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'The culture is disgusting': analysing continuities and differences in experiences and perceptions of youth rape culture through cross-generational testimonies online

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ABSTRACT

This paper draws on anonymous survivor testimonies shared on the Everyone's Invited platform to analyse continuities and differences in experiences and perceptions of youth rape culture across generations. Findings suggest that while there are stubbornly consistent patterns of harm in experiences of rape culture over decades, there is hope to be found in distinct perceptions of rape culture between survivors of different ages. This occurs specifically in the way young people wield the discourses and conceptual resources of society's reckoning with sexual violence to situate their experiences in a broader structural and cultural landscape, in spite of ongoing and entrenched institutional failings. While the experience of rape culture as a phenomenon continues much as it did decades ago, the mobilization of 'rape culture' as a conceptual resource amongst young people is increasingly visible at our current conjuncture, and this visibility is facilitated partly via digital connectivity and the expansion of personal testimony campaigns.

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Introduction

In March 2021, a recent graduate called Soma Sara started a website called 'Everyone's Invited' (EI) which sought to provide 'a safe place for survivors to share their stories completely anonymously' (EI, 2022). The platform emerged at a time of extensive UK media coverage about gender-based sexual violence and ongoing scrutiny of the criminal justice system following the rape and murder of a young woman called Sarah Everard by a male police officer (Dean, 2021). This, along with the smartphone hyper-connectivity precipitated by the pandemic, contributed to the media attention received by the EI platform, and to the large number of testimonies submitted to the site: over 50,000 as of September 2021.

In response to this proliferation of testimonies, a review of sexual abuse in schools was conducted by the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted). The review claimed in no uncertain terms that sexual harassment and sexual abuse were a routine part of daily life for young people in England, and that the issues disproportionately affected girls (Ofsted, 2021).[1] When parliament debated the review, Vicky Ford MP (the then Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education) concluded her speech by declaring that 'the rising trend in sexual abuse must be stopped' (Hansard HC, 2021).

Reading this speech, I was struck by the way Ford positioned youth experiences of sexual abuse as a 'rising trend'. 'Rising trend' implied a temporality which eschewed historical analysis, suggesting

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that sexual harm amongst young people was either a relatively new phenomenon, or was markedly different now than what it had been for previous generations. The EI testimonies contradicted this: in spite of media coverage emphasizing the implications for schools and universities now, there were many submissions from older people, up to eighty years old, recounting experiences of sexual harm from their youth decades ago. Some aspects of sexual harm amongst young people are new of course, namely those facilitated by digital technologies, but the underlying issues of sexual harassment, violence and abuse experienced by young people – by girls in particular – are not (Ringrose et al., 2021).

So, what are the differences and continuities in experiences and perceptions of rape culture across generations? In this paper, I am guided by this question, arguing that while there are stubbornly consistent patterns of harm, there are hopeful differences too, namely around youth awareness of the role institutional and societal culture can play in exacerbating or alleviating sexual harm. I suggest that the anonymity and age range of the EI testimonies generates a unique dataset which facilitates qualitative comparison. In total, I use sixteen testimonies from contributors aged 14–80 to conduct a thematic analysis. I do this by 'developing, analysing and interpreting patterns' across the dataset and using those patterns to establish themes (Braun & Clarke, 2021, p. 4).

Throughout the analysis, I use a critical feminist framework to guide the meaning-making process of thematic analysis, and adopt a conjunctural approach, attempting to remain cognizant of 'the importance of mapping the specificity of the present' throughout the analysis (2019, p. 5). We have witnessed and continue to witness a conjunctural shift, in which 'extraordinary – perhaps epochal – events have occurred' (Gilbert, 2020, p. 5) and in feminist and gendered terms, we see manifestations of this unrest in ongoing #MeToo activism, 2021's protests in response to Sarah Everard's death, and the emergence of the EI platform.

These three public events where women of all ages in the UK came together to protest sexual harms are deeply connected, and are emblematic of three overlapping phenomena specific to the current conjuncture: an ongoing societal reckoning with sexual violence (Syal, 2021); a growing lack of confidence in policing and judicial systems (Davis et al., 2022; Mann, 2021); and a state of deep smartphone and social media connectivity (Feldman, 2021). Digital connectivity is what enables groups of disparate individuals to self-mobilize and amplify concerns via platform technologies and digital networks (Gilbert, 2019), as seen in the feminist organizing in the wake of Sarah Everard's death. It is also unique to our current era, offering previously unavailable ways to tell one's story of sexual harm (Loney-Howes, 2018; McGlynn, 2011).

