

The New Wave: A Movement and Media Analysis of Contemporary Campus Sexual Assault Movements

Introduction

Within the last five years, campus sexual assault has garnered large amounts of media attention. Major policy changes to Title IX during the last two Presidential administrations have kept one question on our minds, how do we handle campus sexual assault? These changes to Title IX ushered in two waves of campus sexual assault activism, the first in 2014 and the second in 2019. Some of the most well-documented sexual assault cases have occurred at elite colleges across the U.S., most notably Columbia University, Swarthmore College, Harvard University, and Rhodes College. Now, students are building a national movement to demand more from their schools by strategically wielding the powerful media tools at their disposal. Sexual assault activists use new media (blogs, hashtags, etc.) to frame sexual assault as a symptom of institutional violence and create viral, emotionally resonant campaigns and art. However, media coverage of the two waves is distinctly defined by the way they portray student activists, and whether students are allowed to develop a political voice without media scrutiny. To analyze the two waves using social movement and media theory, I draw heavily from campus and national newspapers, first-hand reporting, organization statements, campaigns, and photos.

The following analysis focuses on Swarthmore's Organizing for Survivors (O4S), Our Harvard Can do Better, Rhodes College's Culture of Consent (CoC), and the artwork of Columbia alumna Emma Sulkowicz. Though each activist group takes a unique approach to combatting sexual assault, they all represent a larger movement to end rape culture. Uniquely,

anonymous online forums, hashtags and personal blogs have provided these movements with new ways to collectively reckon with campus sexual violence.

Emotion Work and the Digital Forum

In April of 2019, a document known as the Phi Psi Historical Archives was sent to the Editor-in-Chief of Swarthmore's *Voices* and circulated throughout the Swarthmore community. The archives include racial slurs, graphic accounts of sexual encounters, rape jokes and other disturbing acts performed by the brothers of Phi Psi (Pizarro, Wang, Robbins 2019).

After the contents of the archive were exposed, student activists denounced Swarthmore fraternities as institutions deeply rooted in misogyny, homophobia, xenophobia, racism, and classism. Within the same month, a public Tumblr page called, *Swat Fraternities Must Go*, was created by Swarthmore Senior Morgin Goldberg. The blog allowed students to anonymously share stories of their own experiences at fraternity parties. What followed was an outpour from students explaining in great detail about their own experiences with sexual assault on campus between 2015-2019. One anonymous contributor described, "being raped in a basement with a 'foreign object'" (Turkewitz 2019).

The power of an anonymous digital archive allowed survivors to talk about the harm that they endured, as well as remove some of the shame and loneliness that they were experiencing. The archive's accessibility allowed anyone with a link to submit a comment and be redirected to support services. Before these events, Swarthmore's Organizing for Survivors (O4S) routinely called out the administration for their complacency in allowing sexual violence on campus to propagate. However, the fraternity archive leak and the subsequent creation of the Tumblr blog ushered in a new era of sexual assault activism on Swarthmore's campus. Gould (2009, 254)

notes, when analyzing the emotion work attached to ACT UP, “a movement’s agenda and activists continually need to mobilize affective states and emotions that mesh with the movement’s political objectives.” The stories and voices of survivors created an emotional habitus that removed the shame, secrecy, and stigma around campus sexual assault and allowed for O4S to mobilize the movement to shut down Swarthmore's fraternities. Mobilizing this new emotional habitus, Swarthmore activists arranged a sit-in, which resulted in the permanent closure of Phi Psi and DU (Adams 2019). Previously, activists relied on physical gatherings to share stories and create an emotionally charged atmosphere, but in the digital age, an equally powerful affective state can be generated on an online forum.

Online Movement Building and Political Framing

Online presence is key for contemporary anti-sexual assault activists; the most used platforms by students are blogging websites such as WordPress, and general Facebook pages. Public blogs and pages host a group's list of demands, as well as information that highlights the extent of their campus sexual violence crisis. Others use the independent publishing site *Medium.com* as a space to counter alternative narratives. For example, Harvard senior Dan Mudannayake was a student organizer with Our Harvard Can Do Better, who was pushing for the resignation of Winthrop house Dean, Roger Sullivan. Dean Sullivan was under scrutiny because he accepted a position to serve as Harvey Weinstein’s lawyer. Danu used *Medium.com* to publish her perspective and how she has, “experienced various forms of harassment and intimidation” (Mudannayake 2019), since becoming a prominent student activist. Additionally, Facebook pages are a crucial tool for student activists to launch campaigns that are defined by strategically chosen hashtags.

Kuo's examination of the racial justice hashtag provides a strong working definition of a hashtag's intention, "(a) demonstrate injustice, (b) re-frame discourse, and/or (c) promote policy change" and applies to sexual assault activism campaigns (2018, 496). Students at Rhodes College and Harvard not only use the hashtag as a device for reframing (Ryan & Gamson 2006), but the hashtag becomes a cultural artifact used to connect justice work.

