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"I Didn't Realize How Common it Was:" A Mixed-Methods Study Examining Changes in Perceptions of Sexual Assault, Sex and Consent, and Sexual Behavior as a Function of the #Metoo Movement

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ABSTRACT

This mixed-methods study examined awareness and perceived legitimacy of the #MeToo movement and how #MeToo changed perceptions of sexual assault and consent, as well as sexual interactions, in the United States. Adults residing in the U.S. were recruited through CloudResearch to complete an online survey in 2021. Quantitative data from 680 participants (M age = 45.8, 60% women, 77.4% White) indicated moderate awareness and perceived legitimacy of the #MeToo movement; Black, LGBTQ+, and more politically liberal respondents had greater #MeToo awareness while younger, more liberal respondents, and those with greater rejection of rape myths rated #MeToo more legitimate. Among 354 participants (M age = 45.0, 65.3% women, 76.4% White) who answered at least one open-ended question with regard to changes resulting from the #MeToo movement, thematic analysis revealed nine primary themes: (1) Describing change; (2) Change in understanding; (3) More cautious; (4) Wrong or requires reporting/punishment; (5) Gendered social norms; (6) Easier to talk about; (7) #MeToo rhetoric; (8) Consequences for survivors, and (9) Empowerment. Several sub-themes were identified among the primary themes and implications for sexual assault prevention and response were discussed. The study findings are contextualized by social constructionism, with a particular focus on gender-based power dynamics, contributing to a growing literature documenting the cultural impact of the #MeToo movement.

Activist Tarana Burke originally coined the term "me too" in 2006 to create solidarity among survivors of sexual violence. The hashtag #MeToo picked up traction on social media in October 2017 as millions of people worldwide began using it to describe their experiences of sexual assault and harassment (Mendes et al., 2018). Google searches for #MeToo, sexual assault, sexual harassment, sexual abuse, and rape significantly increased after Harvey Weinstein was accused and remained higher than prior to this accusation for several months (Kaufman et al., 2021), suggesting that the #MeToo movement may have increased the general public's awareness of sexual violence in all its forms. However, less is known about how the #MeToo movement may have changed the ways in which people think about and approach sexual behavior. Many individuals with past experiences that meet behaviorally-specific criteria for sexual assault or rape – hereafter referred to as survivors – publicly disclosed for the first time using the hashtag #MeToo (e.g., Alaggia & Wang, 2020; Bogen et al., 2021), and the telling of these stories may have allowed others who did not previously recognize their own experiences as sexual assault to have a new framework for understanding their personal histories (Jaffe et al., 2021). Thus, the current study examined how the #MeToo movement influenced U.S. adults' views on sexual assault and consent, their behavior with present or future sexual partners, and changes in how survivors perceive their own experiences.

The #Metoo Movement and Social Constructionism

Greater exposure to the #MeToo movement has been associated with increased awareness and concern about sexual assault in both quantitative (Castle et al., 2020) and qualitative (Acquaviva et al., 2021; Williamson et al., 2020) research. Further qualitative research has also explored how the #MeToo movement shaped conversations about sexual consent among American college students (Cary et al., 2022). These studies focused on young adults or examined constructs such as political ambition and engagement in relation to the movement (Acquaviva et al., 2021; Cary et al., 2022, Castle et al., 2020; Williamson et al., 2020), setting a strong foundation upon which to investigate whether the #MeToo movement has changed perceptions of sexual experiences and behaviors among U.S. adults more broadly.

Social Constructionism

Sexual violence prevention programs cannot produce enduring change without corresponding changes in the culture at large, so we need to understand how social movements like #MeToo might accomplish change to enact further change at the societal level. Advancing such knowledge requires a psychosociological approach because understandings of sexual assault, sexual consent, and partnered sexual behavior are

deeply personal *and* cultural. Indeed, we understand our sexual thoughts and behaviors through our social context and preexisting cultural scripts, such that perceptions of sexual phenomena mirror cultural assumptions surrounding what is acceptable or unacceptable (Seidman, 2003). **Thus, changes ensuing from the #MeToo movement can be usefully contextualized by social constructionism, a theory asserting our individual perceptions and experiences are not inherent or biologically determined but rather constructed through social processes (DeLamater & Hyde, 1998).** A constructionist framework assumes social problems are actively made, not simply revealed, a core tenet of feminist science and the sexual violence literature regarding societal norms that perpetuate sexual assault and gender-based power dynamics (Chasteen, 2001). Understanding perceptions and behaviors through the lens of social constructionism means grounding individual conceptualizations in the present cultural climate, allowing for a contextualized analysis of the ways in which they might reflect broader changes resulting from the #MeToo movement (Seidman, 2003).

Sociodemographic Characteristics and the #Metoo Movement

How individuals make sense of their reality may vary as a function of the beliefs shared within a given social group, including those constructed among members who share social identities. As such, sociodemographic characteristics, including age, gender, race, sexuality, and political views, may be differentially associated with awareness and perceptions of the #MeToo movement. Generational differences in perceptions of sexual harassment and assault have been hypothesized due to changing cultural perceptions (see Kessler et al., 2021), and men have been shown to have less positive attitudes toward the #MeToo movement compared to women (Bonny-Noach et al., 2022). Findings from longitudinal research suggest both men and women report less dismissal of sexual assault following the #MeToo movement, but this effect hinges on social dominance orientation such that men with low levels of support for group-based hierarchy and women with high levels of support for group-based hierarchy show the greatest reductions in sexual assault dismissal (Szekeres et al., 2020). Similarly, political views may relate to perceptions of the #MeToo movement, with some work suggesting that Democrats are more likely to be aware of and mobilized by #MeToo compared to Republicans (Castle et al., 2020). Politically conservative men who believed that men were being victimized by the #MeToo movement have also reported being less likely to work alone with women and less willing to speak out against sexual harassment or support local sexual assault advocacy groups (Lisnek et al., 2022). Considered in tandem, these findings align with the notion that perceptions of sexual assault and the #MeToo movement broadly both rely on belief systems co-created among like-minded members of the same social groups.