With this in mind, I develop my analysis as follows: I begin by outlining necessary terminology and reviewing relevant literature. Next, I outline my methodological approach and the selection process for the sample of testimonies included. Lastly, I use a critical feminist and conjunctural framework to conduct a reflexive thematic analysis of a sample of EI testimonies. The analysis focuses on patterns of continuity and patterns of difference when it comes to contributors' perceptions and experiences of rape culture. Through this analysis, I suggest that while there are consistent patterns of harm in experiences and perceptions of rape culture across generations, there are hopeful differences too, which proliferate in part as a result of the discourses in anonymous peer-to-peer witnessing online.

A note on terminology

No single term can adequately describe the personal experiences of a group of individuals, and the terrain of language as it relates to sexual harm is particularly complex (Loney-Howes, 2020). As such, I defer to the term used on the EI platform, given that the people who chose to share their stories there opted to do so in the context of the website's description, and write 'survivors' to describe people who have experienced sexual harm (EI, 2022). I use the language of 'sexual harm' throughout the paper to encompass the wide-ranging experiences reported via the EI platform, which include different and overlapping forms of sexual harassment, abuse, assault, and violence (Alcoff, 2018).

I also use the term 'rape culture' as it appears on the EI platform, to describe a cultural context which, in various overt and covert ways, condones or encourages gender-based sexual harm.

On this note, it is necessary to recognize that sexual harm and rape culture are both inescapably gendered in nature (Mendes et al., 2019) but I am obliged to use terms like 'gender-based violence' with caution when analysing specific testimonies here because contributor anonymity means there is limited biographical information for each testimony. That said, I assume the pronoun 'she' when referring to contributors because an overwhelming proportion of survivors are women and girls (McGlynn, 2011).

Rape culture and speaking out online: a conjunctural view

Braun and Clarke suggest that when conducting thematic analysis, researchers should 'set the scene and provide a theoretically informed and located rationale' rather than adopting a 'filling the gap' approach (Braun & Clarke, 2021, p. 120). I therefore position this paper as a contribution to the already rich tapestry of studies which have considered the role of the internet in relation to rape culture and survivor testimony (Dey & Mendes, 2022; Durham, 2021; Loney-Howes, 2020; Mendes et al., 2019). Scholars have already identified the significance of online spaces as sites of contestation and testimony for youth experiences of rape culture (Keller et al., 2018; Rentschler, 2014; Sills et al., 2016) thus highlighting the importance of digital platforms for survivor resistance. The unique context of this project lies in its incorporation of cross-generational anonymous voices and its focus on youth experiences of rape culture.

The concept of 'rape culture' is central to the EI movement. It has seen a revival in recent years (Mendes et al., 2019) and can be defined as a culture 'in which sexual violence against women is implicitly and explicitly condoned, excused, tolerated, and normalized' (Powell, 2015, p. 575). The concept first emerged in the mid-1970s, when members of the New York Radical Feminists group drew connections between the act of rape and broader societal issues related to gendered harms (Connell & Wilson, 1974). Susan Brownmiller subsequently cemented this understanding when she wrote that 'rape is nothing more or less than a conscious process of intimidation by which *all* men keep *all* women in a state of fear' (Brownmiller, 1977, p. 15).

While these early conceptual formulations of 'rape culture' facilitated a necessary reframing of rape, they were lacking in intersectional terms (Davis, 1981; Kessel, 2021)– they did not hold room for the different axes of oppression that people experience simultaneously, such as Black women who encounter racism and misogyny together and thus experience a uniquely gendered and racialized forms of each (Crenshaw, 1991). The concept of intersectionality is now highly visible across feminist scholarship (Kanai, 2021), to the extent that some Black feminist scholars have drawn attention to its 'citational ubiquity' (Nash, 2019), implying that its inclusion in scholarship can in some cases be read as box ticking. As such, while it is an important part of rape culture's conceptual trajectory, I use 'intersectionality' with caution here given the limited biographical data available for the testimonies.