Culture of Consent (CoC) is an established group of student activists at Rhodes College passionate about ending rape culture. CoC's Facebook page remains a center for keeping up to date with their activism. After being at the center of a nationwide conversation on campus sexual assault, Rhodes College has been awarded \$300,000 worth of funding to work on Sexual Assault prevention efforts. However, a 7-page letter written by a Rhodes College alumna, detailing how the school grossly mishandled her sexual assault, kicked off a new campaign for CoC:

#YouProbablyKnowThem. This hashtag references a community of survivors that have been retraumatized and neglected while going through the school's Title IX process. Culture of Consent calls upon its students to recognize this imagined community as people that they pass on campus, their roommates, classmates or TAs. Even if people aren't talking *explicitly* about their experience with Title IX at Rhodes, it doesn't mean it hasn't occurred. Just as Swarthmore's anonymous Tumblr page highlighted the volume of sexual violence on campus, #YouProbablyKnowThem evokes distrust in the University and a demand for changes. After a #YouProbablyKnowThem candlelit vigil, one student shared, "My main takeaway was that students are picking up on the fact that Rhodes seems to care more about its image than its students" (Roberts 2019).

As an organizing body, #OurHarvardCanDoBetter started as a hashtag and continues to use it to chronicle their work. Their pithy slogan archives, links, and organizes an important

discourse on sexual assault, accessible to those who wish to observe or participate (Kuo 2018). Recent photos on their Facebook page showcase a sit-in held at Winthrop Dining Hall, the house of former Harvard college Dean, Ronald Sullivan. Photos of the sit-in feature students carrying posters that begin with the phrase “House Communities Should Be....”, followed by the student’s response. One student finished the sentence with “free of rape culture” another said, “a safe space”. In the background, a banner reads “Reclaim Winthrop” and “#TimesUp”. In this case, Harvard activists are making a strategic decision to invoke the hashtags of #TimesUp and #MeToo as a way of putting these other movements in conversation with their own. Current students active in anti-sexual assault activism frequently reference the #MeToo movement as a motivation for their campus organizing (Turkewitz 2019).

One of, if not the most, widespread hashtag campaigns ushered in the first wave of campus sexual assault media coverage. In the Fall of 2014, Columbia senior Emma Sulkowicz returned to campus carrying around a twin-mattress; it was the prop for her senior art thesis, *Mattress Performance (Carry the Weight)*. What started as an independent performance piece, quickly transformed Sulkowicz into the face of the campus sexual assault awareness. Sulkowicz’s performance reframed how we interpreted campus sexual assault, equating the physical demands of carrying a mattress with the mental and emotional trauma of being raped. In the following months, students devised a global day of protest known as *Carrying the Weight Together*. Across the world, students on college campuses brought out mattresses in support of Emma and other survivors of assault. Participants as far as Hungary checked in and chronicled their participation under the hashtag #CarryThatWeight (Svokos 2014). The Facebook page of Our Harvard Can Do Better features student activists from 2014 carrying mattresses that express their solidarity with students carrying the weight. Though Emma’s goal might not have been

global attention, her work sparked a much-needed conversation. Similar to the thought-provoking AIDS-era artwork produced by Gran Fury, Sulkowicz's art "tapped into the power of mass media to spark and sustain public debate"(Meyer 1995, 59). In the social media age, the iconic image of Sulkowicz dragging a twin-mattress reached far beyond the New York city limits.

Aggressive Accusations & Framing

Another tactic of Gran Fury's campaign, that remains present in the campus sexual assault activism movement, is that of controversial and aggressive accusations. Gran Fury often used powerful statements that framed the AIDS epidemic as a public health issue. Similarly, college activist groups use bold campaigns as a way to connect on-campus sexual assault to larger structural issues. As such, campus sexual assault activists are proponents of affirmative consent, comprehensive sex education, bystander training, and Title IX reform. One of Swarthmore's Organizing for Survivor's (O4S) more controversial demonstrations was their 2017 Swat Protects Rapists campaign.



Flyers in a Swarthmore College bathroom featuring Swat Protects Rapists and Happy Sexual Assault Awareness Month (The Phoenix, 2017).

O4S claimed that Swarthmore University perpetuates sexual assault by allowing fraternities to exist (known centers for sexual assault), failing to adequately educate students on consent. As a result, administrators communicate that rapists are protected over the safety of the

student body. O4S rightfully criticized Swarthmore for removing a banner that said, “Swat Protects Rapists”, while sharing posters that say, “Happy Sexual Assault Awareness Month.” (Organization for Survivors 2017). These sharp critiques of the administration demonstrate that O4S recognizes sexual assault as a symptom as not only a personal issue but a structural one. In addition to their provocative campaigns, O4S frames their activism as contributing to other justice movements that seek to abolish punitive systems. The following is featured on their website.