With respect to racial identity, higher odds of disclosing in response to the #MeToo movement have been observed among Black student survivors relative to White student survivors (Palmer et al., 2021). Yet college students who participate in the movement by posting about #MeToo on social media,

signing petitions, or attending protests are more likely to be White than another race and more likely to be lesbian, gay, or bisexual (LGB) than heterosexual (Hoffman, 2021). Of note, Black women may have been more likely to disclose due to Tarana Burke's leadership in the original Me Too movement – which she founded to help women of color who had experienced sexual violence – whereas White women became more involved after Alyssa Milano brought the movement to the digital sphere (Guerra, 2017). **While the online movement has enacted positive change by encouraging individuals to break the silence around sexual harassment and assault, it is equally important to highlight that the digital movement was co-opted by White feminism, undermining the voices and contributions of women of color (Leung & Williams, 2019).** As such, patterns of #MeToo involvement that vary as a function of racial identity or ethnic background should be carefully considered with this context in mind.

Further, it is imperative to consider the ways in which holding several intersecting identities may influence the awareness and perceptions of individuals belonging to multiple social groups (Crenshaw, 1989). On the surface, #MeToo can be viewed as a social movement led by women and rebuked by men, but the reality is more complex. Black women experience violence and other consequences of social inequality on the basis of their race and gender, which from the social constructionism perspective might suggest their responses to the #MeToo movement would differ from that of White women (Leung & Williams, 2019). Accordingly, Black women participating in the #MeToo movement have more often incorporated experiences of racial discrimination into their narratives, while White women have connected the movement to social and political issues (i.e., gun violence and voting) more immediately visible from their position in a racist, patriarchal hierarchy (Mueller et al., 2021).

Rape Myths and the #Metoo Movement

Also consistent with a patriarchal power structure, the #MeToo movement received many forms of backlash. For example, the hashtag #HimToo was intended to elevate the stories of men survivors, but it was repurposed by supporters of Brett Kavanaugh to facilitate overarching goals of male power and privilege by focusing on false sexual assault accusations and fostering skepticism regarding the movement's credibility (Boyle & Rathnayake, 2020; Ellis, 2018). Negative #MeToo views also have been documented in qualitative analyses of Twitter discourse with prominent themes including (1) invalidation of #MeToo accusations, (2) belief that accusations were false, (3) concerns for those accused, and (4) concerns for male power, privilege, or status as a result of the #MeToo movement (Nutbeam & Mereish, 2022). Rape myths, or false beliefs characterized by inaccurate stereotypes that shift blame from the perpetrator to the victim, may help to explain this pattern of findings through the lens of social constructionism. Prior research has linked reading #HimToo posts on social media with lower rejection of rape myths and exposure to #MeToo posts on social media with higher rejection of rape myths (Nomamiukor & Wisco, 2023; A. M. Smith & Ortiz, 2021), suggesting that even the virtual echo-chambers we

construct through online social interactions play a role in shaping our belief systems and impressions of real-world phenomena. Offline, men are less likely to reject rape myths when compared to women, and these heightened levels of rape myth acceptance may work in tandem with hostile sexism to explain gender differences in perceptions of the #MeToo movement (Kunst et al., 2019). Politically conservative, heterosexual, Christian women have also been shown to endorse more acceptance of rape myths than politically liberal, LGBTQ+, non-religious women (PettyJohn et al., 2023), and greater rape myth acceptance has been linked to a decreased likelihood of labeling an experience as rape or sexual assault (Peterson & Muehlenhard, 2004). Collectively, these findings suggest that lower rejection of rape myths may be related to less awareness of the #MeToo movement and diminished beliefs that the movement is legitimate.

Sexual Assault History and the #MeToo Movement

Many of the social media posts that epitomized the #MeToo movement were shared by survivors who were publicly disclosing their assault histories for the first time (Alaggia & Wang, 2020), prompting studies examining online disclosures of sexual victimization via the hashtag #MeToo. One line of research in this area concerns the #MeToo movement's impact on survivors' acknowledgment and acceptance of their own sexual assault experiences. For example, a longitudinal study of college students showed that as more time passed after the initial #MeToo hashtag surfaced, survivors were increasingly more likely to identify and label an unwanted, behaviorally-specific sexual experience as sexual assault even though the prevalence of these experiences did not increase over time (Jaffe et al., 2021). These findings were interpreted to mean that the #MeToo movement may have increased students' recognition of their nonconsensual sexual experiences as assault (Jaffe et al., 2021).

The #MeToo movement also may have impacted survivors in ways that do not include increased labeling or acknowledgment. College students with more sexual victimization experiences and those who know a sexual assault survivor are more likely than those without such experiences or connections to participate in the #MeToo movement, either through advocacy work or by using the hashtag on social media (Hoffman, 2021). Activism also has been shown to serve as a useful coping mechanism, which helps survivors feel empowered and gain a greater understanding of their experiences (Strauss Swanson & Szymanski, 2020). However, survivors also describe some negative effects of the #MeToo movement, including feeling triggered, burned out, and frustrated (Strauss Swanson & Szymanski, 2020) and experiencing negative mental health and relationship outcomes as a result of #MeToo exposure, particularly when social media discourse involves rape culture narratives (PettyJohn et al., 2022).

Current Study

The current mixed-methods study sought to address gaps in the extant literature by examining the degree to which and specific ways in which the #MeToo movement has changed

perceptions of sexual assault and consent, behaviors with potential sexual partners, and survivors' perceptions of their own assault in a broad sample of U.S. adults. The first aim was to examine awareness of the #MeToo movement, perceptions of its legitimacy, and whether awareness or legitimacy perceptions vary as a function of demographics. We hypothesized that the majority of the sample would have at least some awareness of the #MeToo movement; however, older, White, cisgender, heterosexual men with more conservative political views would be less likely to believe in the movement's legitimacy compared to younger, female or genderqueer, LGBTQ+, people of color with more liberal political views.