Another important development in feminist conceptualizations of rape culture comes as a result of the internet. The online world has influenced both the nature of sexual harm and the ways in which survivors deal with it. However, while there are instances of youth experiences of sexual harm which are facilitated by digital technologies (McGlynn & Rackley, 2017; Ringrose et al., 2021), scholars have questioned the extent to which these phenomena are merely digital manifestations of sexual harms which occurred in different forms prior to the widespread use of smartphones (Ringrose et al., 2022). Understood in these terms, sexual harms evolve depending on techno-social contexts, but they always occur as part of a longer historical trajectory.

Alongside these digitized forms of sexual harm are new ways to speak out, through social media platforms, hashtags, and online movements (Serisier, 2018). Many-to-many networks online create the scope for a form of counter-power, giving voice and crucially, connection, to many different people simultaneously (Castells, 2007, 2011). These networks can abate some of the difficulties inherent to reporting sexual harms via traditional mechanisms like the criminal justice system, which

can often be contingent upon how 'believable' a survivor appears to the person she reports to (Banet-Weiser & Higgins, 2022). Communication technologies allow survivors to speak about their experiences of sexual harm to bigger audiences than ever before, and thanks to anonymity affordances, allow them to do so with reduced risk of disbelief or further trauma (Powell, 2015).

Methodological approach

The core question asked in this paper is: what are the continuities and differences in survivors' perceptions and experiences of rape culture across generations? There are two key comparative temporal strands to this question: first, the generational comparisons between the way older and younger survivors describe how they experienced youth sexual harm in the moment it happened or the immediate aftermath. This strand is delineated in the analysis via the themes categorized as 'continuities' or 'differences'. The second is the way contributors from each generational category write about their experiences with hindsight. This is considered across each of the themes where it is apparent in the testimonies.

Reflexive thematic analysis via a conjunctural feminist framework

I use reflexive thematic analysis with a sample of sixteen testimonies from the EI website to respond to the question outlined above. Reflexive thematic analysis is a qualitative research method whereby the researcher familiarizes herself with a dataset to identify patterns and establish themes and eventually pose arguments in response to her research question (Braun & Clarke, 2021). In calling the method '*reflexive* thematic analysis' Braun and Clarke emphasize the importance of critical reflection on the part of the researcher, both about the researcher's role and perspective, and about the research practice and process more broadly. Such reflexivity is a foundational principle of feminist qualitative research (O'Shaughnessy & Krogman, 2012; Ryan-Flood & Gill, 2013) which makes the method well-suited to this project. Alongside this, I needed a method that would accommodate a framework using both an overtly feminist lens and a broader conjunctural perspective. The flexibility of reflexive thematic analysis facilitates this approach.

Sample

The sixteen testimonies used in this paper are taken from a sample of 100 testimonies from the EI website. When people post to the website, they asked to confirm if they are willing to have their testimony made public. As of September 2021, when this data was collected, approximately 7,000 of the 50,000+ testimonies on the site had been made public. I downloaded those from the platform using the DataScraper plug-in tool, then converted them to an Excel document for analysis. The testimonies were narrowed down from the full dataset to an initial randomized sample of 100. From this, I used a three-point criteria to identify testimonies which would be suitable for thematic analysis in response to my research question. Selected testimonies needed to:

(1) Make clear that the incident, or at least one of the incidents, they described occurred when the contributor was of school age (18 or under);
(2) Make clear the contributor's age at the time of writing the testimony;
(3) Make clear that the contributor was 18 or under at the time of posting to fit into the 'youth' category OR make clear that the contributor was over 18 and writing about an experience which occurred over ten years ago, to fit into the 'legacy' category.

The rationale for the first two of these points is to ensure sufficient biographical information about the age of people posting when they experienced sexual harm, and their age when writing about it. Regarding the third point, I needed parameters to distinguish between young people who were still

school age when they wrote their testimonies and adults who were writing about historical events from their youth, so I established two categories: 'youth' and 'legacy'. For the legacy category, I set the minimum time to have passed as ten years to ensure experiences of sexual harm had occurred prior to the societal reckoning with sexual violence pertinent to our current conjuncture. This meant that all 'legacy' testimonies which met the criteria would have the temporal aspect of looking back on a distinct conjuncture from our own, before the pandemic, smartphone ubiquity, #MeToo and Sarah Everard's death.