We must revolutionize responses to sexual violence on campus, both by substantively bettering existing formal responses and by developing new ones that are explicitly built on the principles of restorative and transformative justice. We also recognize the United States criminal justice system we currently live under is bound by a punitive and oppressive culture and legal structure and that the College itself exists and participates in violent systems.

By following the principles of transformative justice, O4S positions itself as a group that will end sexual assault on campus, by eradicating the social conditions under which sexual violence occurs.

Media Critique: The Face of a Movement

Media coverage of the two waves is distinctly defined by the way they portray student activists. First, I will analyze the media treatment of Sulkowicz, the most recognizable student activist of the first wave.

In the press, Sulkowicz was lauded for her bravery and boldness, but a closer analysis of her media coverage reveals a concerning pattern. For example, a *Huffington Post* article discussing a Columbia University #*CarrytheWeight* demonstration neglects to discuss Emma's influence in organizing the protest. Instead, Sulkowicz told *Huffington* that “students have frequently tried to help her carry her heavy mattress around campus. For the most part, she said,

she's only had to carry it alone when reporters followed her and asked for shots with Sulkowicz carrying it by herself" (Kingkade 2014). This quote illustrates how journalists disrupted Sulkowicz's performance art for the sake of a curated photo.

In an article by *i-D*, titled, "Emma Sulkowicz Carried the Heavy Legacy of Feminist Performance Art", the author attempts to frame *Mattress Performance (Carry the Weight)* as a part of a greater repository of feminist performance art on sexual and domestic violence. Sulkowicz is put into conversation with artists such as Judy Chicago, who founded the Feminist Art Program to address issues of gender-based violence with performance art (Euse 2017). This comparison would not be problematic had Sulkowicz saw herself as part of this larger legacy. In a recent interview with *The Cut*, Emma pointed out that as an undergrad she "literally didn't know what feminism was." This was a personal project, she says, inspired not by the fiery tradition of feminist performance art, but by the quiet endurance pieces of Tehching Hsieh" (McNamara 2019). Months before Emma was known as "mattress girl", Senator Gillibrand asked her to appear in *The New York Times*, as a way to put a face to the college sexual assault movement. Becoming the face of an entire movement is not always strategic, but it is notable how Sulkowicz's persona became *heavily* political, so much so that the media bastioned her as a feminist icon and advocate, without daring to consider her input. On the podcast, *#HealMetoo* Sulkowicz reveals that her participation in campus protests was symbolic. She was often left out of organizing meetings and instead told to "show up at this time and give a speech". As a highly visible individual in the movement, Sulkowicz became reduced to a prop, who had little to no say about how her image or art pushed the movement forward.

A *Vox* profile on how sexual assault activism had come to the forefront claimed that “smart organizing made people sit up and take notice” and college students were strategic in their demonstrations (Nelson 2015). Accompanied by this line is a photo of Sulkowicz with her mattress. However, a student activist quoted in the piece pointed out that many of them don’t come from a policy background, they were just passionate individuals with direct experience (Nelson 2015). This is not to say that new activists cannot be strategic and adept, but it is interesting how students just finding their voices are thrust into the seat of “expert”.

Though media coverage of the second wave of sexual assault activism is not yet complete, there is a marked difference. Today, journalists distinguish that these students are “not particularly activists” or from the words of student activist Danu Mudannayake herself, “I wasn’t someone to go out and organize sit-ins and teach-ins” (Hartocollis 2019). Danu was just a girl who was inspired by the stories of survivors. As opposed to picking a new face of the movement, it appears that student activists at Harvard, Rhodes and Swarthmore are allowed to discover their activist voice without external pressure. As the current media frames students as falling into organizing by accident, they highlight how college is a time of intellectual and political exploration.

Conclusion

Campus sexual assault activism has utilized digital media, personal blogs, hashtags, and posters to circulate their message, and frame the issue as one that has far-reaching implications. Young people today have found new ways to channel the strong emotional response to the pain and injustice that follows a sexual assault into direct-action. By organizing sit-ins, vigils and promoting provocative campaigns, students are bringing attention to an issue that is typically

shrouded in shame and secrecy. Previous media coverage of the movement singled out new activists, thrusting them into dialogue with feminists and radicals before them; current media coverage allows for students' politics to morph and change as the times do.