The second aim was to examine associations between rape myth rejection and #MeToo awareness and legitimacy perceptions. Based on prior work suggesting an association between the acceptance of rape myths and negative perceptions of the #MeToo movement (Kunst et al., 2019), we hypothesized that greater rejection of rape myths would be associated with greater awareness of and belief in the legitimacy of the #MeToo movement.

Our third aim was to examine the degree to which participants found that #MeToo had changed the way they think about sexual assault, the way they think about sex or sexual consent, and/or the way they interact with potential sexual partners, and to analyze participants' open-ended responses about the specific nature of such changes. For those who reported any change, we explored their qualitative responses about how their thoughts on sexual assault, sex, and sexual consent have changed and how their interactions with potential sexual partners have changed as a result of the #MeToo movement.

Our fourth aim was to examine whether participants who endorsed at least one instance of unwanted sexual contact since age 14 would also note changes in how they viewed their own victimization experience(s) as a result of exposure to the #MeToo movement. We explored the degree to which their thinking about their own assault changed and qualitatively examined the ways in which their thinking about their own assault changed.

Method

Participants

Study participants were recruited through CloudResearch, an online data collection platform, in March 2021. Participants were eligible for the current study if they resided in the United States, reported being at least 18 years old, and provided informed consent. Of the 714 participants who consented to participate and began the survey, two were screened out because they did not meet the age criterion, and 32 were removed following an assessment of data quality and missingness (see Data Analysis Plan for detailed information).

The quantitative sample consisted of 680 participants between the ages of 18 and 91 ($M = 45.8$, $SD = 18.7$). These participants (261 men, 412 women, 8 gender expansive) displayed an ethnic makeup similar to that of the general U.S. population; demographic information is reported in Table 1. Approximately 41.9% ($n = 285$) endorsed sexual assault victimization; 70% of survivors were women, 18%

Table 1. Sample demographics ($N = 680$).

	<i>n</i>	%
Age – Mean (SD) ^a	45.8 (18.7)	–
Gender		
Cisgender man	261	38.4
Cisgender woman	412	60.6
Transgender, genderqueer or another gender	8	1.0
Race		
Asian	36	5.3
Black	76	11.8
White	526	77.4
Other	42	6.2
Hispanic/Latinx Ethnicity		
Yes	85	12.4
No	578	85.3
Sexual Orientation ^b		
Heterosexual	599	88.1
LGBQ+	68	10.0
Marital Status		
Single/dating	213	31.3
Married/committed relationship	351	51.6
Separated/divorced/widowed	116	17.1
Political Views ^c		
Fiscal – Mean (SD)	52.02 (27.4)	–
Social – Mean (SD)	53.29 (28.1)	–
Unwanted Sexual Experience Since Age 14 ^d		
Yes	285	41.9
No	395	58.1

^aAges ranged from 18 to 91. 10 participants did not provide age data. ^b13 participants preferred not to report their sexual orientation. ^cFiscal and social political views were each assessed with a sliding scale item that ranged from 0 (*extremely conservative*) to 100 (*extremely liberal*) with 50 identified as the neutral midpoint. ^dAlthough 286 individuals did not select “this never happened to me,” only 285 endorsed any SES-SFV item.

were LGBQ+, 73% were White, 15% were Hispanic or Latin/o/x, and 50% were in a married or committed relationship, while 9% were dating, 29% were single, and 13% were separated, divorced, or widowed.

Procedures

Prime panelists were invited to participate in a CloudResearch study and directed to a web-administered Qualtrics survey. Those who met inclusion criteria and provided informed consent completed a self-report survey assessing the constructs of interest for the current study as well as a vignette depicting a sexual assault with questions relating to labeling and responsibility for the assault. The vignette analyses are not part of the current article. All procedures were reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board. Survey measures were presented in the same order as they are listed below.

CloudResearch – previously known as TurkPrime – has advantages over other online data collection platforms. In a study assessing data quality in online human-subjects research, participants recruited via CloudResearch were more likely than those from Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk), Qualtrics, or an undergraduate student sample (i.e., SONA) to pass various attention checks, follow instructions, provide meaningful answers, work slowly enough to read survey items, remember previously presented information, and have a unique IP address and geolocation (Douglas et al., 2023). The current study used Prime Panels, a service within CloudResearch that facilitates access to a diverse pool of participants by drawing from multiple reputable online panel providers. Prior work suggests Prime Panels participants are more

diverse in age, education, and political attitudes than those recruited from MTurk (Chandler et al., 2019). The research team paid CloudResearch a flat fee based on survey length, estimated response time (i.e., 16–20 minutes), and targeted sample size. CloudResearch then paid participants according to agreements with their respective panel providers.

Measures

Demographics

Participants reported their age in years; race (American Indian/Alaska Native, Asian, Black, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, White, another race not listed, prefer not to answer); Hispanic/Latinx ethnicity (yes/no); gender identity (cisgender man, cisgender woman, genderqueer or gender non-conforming, trans man, trans woman, another identity not listed, prefer not to answer); sexual orientation (asexual, bisexual, gay, heterosexual, lesbian, pansexual, queer/questioning, another orientation not listed, prefer not to answer); and relationship status (committed relationship, dating, married, single, separated/divorced, widowed). Due to small sample size, some categories were collapsed for further analysis. Race was collapsed into Asian, Black, White, and other races, which included American Indian/Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, and those who endorsed another race not listed. Gender was collapsed into cisgender man, cisgender woman, and transgender or gender expansive, which included trans men, trans women, and genderqueer or gender non-conforming people. Sexual orientation was collapsed into heterosexual or LGBQ+ (i.e., lesbian, gay,

bisexual, and other queer identities, which included asexual, pansexual, queer/questioning, and those who endorsed another identity not listed). Marital status was collapsed into single/dating, married/committed relationship, and separated/divorced/widowed. Participants were also asked to identify their fiscal and social political beliefs on corresponding slider scales ranging from 0 (*extremely conservative*) to 100 (*extremely liberal*).