From the sixteen testimonies suitable for analysis, seven were in the 'youth' category and nine were in the 'legacy' category. While this implies a majority of contributors were posting about historical experiences, the ratio is more likely to be because survivors who contributed legacy testimonies deemed it relevant to include their age; those writing about more recent events typically don't reference ages or years when incidents occurred. The number of testimonies overall on the website are predominantly from survivors who imply that their experiences are in the recent past, but many of these were not suitable for the analysis in this paper because the temporal parameters were not made explicit.

As noted, there is little to no biographical data for the contributors who shared these testimonies. The nature of EI – and perhaps a big reason for its success – is that it allows anonymous narratives. The only biographical details shared in the sixteen testimonies are related to age and (in twelve out of sixteen) the context of being a girl or woman. There is no information about where they are from, race, ethnicity, religion, disability status, class, or socio-economic status.

Limitations

While only 16 testimonies from my initial sample of 100 have been incorporated into this analysis, the insight offered by each account is significant, and inclusion of more would have jeopardized the scope for actual analysis. Still, there are inevitable limitations. As a result of the anonymous nature of the platform, there is no biographical data attached to testimonies which means that the scope for intersectional analysis is severely limited. Also, many testimonies from the initial sample had to be eliminated because they did not meet the criteria for a cross-generational analysis, and none of the testimonies are linked back to a specific named contributor and as such, the sources cannot be fully verified. That said, the unsteady nature of the testimonies is inextricably linked to the broader challenges facing survivors. The anonymous forum of EI gives them a voice precisely because of the features which render it an imperfect data source. As such, while it weakens the data to some extent, it also sheds light on the challenge of documenting first-person survivor narratives. It is a key part of the story.

Ethical considerations

The anonymity of the testimonies means it is not possible to seek out consent for the use of the testimonies shared here; I rely on the consent each contrubitor has granted via the EI platform. At the time of data collection (September 2021), anyone could submit their story anonymously to the EI platform, but they had to tick a separate consent box to also grant the platform permission to share the post publicly. This read: 'I give my consent for my story to be shared on this website'. Only contributors who have clicked this will have their testimonies made visible to anyone on the platform, and they are the testimonies used here. In making the decision to draw on these testimonies, I am guided by the Association of Internet Reserachers' most recent ethical guidance (Franzke et al., 2019) which emphasises the importance of case-by-case decision making through a process and context-oriented approach. Given that each of the testimonies used here was knowingly shared publicly as part of a campaign which intended to amplify survivor voices, and given that all testimonies are anonymous, I feel their use for feminist research about rape culture experiences is appropriate. Ethical thinking is an important part of the ongoing work of reflexive thematic analysis, not only in data collection but also in

interpretation, and these considerations have been ongoing throughout the project (Braun & Clarke, 2021). As a white, cisgender, able-bodied woman researching youth experiences of sexual harm, I am mindful of the need to avoid universalizing claims that fail to recognize the myriad differences between different girls and women. Using sources that lack biographical information complicates this, because I am unable to factor in the inevitable complexity of each of the experiences raised in the testimonies used here. I have aimed to avoid universalizing claims, while offering some insights into what the testimonies might suggest.

Analysis: continuities across generations

Women and girls are silenced; platforms help them to 'speak out'

While some survivors report their experiences in the immediate aftermath, many do not tell anyone until months or years later, and many more never share their stories at all because of shame, self-blame, and the risk of not being believed (Herman, 1992; Loney-Howes, 2018). There is a continuity across the EI 'youth' and 'legacy' testimonies which exemplifies this – many survivors say that prior to sharing their story on the platform, they never told anybody. After writing about an experience of sexual assault when she was 16, one contributor adds: 'I am now 59 and have never told this to anyone until this space helped me do so'. Variations of this sentence are typical on the platform. They demonstrate the way rape culture works to normalize sexual harm (Powell, 2015) and therefore silence survivors, but they also reveal the sense shared by many contributors that the platform 'helped' them to speak about their experiences by challenging this normalization.

This attention to hindsight occurs, albeit to a lesser extent, in youth testimonies as well. One 18-year-old contributor writes about numerous experiences of sexual harm which she went through from the ages of 13 to 18 and concludes by writing: 'I thought this was "normal" for too long until this summer where I understood all the times before where sexual assault'. The contributor refers overtly to the normalization of rape culture and the way it operates to silence survivors by rendering their experiences unremarkable. Youth testimonies refer repeatedly to the way certain sexual harms are normalized, in a way which counters widespread discourses about improved understanding of consent in the current conjuncture. This is echoed by findings from other youth researchers which note that while the language of consent and sexual harm is now widespread, the practices and lived experiences of young people often remain consistent with longstanding gender norms and misogynistic sexual scripts (Setty, 2021).