Bibliography

1. Adams, Susan. 2019. "Swarthmore Fraternities Shut Down After Students Protest Over Alleged Frat 'Rape Attic'." April 30.
<https://www.forbes.com/sites/susanadams/2019/04/30/swarthmore-suspends-fraternity-activities-amid-student-protest-over-a-frat-rape-attic/#e9a77a531c13>. (February 3rd, 2020)
2. Euse, Erica. 2017. "How Emma Sulkowicz carried the Heavy Legacy of Feminist Performance Art." July 28. https://i-d.vice.com/en_us/article/9kbb35/how-emma-sulkowicz-carried-the-heavy-legacy-of-feminist-performance-art (February 4th, 2020)
3. Felshin, Nina and Richard Meyers et al. *But Is It Art?: The Spirit of Art As Activism*. Seattle: Bay Press, 1995.
4. Hartocollis, Anemona. 2019. "New Wave of Student Presses Colleges on Sexual Assault." June 8. <https://search-proquest-com.proxy.uchicago.edu/usnews/docview/2236607392/C86FBF015CCD497CPQ/1?accountid=14657> (February 3rd, 2020).
5. Kingkade, Tyler. 2014. "Columbia Students Bring out Mattress to Support Senior Emma Sulkowicz's Rape Survivor Project." September 12.
https://www.huffpost.com/entry/columbia-mattress-emma-sulkowicz_n_5811030 (February 1st, 2020)
6. Kuo, Rachel. "Racial Justice Activist Hashtags: Counterpublics and Discourse Circulation." *New Media & Society* 20, no. 2 (February 2018): 495–514.
doi:[10.1177/1461444816663485](https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444816663485).
7. McNamara, Sylvie. 2019. "Did Emma Sulkowicz Get Redpilled?" October 28.
<https://www.thecut.com/2019/10/did-emma-sulkowicz-mattress-performance-get-redpilled.html>. (January 31st, 2020).
8. Mudannayake, Danu. 2019. "i will not be silenced." April 9.
<https://medium.com/@mudannayake/i-will-not-be-silenced-79e4e52f74b9> (February 2nd, 2020).
9. Nelson, Libby. 2015. "2014 was the year college sexual assault became impossible to ignore." Jan 6. <https://www.vox.com/2015/1/6/7442125/college-sexual-assault-2014> (February 1st, 2020).
10. Organizing for Survivors (O4S). 2017. "Swat Protects Rapists"
<https://organizingforsurvivors.wordpress.com/swat-protects-rapist-2017/> (February 4th, 2020).
11. Organizing for Survivors (O4S). "Transformative Justice in Our Demands"
<https://organizingforsurvivors.wordpress.com/transformative-justice-in-our-demands/> (February 4th, 2020).
12. Our Harvard Can Do Better. 2013. "A Job Well Done, More to Do." October 6.
<https://ourharvardcandobetter.wordpress.com/2013/10/06/httpwww-thecrimson-comarticle2013104osl-rankin-director/> (January 31st, 2020).
13. Pizarro, Citlali, Tiffany Wang and Olivia Robbins. 2019. "Phi Psi Historical Archives' Leaked Amidst Campus Tensions Around Fraternities." April 18.
<https://swarthmorevoices.com/content-1/2019/4/17/phi-psi-historical-archives-leaked-amidst-campus-tensions-around-fraternities-86plg>. (February 1st, 2020).

14. Roberts, Jane. 2019. "Rhodes students Talk About Sexual Assault on Campus." November 20. <https://dailymemphian.com/section/metro/article/8995/rhodes-students-talk-about-sexual-assault-on?fbclid=IwAR1U1Yj54urZGD3uPA7ttHsTK-qdLZaEUtoeqDSmuAC67Y4XEEOLoXiNJeI> (February 5th, 2020).
15. Ryan, Charlotte, and William A. Gamson. "The Art of Reframing Political Debates." *Contexts* 5, no. 1 (February 2006): 13–18. doi:10.1525/ctx.2006.5.1.13. (January 23rd, 2020)
16. Singsen, Hope, host. "Emma Sulkowicz on Healing Through Activism." #HealMeToo (podcast). March 29, 2019. Accessed February 3rd, 2020. <https://skintheplay.com/podcast-001>.
17. Svokos, Alexandra. 2014. "Students Bring Out Mattress in Huge 'Carry That Weight' Protest' Against Sexual Assault." October 29. https://www.huffpost.com/entry/carry-that-weight-columbia-sexual-assault_n_6069344 (February 1st, 2020)
18. Turkewitz, Julie. 2019. "Swarthmore Students Demand Closing of Fraternity that Boasted of 'Rape Attic'." April 30. <https://search-proquest-com.proxy.uchicago.edu/usnews/docview/2216950840/29700FC48B374F8FPQ/1?accountid=14657> (February 3rd, 2020).
19. Zipp, Bobby. 2017. "Flyers Around Campus Provoke Discussion on Sexual Violence." April 6. <https://swarthmorephoenix.com/2017/04/06/flyers-around-campus-provoke-discussion-on-sexual-violence/> (February 5th, 2020)