#Metoo Awareness and Legitimacy

Participants were asked to indicate their awareness of the #MeToo movement by rating the extent to which they followed related media coverage on a scale from 0 (*Not at all* (e.g., what is this?)) to 100 (*Extremely* (e.g., watched hours of trials and followed news stories)), with midpoints at 25 (*Somewhat* (e.g., recognize the hashtag)), 50 (*Moderately* (e.g., I watched some of the major trials and followed the movement on Twitter, Instagram, etc.)), and 75 (*Very much* (e.g., I watched most of the major trials and followed the movement)). Participants were asked to rate the extent to which they felt the #MeToo movement was a legitimate endeavor on a scale from 0 (*Not legitimate*) to 100 (*Very legitimate*) with a midpoint of 50 (*Somewhat legitimate*). These questions were based on items used by Lathan et al. (2019).

Post-#Metoo Perceptions of Sexual Assault, Sex and Consent, and Behaviors with Partners

Participants were asked “How much has the #MeToo movement or media coverage of related cases (e.g., Harvey Weinstein, Brett Kavanaugh) changed the way you think about sexual assault?” and given response options on a Likert-type scale from 0 (*Not at all*) to 4 (*Extremely*). The same survey item was then repeated three times in reference to changes in the way participants (1) think about sex, (2) think about consent, and (3) interact with potential sexual partners. Whether participants received each qualitative follow-up question was based on their prior response to the corresponding item assessing the degree of change due to the #MeToo movement. Those who endorsed a value of 1 (*A little bit*) or more were presented with an open-text entry box and asked to describe the indicated change in thoughts or behaviors (e.g., “How has your thinking about sexual assault changed?”).

History of Sexual Assault Victimization

The 10-item Sexual Experiences Survey-Short Form Victimization (SES-SFV; Koss et al., 2007) was used to assess the number of times since age 14 that participants had been subjected to behaviorally specific acts ranging from unwanted sexual contact to completed penetration, occurring via tactics such as verbal coercion, incapacitation, threats of force, or physical force. History of sexual assault victimization was defined by endorsing at least one behaviorally specific incident of unwanted sexual contact since age 14.

Post-#Metoo Changes in Perceptions of Personal Sexual Assault Experiences

Participants who endorsed at least one behaviorally-specific incident of sexual assault or rape on the SES-SFV were asked “How much has the #MeToo movement changed the way you think about your own uncomfortable or unwanted sexual experience(s)” and instructed to indicate their response on a Likert scale from 0 (*Not at all*) to 5 (*Extremely*). Participants who indicated change beyond “Not at all” then received the following open-ended question, “How has your thinking about your own uncomfortable or unwanted sexual experience changed?”

Rape Myth Rejection

The updated Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale (uIRMA; McMahon & Farmer, 2011) is a 22-item self-report measure assessing implicit and explicit beliefs that survivors are to blame for their own experiences of sexual assault victimization. Response options range from 1 (*Strongly Agree*) to 5 (*Strongly Disagree*), with item responses summed overall and within each subscale such that higher scores reflect greater rejection of rape myths across four domains: She Asked for It, six items assessing the belief that the victim’s behaviors invited sexual assault (e.g., “If a girl goes to a room alone with a guy at a party, it is her own fault if she is raped”); He Didn’t Mean To, six items reflecting the belief that the perpetrator did not intend to rape (e.g., “Guys don’t usually intend to force sex on a girl, but sometimes they get too sexually carried away”); It Wasn’t Really Rape, five items that deny an assault occurred due to either blaming the victim or excusing the perpetrator (e.g., “If a girl doesn’t physically fight back, you can’t really say it was rape”); and She Lied, five items assessing the belief that victims fabricate rape (e.g., “Rape accusations are often used as a way of getting back at guys”). In the current sample, the internal consistency of the total uIRMA scale was $\alpha = .95$, with subscale alpha values ranging from .83 (He Didn’t Mean To) to .91 (She Lied).

Attention Checks

Two items were scattered throughout the survey as attention checks assessing for carelessly invalid responses. Both questions asked about the season in which a given month (i.e., January, July) falls in the United States.

Reflexivity

Our team consisted of four White cisgender women researchers with training in psychology, public health, and/or gender-based violence. As feminists, we are committed to dismantling the power structures that facilitate sexual violence, including gender inequity, and approached the qualitative analysis with some preconceived notions about how gender related to themes we observed. We used a reflective process to question our biases while analyzing themes and worked to cultivate an intersectional approach and position our findings within the greater social landscape. Further, we believe that an apprehension of injustice and oppression in all forms is imperative in understanding

the ways different populations may react to and/or engage in demonstrations of social change.

Qualitative Response Coding

Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was the most appropriate qualitative approach for the purposes of our study and all four authors participated in the iterative coding process. We began by familiarizing ourselves with the qualitative data provided in response to each of the four open-ended questions about changes in participants' (1) sexual assault perceptions, (2) sex and/or sexual consent perceptions, (3) interactions with potential sexual partners, and (4) thoughts about their unwanted sexual experiences. Next, we divided the four questions, with each author identifying preliminary codes. We held regular meetings throughout the process to discuss the initial codes, group overlapping codes into sub-themes, and organize these clusters of sub-themes into themes pertinent to our research questions. Once we had developed a coding scheme, the first three authors participated in successive rounds of coding the four questions, flagging potential discrepancies and coding concerns. Responses could be coded to reflect multiple themes. After all of the responses were coded, the last author independently coded all responses using the codebook to assess interrater agreement and listed the themes in a table organized from most prevalent to least prevalent. Cohen's weighted kappa between the primary coder and last author coder was .88, .84, .82, and .76 across the four questions, which indicates substantial to near perfect agreement between the last author and each other rater across questions (Ranganathan et al., 2017). We resolved minor discrepancies through discussion and selected quotes to represent themes as a group. Although we examined agreement by question, we coded and organized themes in the table across questions. When providing quotes, we analyzed themes according to gender, age (typically described by decade except for 18- and 19-year-old respondents to avoid confusion by using the word teen when the full range of teens was not represented), and race/ethnicity.