Online spaces can help survivors to share their stories because of the solidarity they engender (Mendes et al., 2019) but the EI testimonies demonstrate a form of cross-generational *learning* too, which challenges the normalization of sexual harm inherent to rape culture. While shame, self-blame and a risk of not being believed are reasons offered by many for why they haven't previously disclosed their experiences, there is also a pattern of survivors not having spoken about what happened to them because at the time, they did not understand it to be sexual harm. Writing about the experience of rape at the age of 16, one contributor says: 'Looking on 11 years later and even looking at these testimonials I can see that something that appeared consensual at the time reality wasn't'.

By writing 'even looking at these testimonials', the contributor implies a learning process occurring in the moment of engaging with the platform itself, as though the experience of reading other people's stories has the power to shift a person's reading of their own historical experience. This is why the distinction between survivors' reflections on their feelings at the time they encountered sexual harm must be separated from the way they perceive the experience with hindsight: the current conjuncture's ongoing reckoning with sexual violence serves not only to encourage survivors to speak, but also to reframe experiences that they had not previously perceived as sexual violence or harassment.

Uneven (and unjust) consequences

Experiences of sexual harm result in long-lasting trauma for survivors (Herman, 1992; Loney-Howes, 2018). This is evident in the testimonies on the EI platform from contributors of all ages. In one legacy testimony, echoing the reflections on hindsight discussed in the previous section, one woman writes '*I had my first boyfriend at 14. Looking back sex we had was rape*'. She then goes on to say '*I'm in my 60's now, but those scary moments can still haunt me*'. Her words suggest that affectively, the experience has remained the same over the years, and the long-term impact of the trauma is unchanging for her; she is haunted by it. In spite of this, the way she conceptualizes the event in intellectual terms has shifted. Saying 'looking back sex we had was rape' implies that at the time, she did not perceive the experience in those terms, but the societal reckoning with sexual harm and increased visibility of 'rape culture' as a concept – both so pertinent to our current conjuncture – has precipitated as reassessment of the encounter.

In another testimony, a contributor writes about an experience when she was sixteen:

> when i turned around there as a large man standing there, wearing a balaclava, masturbating with his trousers down [. . .] I am now 46 years old & this frightening experience changed the way I live. I never walk alone and constantly check on my daughter and girlfriends when they go out.

This extract demonstrates the cumulative and residual impact of sexual harm. Not only has the frightening encounter changed the survivor's own life, but she suggests that it has also had an impact on her relationships with her daughter and friends. In saying that she constantly checks on them, she reveals the affective spill of sexual harm and the way it passes across and between generations of women and girls as an ongoing thread of fear and altered behaviour, in the name of self-preservation and protection.

Again, these reflections on the longer-term effects of sexual harm occur in the youth testimonies as well as the legacy ones. One 18-year-old writes: 'I have extremely bad sleep paralysis where a man is in my room I don't know if this is related to all the men who assaulted me but I struggle with it very often'. The conviction that these experiences are directly linked to experiences of sexual assault are tentative here, but they speak powerfully to the feeling of ongoing fear in the wake of sexual violence. The uncertainty of the testimony speaks to the recent nature of the events the contributor writes about.

The long-term impact of sexual harm is discussed extensively in many of the EI testimonies, and often occurs in tandem with despairing comments about the gendered imbalance in consequences for girls who are subjected to sexual harm and men or boys who enact it. Again, these norms are evident across all age ranges, reinforcing the idea that many of the sexual scripts at work in youth sexual cultures now are alarmingly consistent with those from decades ago, in spite of broader societal discourses about consent and sexual violence changing (Orenstein, 2016; Setty, 2021). In one youth testimony, about the aftermath of rape, the survivor, aged 14 at the time, writes:

> he then finished all over me and i just sat there crying for hours. it's been a year and I've only told my closest friends. the fact he's had no consequences makes me sick and i don't think I'll ever be the same again.

When considering the long-term impact of assault on a survivor, the imbalanced temporal dimensions of this testimony are striking. She says he 'finished', alluding to the brief moment of ejaculation, and this is contrasted with the hours she spent crying in the immediate aftermath of the assault. The passing of time operates differently for her and for the person by whom she was assaulted. She suggests that for him, the moment of ejaculation (that moment in itself being a significant and violent part of the assault) marks the end both physically and affectively; for her, it is followed by hours of physical and emotional distress, then a year of it, then the realization that the distress will endure even longer, when she writes that she doesn't think she will ever be the same again. This temporal dimension of survivors' pain can be seen across testimonies from teenagers to adults in

their eighties, in their attempts to come to terms with the harm they encountered and the subsequent and ongoing injustices that they face.

Analysis: differences across generations

Legacy testimonies show a reluctant reliance on institutional solutions

In the previous section of this analysis, I discussed the way in which numerous contributors of different ages write about the realizations they have with hindsight, after reading other people's testimonies, that something they experiences was in fact rape or sexual assault. These shifts in perception of experiences are not uncommon across the wider dataset. There are other instances though, where women who share legacy testimonies clearly knew in the moment of the experience that they were being sexually harassed, assaulted or raped. In many of these cases, contributors either rationalize why that did not report at the time (fear of disbelief being the most common point) or refer to attempts to report to the police or other authority figures who, upon receiving a report of sexual harm, dismiss the survivor. One 62-year-old woman writes the below statement, recalling an incident of sexual assault on a bus several decades ago:

> The police didn't take it very seriously. In fact one policemen joked that he was going to Paris for the weekend and hoped to get molested himself. Or similar words to that effect [. . .] I feel so angry and saddened that women still feel so much anxiety around personal safety. Please no more empty platitudes . . . Constructive cross party action and groups has to be taken to make change.

The fact that this contributor writes that 'women still feel so much anxiety around personal safety' chimes with the idea that all women and girls feel long-term residual effects (and affect) of rape culture more broadly, even if they are not survivors themselves. The difference here occurs in the contributor's reference to speaking to the police. None of the youth testimonies talk about reporting things to the police. The omission is not explained or justified – it's completely left out. In contrast, the above testimony speaks of the contributor's experiences of being failed by the police and the criminal justice system. She does not abandon hope in those institutions though, instead calling on parliamentary action. This pattern can be seen across various legacy testimonies; older contributors write about their encounters with police officers which resulted in no justice, or their inability to report incidents to police in the first place because of a fear of not being believed, but they do so in the context of *wanting* to rely on the police, and wanting to know justice will come as a result.

In another legacy testimony, where a 77-year-old woman recounts being raped at the age of 16 and never finding justice, she concludes by writing, 'enough is enough, women need protection by law'. By stating that 'women need protection by law', the contributor suggests that regardless of what the word of the law says, in practice, the law is not currently offering women protection. In many of the legacy testimonies, women explain the horrific experiences they have endured, and the inadequacy of legal and institutional responses to those experiences, but they continue to hope for a change in those institutions which might result in increased safety, reduced fear, and accountability for those who enact sexual harm. This contributor's response is not to abandon the law as a framework for justice, but to call out its shortcoming and to ask it to do better. Another contributor says it in even plainer terms. After writing about her own experience of sexual assault in youth, she writes:

> Your generation is the latest to be sexually assaulted and abused. Men are the problem. It must be them that are punished and not a lifetime of silence for women. It's got to the stage that we'd have to be stupid to go to the courts and expect justice. until men are convicted of rape and assault, women will continue to be used and abused.

She directly addresses the younger contributors and makes clear that their experiences are part of a longer trajectory of rape culture which all living women have encountered in some form. She is weary, highlighting once again the gendered imbalance in the consequences of sexual harm –

silence and suffering for women and girls and impunity for men and boys. There is a sense throughout these legacy testimonies that the women have been dealing with the same issues and the same ineffectual solutions for so long that they are fed up, simultaneously reliant on the criminal justice system and inured to its failings.