Data Analysis Plan

After data were cleaned and quality was assessed, 30 participants were removed due to low-quality data (i.e., failed attention checks, straightlining, nonsensical answers in text box entries). Patterns of missingness were examined and two additional responses were removed for more than 25% of missing data. Sample descriptive statistics were computed for demographics, #MeToo awareness and legitimacy perceptions, and proportions of participants who reported their thoughts and/or behaviors with sexual partners had changed.

To address the first hypothesis that certain demographics would be associated with #MeToo awareness and legitimacy perceptions, we used correlation for continuously measured characteristics (e.g., age, political views) and Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) for categorical characteristics (e.g., gender, race, sexual orientation, relationship status). For significant ANOVAs, follow-up pairwise mean differences

were ascertained using Bonferroni correction. To address the second hypothesis, that greater rejection of rape myths would be associated with greater #MeToo awareness and legitimacy perceptions, we used correlations to examine associations between uIRMA scores and #MeToo awareness and legitimacy scores. To address the third and fourth hypotheses we coded responses to open-ended questions and summarized the different themes discerned through thematic analysis.

Results

#Metoo Awareness

Average awareness of the #MeToo movement was 42.3 ($SD = 29.2$) on a scale ranging from 0 (completely unaware) to 100 (extensively followed the trials and participated in the movement on social media). This score fell between the anchor points of 25 (recognize the #hashtag) and 50 (watched some of the major trials and followed the movement on social media). **Although there were no significant differences in awareness of the #MeToo movement by gender, $F(2,673) = 2.29$, $p = .102$,** age showed an inverse relationship with awareness of the #MeToo movement ($r = -.23$, $p < .001$), indicating that older individuals tended to be less aware of the movement. There also were significant differences by race, $F(3,667) = 4.28$, $p = .005$, sexual orientation, $F(3,662) = 8.17$, $p = .004$, and marital status, $F(3,673) = 3.42$, $p = .017$. Follow-up pairwise comparisons indicated that Black respondents had higher #MeToo movement awareness than White respondents, LGBQ+ respondents had higher #MeToo movement awareness than straight respondents, and both single and married respondents had higher #MeToo movement awareness compared to separated/divorced/widowed respondents. Additionally, there were positive correlations between more liberal fiscal ($r = .39$, $p < .001$) and social ($r = .36$, $p < .001$) political views and awareness of the #MeToo movement, suggesting that individuals with more liberal views were more aware of the movement. Given wide variability in age and the potential for generational differences, we examined demographic correlates of #MeToo awareness just among young adults (age 18–34) and found that race, sexual orientation, and marital status) were not related to awareness ($ps > .11$).

#Metoo Legitimacy Perceptions

Average perception of the legitimacy of the #MeToo movement was 53.82 ($SD = 31.90$) on a scale from 0 (not at all legitimate) to 100 (very legitimate), with the score falling just above 50 (somewhat legitimate). **There were no differences in perceptions of legitimacy of the #MeToo movement by gender, $F(2,664) = 0.77$, $p = .464$,** race, $F(3,661) = 2.02$, $p = .110$, sexual orientation, $F(1,653) = 0.98$, $p = .332$, or marital status, $F(3,664) = 0.80$, $p = .496$. However, there was an inverse association between age and perceptions of the #MeToo movement's legitimacy ($r = -.17$, $p < .001$), implying that older individuals tended to view the movement as less legitimate. Liberal fiscal (r

= .40, $p < .001$) and social ($r = .39$, $p < .001$) political views were positively associated with perceptions of the #MeToo movement's legitimacy, suggesting that individuals with more liberal political views perceived the #MeToo movement as more legitimate. #MeToo awareness and legitimacy were moderately correlated ($r = .65$, $p < .001$).

Rape Myth Rejection and Awareness and Perceptions of the #MeToo Movement

Although age was not associated with overall rape myth rejection or the "she asked for it" subscales, older people had greater rejection of the "he didn't mean to" ($r = .09$, $p = .02$) and "it wasn't really rape" ($r = .17$, $p = .001$) myths but less rejection of the "she lied" myth ($r = -.09$, $p = .03$). Gender was significantly associated with rape myth rejection such that women reported greater rejection of rape myths overall, $F(1,670) = 14.24$, $p < .001$, including greater rejection of the "she asked for it," $F(1,670) = 18.05$, $p < .001$, "he didn't mean to," $F(1,670) = 6.84$, $p = .009$, "it wasn't really rape," $F(1,670) = 5.06$, $p = .025$, and "she lied," $F(1,670) = 17.38$, $p < .001$, subscales of the IRMA. Race was not significantly associated with overall rape myths rejection or any subscales ($ps > .05$).

Although the uIRMA total score was not significantly associated with awareness of the #MeToo movement ($r = .05$, $p = .229$), it was significantly associated with #MeToo movement legitimacy perceptions ($r = .13$, $p = .001$) such that respondents with greater rejection of rape myths perceived the #MeToo movement as more legitimate. All of the uIRMA subscales except "it wasn't really rape" were significantly positively associated with higher legitimacy perceptions of the #MeToo movement (rs ranged from .10 for "he didn't mean to" to .20 for "she lied").

Degree to Which the #MeToo Movement Changed Thoughts and Behaviors

Table 2 shows the percentage of change in thoughts or behaviors in response to the #MeToo movement along with the mean scores for each question. Means fell between (1) a little bit and (2) moderately. Older individuals reported a lesser degree of change in their thoughts about sexual assault ($r = -.14$, $p < .001$), consent ($r = -.17$, $p < .001$), and behavior with sexual partners ($r = -.20$, $p < .001$), indicating that the #MeToo movement had a comparatively smaller impact in terms of altering their perceptions and behaviors. Gender differences were observed in changes in behavior with sexual partners, F

(2,678) = 4.25, $p = .015$, and perceptions of one's own sexual assault, $F(2,284) = 3.53$, $p = .031$, with men reporting more change than women, highlighting gender-specific impacts of the movement. Means for gender expansive people were higher than means for men but the sample was too small for this effect to reach significance. There were significant differences by race in thoughts/beliefs about consent, $F(3,674) = 3.29$, $p = .020$, and behavior with sexual partners, $F(3,675) = 5.10$, $p = .002$. Specifically, Black respondents reported greater changes in thoughts/beliefs about consent compared to White respondents, and both Black and Asian respondents reported greater changes in behavior with sexual partners compared to White respondents. LGBTQ+ respondents reported significantly more change in their perceptions of sexual assault and consent and their behaviors with sexual partners compared to straight respondents ($ps < .02$).

Thematic Analysis

In response to questions about how the #MeToo movement has changed thoughts or behaviors, there were 1008 total codable responses among 354 participants. There were 136 codable responses (included in the 1008) just among the 227 participants who had an unwanted sexual experience and reported that the #MeToo movement had changed their perceptions of their own experience at least a little bit or more. Responses were an average of 37 characters long and ranged from 4 characters (e.g., a lot) to 331 characters and thus could be a single word all the way to several sentences.

Of those who provided qualitative responses, nearly two-thirds (65.3%) were women, while one-third (32.3%) were men, and six were gender-expansive individuals. More than three-quarters (76.4%) were White, 11.8% were Black, 6.3% were Asian, and 14.3% were Hispanic/Latinx. For those who provided qualitative responses, the mean age was 45.0 ($SD = 18.6$). There were no demographic differences between the full sample and those who provided qualitative data. Similarly, there were no demographic differences between sexual assault survivors who did and did not provide qualitative responses. Themes and subthemes along with their frequency are summarized in Table 3.

Describing Change

Across all questions, 186 responses reflected no change in perceptions, behaviors, or thinking about one's own assault, but the nature and extent of the explanation varied.

Table 2. Means and percentages of changes in perception and behavior after the #MeToo movement.

	Sexual Assault $n = 678$	Consent $n = 678$	Sexual Behavior $n = 679$	Own Assault $n = 286^a$
Not at all	16.3	24.5	33.8	20.6
A little bit	18.9	16.1	13.7	22.4
Moderately	32.2	28.6	26.4	28.3
Quite a bit	19.1	18.7	14.3	10.8
Extremely	13.3	11.7	11.9	17.8
Mean (SD)	1.65 (1.31)	1.51 (1.34)	1.29 (1.36)	1.83 (1.36)

Responses were provided on a Likert scale from 0 (*Not at all*) to 4 (*Extremely*).

^aParticipants who endorsed at least one behaviorally-specific incidence of sexual assault received this item about changes in perceptions of personal experiences.

Table 3. Summary of themes and subthemes reflecting changes resulting from #MeToo ($N = 354$).

Themes and Subthemes	n (%)	# of responses
Describing change	203 (57.3)	271
Degree of change in perceptions	48 (13.6)	85
Reinforcement of pre-#MeToo beliefs	114 (32.2)	145
No change in partnered behavior	41 (11.6)	41
Change in understanding	169 (47.7)	169
Increased awareness	113 (31.9)	113
Have deeper, clearer understanding of consent	39 (11.0)	39
Disclosed, reflected on, or reconsidered own sexual assault ^a	17 (12.5)	17
More cautious	77 (21.8)	77
Gendered social norms	55 (15.5)	56
Heteronormative sexual scripts	23 (6.5)	23
Power dynamics in sexual assault and consent	15 (4.2)	15
Rape myths	17 (4.8)	18
Wrong or requires reporting/punishment	48 (13.6)	48
Wrong or serious	36 (10.2)	36
Should be reported [to police] and/or punished	12 (3.4)	12
Easier to talk about	48 (13.6)	48
More communicative about consent and boundaries	32 (9.0)	32
More public conversations about sexual assault	16 (4.5)	16
MeToo rhetoric	41 (11.6)	41
Consent rhetoric like “no means no”	39 (11.0)	39
Believe women or survivors	7 (2.0)	7
Consequences for survivors	29 (8.2)	29
Realized it’s not my fault, blame myself less, feel less alone ^a	21 (15.4)	21
Experienced shame, self-blame, nightmares, or other symptoms ^a	8 (5.9)	8
Empowerment	20 (5.6)	20

Although we had 1008 codable responses, the rightmost column adds to 1099 because some responses were coded under multiple themes.

^aPrevalence is out of the 136 participants with an unwanted sexual experience who responded to the question about how #MeToo had changed their thinking about their own sexual assault.

Degree of Change in Perceptions. About 85 responses reflected the degree of change (e.g., not much, a lot, extremely) but did not provide additional information or context.

Reinforcement of Pre-#MeToo Beliefs. Several respondents who indicated no change also stated that sexual assault is always wrong or consent is always needed, indicating that the #MeToo movement may have reinforced their prior beliefs. For example, a Black woman in her 20s said “I’ve always thought about it the same, it hasn’t changed. Always believe survivor” while a Black man in his 60s said “It has not changed, it remains the same, it is a very serious charge.” It is notable a younger Black woman described popular rhetoric from the #MeToo movement for additional context, while an older Black man focused on the significant implications of being charged with sexual assault.