Younger contributors recognize sexual harm as cultural and institutional

While that sense of weariness is present in some of the testimonies from younger contributors too, there is noticeably less reference to police and the criminal justice system. In terms of institutional justice systems, the emphasis in youth testimonies is more heavily placed on schools. This emphasis is not considered in terms of school rules and punishment systems specifically though – it is discussed in terms of culture. One survivor writes a list of all the experiences she has had with boys at one school (the school name has been retracted by EI moderators) including sexist comments, intimate parts of her body being touched without her consent, and being forced to give someone oral sex. She writes 'And then imagine something like that happening to most girls at the school – this is the reality of [school name omitted by EI to preserve anonymity]'. Here, while the word 'culture' isn't used overtly, the contributor is able to highlight not only the harm and pain of specific incidents she has been through, but the cumulative effect of their ubiquity for all the girls at that school, and the environment that creates. Another survivor writes:

> I go to [school name omitted by EI to preserve anonymity] the culture is disgusting last year me and my best friend were sexually assaulted numerous times by the same other pupil in lessons throughout the course of a term.

The word culture is used here to describe the way schools can normalize and condone sexual assault (Gillander Gådin & Stein, 2019). This articulates what I understand to be one of the most hopeful of the differences between youth and legacy testimonies. Across the youth testimonies, there is overt and implicit reference to cultures in schools which contribute to a climate that condones sexual violence and harassment. While the content of legacy testimonies suggests that those contributors have shifted perception of past experiences as a result of the current conjuncture's societal reckoning with rape culture, the language and norms of 'culture' are not wielded in the same way as they are in youth testimonies, where it is much more apparent. This suggests that the 'conceptual resources' (ideas like 'slut shaming', 'victim blaming', and 'rape culture') (Srinivasan, 2021) of recently revived feminist activism have made their way into youth discourse and contribute to the way young survivors and victims understand sexual harm not only as gendered but as cultural too.

Here, we might take 'culture' as 'the meanings, values and ideas embodied in institutions, in social relations, in systems of beliefs, in mores and customs, in the uses of objects and material life' (Hall & Jefferson, 1976, p. 10). The youth constructions of school culture as 'disgusting' and their recognition of the cultural patterns which perpetuate sexual harm are distinct from the legacy testimonies. This indicates an appreciation amongst youth of the way sexual harm circulates and is manifest in seemingly innocuous daily practices which cumulatively condone sexual harassment and sexual violence, both overtly and covertly. This is perhaps the most salient finding across the youth testimonies. The ability of young contributors to draw connections between their personal experiences and the cultures of institutions implies links being made between instances of sexual harm at a personal level and the systemic issues which feed into rape culture at large – precisely the kind of connection which online testimony campaigns like Everyone's Invited seen to draw attention to.

Discussion

The aim of this research was to better understand the continuities and differences in experiences and perceptions of rape culture across generations through thematic analysis of Everyone's Invited testimonies. Findings are consistent with previous research which notes that survivors suffer long-

term consequences, experience little in the way of justice, and feel silenced when it comes to telling their stories via formal reporting channels (Bailey et al., 2019; Loney-Howes, 2020; McGlynn & Westmarland, 2019). Those continuities in the experiences of rape culture across generations are bleak to read, but the evidence of a shift in the way rape culture experiences are perceived and metabolized hints at a change in the way young people articulate and consequently challenge their own experiences.

While there is reason to be sceptical about 'speaking out' as an end goal, both because of its limited efficacy in reducing sexual harm and the imbalance in who is listened to when they speak (Serisier, 2018) I suggest that there is hope to be found in the way young people are able to wield the discourses of society's reckoning with sexual violence to situate their experiences in a broader cultural landscape, in spite of ongoing and entrenched institutional failings. While the experience of rape culture as a phenomenon continues for young people much as it did decades ago, the mobilization of 'rape culture' as a conceptual resource is increasingly visible at our current conjuncture (Srinivasan, 2021).

The limited scope of this paper necessitated a small sample for analysis, but future research using a larger sample might yield new and important insights into cross-generational experiences and perceptions of rape culture and could stratify generations into more than two groups, leading to more nuanced understanding. Similarly, further research using data with biographical information attached could help to better understand intersectional distinctions in cross-generational experiences and perceptions. This paper is one small piece of these investigations, but as a researcher and educator working to end sexual harm amongst youth, I do find opportunity for hope here, particularly amongst the young girls who see sexual harassment and sexual violence in their schools and, alongside recognizing the harm on an individual level, write that 'the culture is disgusting'.

Note

1. Education is a devolved matter in the United Kingdom where each of the four regions (England, Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland) is responsible for its own education standards. As such, Ofsted only covers schools in England.

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