No Change in Partnered Behavior. About 41 of the 186 “no change” responses described a lack of change in sexual behavior with partners because the person had no or only 1 long-term sexual partner. For example, a non-Hispanic White man in his 60s said “I am married and old so do not have such interactions” while a non-Hispanic White woman in her 50s said “None, because I’m happily married to my husband” and a White woman in her 60s said “I only have one sexual partner, therefore, I cannot comment on this question” and a White man in his 60s said “I don’t interact with potential sexual partners because I am happily married, and a Christian.” These responses, largely from people in their 50s and beyond, suggested that people in committed relationships did not necessarily perceive that the question applied to them or that they could change their behavior with current sexual partners.

Change in Understanding

Increased Awareness. About 113 responses reflected a change in awareness of what sexual assault is or how it often it occurs and to whom. Several of these responses were from men of various ages and races. For example, a non-Hispanic White man in his 60s said “it is more prevalent [sic] than I knew,” a 19-year-old non-Hispanic White man said “I didn’t realize how common it was,” and a Black man in his 30s said “How prevalent it is and how so many people who know it happens don’t do anything to help.” The latter response reflected an increase in awareness of the prevalence of sexual assault but also a critique of how little is done to intervene or support sexual assault survivors.

Deeper Understanding. Themes among women and non-binary respondents often focused on how definitions had changed. For example, a non-Hispanic White woman in her 40s noted that her definition of assault had expanded and her perceptions of who is responsible for assault have changed, “A lot more is assault than I used to think and I no longer think women ‘ask for it’ with clothes they wear or drinking.” This suggests that the #MeToo movement has increased understanding of assault and its prevalence and has potentially reduced rape myths for some. As support for the idea that the #MeToo movement has increased understanding of sexual assault, a White non-binary respondent in their 20s noted “My understanding of what qualifies as sexual assault has changed,” and a non-Hispanic White woman in their 40s clarified “I have a wider variety of what can be considered sexual assault. It is not just penetration.” Similarly, a different non-Hispanic White woman in her 40s linked a lack of consent to sexual assault “If you don’t give consent, it is rape,” while a non-Hispanic White woman in her 40s reflected on changes in how

she thinks about sexual consent: “Consent is/should be VERY CLEAR. It’s not the absence of ‘no.’”

Disclosed or Reconsidered Own Experience. Survivors described changes in their thinking about their own unwanted sexual experience as a result of #MeToo. For example, a non-Hispanic White man in his 30s implied that the #MeToo movement had helped him identify his own experience as sexual assault, “I myself was sexually assaulted in college and recently admitted it.” A 19-year-old non-Hispanic White sexual assault survivor described how their thinking about their own assault had changed as follows: “It changed a lot. I realize things i thought were normal aren’t.” Similarly, an 18-year-old Asian woman said “I’ve realized that the things that have happened to me count as unwanted sexual advances,” while a White gender-queer respondent in his 30s said “I wonder if it was rape or not,” suggesting that the #MeToo movement had introduced new information about what assault and rape are that made some people either reevaluate or question whether they had experienced sexual violence. Some respondents also reflected that information from #MeToo contradicted stereotypes of what a “real rape” is (e.g., men are perpetrators and women are victims; rape cannot happen within marital relationships, etc.). For example, a non-Hispanic White man in his 20s said “That just because they are female and I’m male doesn’t give them any right to attempt to touch me sexually,” while a couple of non-Hispanic White women in their 50s and 60s, respectively, said “I can see now that it’s totally wrong for anyone, even a spouse, to do that” and “yes, i have been raped, assaulted by my ex husband, much more pervasive and insidious, glad it is out in the open.”

More Cautious

About 77 responses reflected being more cautious, distrustful, paranoid or avoidant of people or sex. For example, in response to the question about how the #MeToo movement had changed their behavior with sexual partners, a non-Hispanic White woman in her 20s said “I am more cautious,” while a Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander woman in her 30s said “don’t trust anyone.” However, some responses overgeneralized this distrust and avoidance to certain groups (e.g., men). A non-Hispanic White woman in her 30s said as a result of the #MeToo movement, “i’m more leary of men.” Some responses also suggested paranoia: a multiracial man in his 20s said “I video tape everything” in response to the question about how the #MeToo movement had changed his behavior with partners. Similarly, a Black man in his 20s said “I think it’s scary that they can now ruin my life if they say something not true,” which may reflect rape myths about the frequency of false allegations, although it is important to acknowledge the historical context in which Black men have been subjected to false allegations. Other responses suggested avoidance of sex and relationships; as one 18-year-old Asian woman said “I have become completely asexual, it makes me uncomfortable to be in a sexual relationship.”

Gendered Social Norms

Heteronormative Ideas. About 26 responses reflected heteronormative ideas about sex, consent, and sexual assault. For

example, a Hispanic White woman in her 30s said “I mean sexual assault is bad either way but it’s never the females fault. We never ask for it,” implying somewhat rigid sex role stereotypes about men as perpetrators and women as victims. Similarly, a non-Hispanic White man in his 60s said “if the woman says no, then thats no” and “let her be the aggressor” when asked about how his thinking about sex and consent and his behaviors with sexual partners had changed as a result of #MeToo. A non-Hispanic White man in his 60s said “if a woman says no, even if you both have started it means stop” when asked about consent and interactions with potential sexual partners. While this response recognizes the importance of process-based consent, it seems to assume that women alone can grant or refuse sex.

Power Dynamics. About 15 responses recognized power dynamics in sexual assault and consent. For example, a non-Hispanic White man in his 30s reflected on how power can increase risk for coercion and that consent obtained under these circumstances may not be freely given: “It’s made me realize powerful people pursue and pressure people in vulnerable positions to consent and that this isn’t really consent at all.” Many of the comments relating to power and authority also seemed to reflect inherent gender differences in these constructs. For instance, a non-Hispanic White woman in her 60s said “An authority figure has a responsibility not to put a woman in a compromising positon[sic]” and a non-Hispanic White woman in her 30s said “Expanded how I interpret abuses of power by position.” Other responses within this theme focused on the role of fame and money. A non-Hispanic White woman in her 60s reflected on the power that has allowed male celebrities to perpetrate violence: “Men shouldn’t get away with it just because they are a celebrity [sic],” while a White woman in her 30s said “I think now rich people and famous people can get caught and not get away with rape and assault just because they have money and fame.”

Rape Myths Acceptance. Nearly all of the 18 responses reflecting acceptance of rape myths were from White women in their 30s through 80s. For example, two 38-year-old non-Hispanic White women described specific myths (i.e., that survivors lie about assault and that survivors are at fault for wearing provocative clothing: “I think a lot of women lie about being raped when they’re not” and “I believe if you don’t wear clothes that show off your body then guys are less likely to look at you.” A non-Hispanic White woman in her 80s reflected common backlash rhetoric about the #MeToo movement, “Women have become to aggressive in accousing [sic] men when they haven’t been raped” while a non-Hispanic White woman [in caps] reflected the broader social idea that “real” rapes would be reported immediately, “WHY DID THESE WOMEN WAIT SO LONG TO COME FORWARD IF, INDEED, THEY *WERE* ACCOSTED?” However, some responses suggested that the #MeToo movement was changing these views, with a White woman in her 70s saying “I am less inclined to blame the women.” Although the potential for blame remains, this person seems to suggest that #MeToo has helped them break down rape myths.

Wrong or Requires Reporting/punishment

Wrong or Serious. About 36 responses reflected changes in thinking about sexual assault that included coming to believe that it is wrong or serious. For example, a non-Hispanic White woman in her 20s said “It’s so wrong” while a non-Hispanic White woman in her 50s said “I take even more seriously as it is extremely concerning now that it is in the light.”

Should Be reported/punished. Twelve responses also described a need for reporting or criminal legal responses. For instance, several different non-Hispanic White men in their 60s and 70s provided thoughts that assault should be reported and/or punished, “It should be extensively investigated and if warranted it should be prosecuted to the max” and “THESE PEOPLE ARE SICK. THEY SHOULD BE CHARGED WITH ASSAULT AND PUT IN JAIL NOBODY DESERVES WHAT THEY DID” and “It is more serious than reported. I think that women should report to Police.” Sexual assault survivors also said that the #MeToo movement had increased their desire or willingness to report; as a non-Hispanic White woman in her 30s said about #MeToo: “I have realized I have to report to the authorities.”

Easier to Talk About

More Communicative About Consent and Boundaries. About 32 responses reflect the idea that #MeToo has made it easier to talk about sex, consent, and sexual assault. For example, a Black woman in her 40s said “It makes it easier to express, since more people have talked about their experiences to the public.” Others noted that the #MeToo movement has encouraged them to be more expressive with their partners: a Black, Hispanic, genderqueer person in their 20s said they are “always having conversations about our needs,” and a non-Hispanic Black woman in her 40s said “It has made me feel like being more expressive about boundaries with my potential relationships.”

More Public Conversations. The #MeToo movement also has encouraged survivors to speak up about their experiences as this 18-year-old multiracial woman survivor of sexual assault described: “It has made me want to speak up after it happened years ago.” This latter quote is ambiguous in that this survivor could be describing wanting to speak out publicly for the first time (e.g., using the #MeToo hashtag) or they could be referring to telling family or friends or reporting more formally to authorities. Other respondents did connect more public conversations to greater accountability, but were not specific about the types of accountability (e.g., public shame vs legal repercussions). For instance, two non-Hispanic White men in their 60s said “Accountability can be brought about by making it public” and “men are starting to be held accountable for their actions and it is about time.”

#Metoo Rhetoric

About 41 responses reflected rhetoric from the #MeToo movement like “no means no” and “believe survivors.” For example, a non-Hispanic White woman in her 50s said “No means no, that’s it!”, while a 19-year-old Black woman said “Believe women even more.” Survivors also internalized these

messages, with a non-Hispanic White woman survivor in her 40s saying “I am a survivor so I believe them.”

Consequences for Survivors

About 8 survivors reported feeling less alone as a result of the #MeToo movement, and 13 realized it was not their fault and they are not to blame as a result of the #MeToo movement. For example, an 18-year-old Asian woman said “I am now more confident and I know that it isn’t my fault at all and I shouldn’t take accountability for someone else’s disgusting actions.” An 18-year-old non-Hispanic White woman also said “The MeToo movement made me feel more proud for living through it. Not ashamed.” However, some survivors also reported negative experiences as a result of the #MeToo movement, including an increase in depression, anxiety, and suicidality. For example, a non-Hispanic White woman in her 50s said “Some, I struggle with a lot of depression and anxiety wanting to harm or kill myself” while a non-Hispanic White woman in her 20s said “its making me have nightmares.”

Empowerment

Across questions, 20 responses primarily from non-Hispanic White women in their 40s-60s highlighted feelings of empowerment as a result of the #MeToo movement, including “It’s made me realize that you don’t have to put up with unwanted advances” and “I used to keep my guard up. I’m married now but I definitely make sure to tell him ‘no’ clearly when I don’t want to.” A sexual violence survivor said “Instead of going along with it now, I would’ve just told the guy to eat shit-hahaha. I feel way more empowered now” while another survivor said “that I have a right to expect no means just that.”

Exploration of Rape Myth Rejection Scores Among Respondents Whose Comments Reflected Rape Myths

The 18 respondents whose comments reflected rape myths had significantly lower total rape myth rejection scores, $F(1,377) = 9.32, p = .002$, as well as lower subscale scores on the “she asked for it,” $F(1,377) = 7.22, p = .008$, “he didn’t mean to,” $F(1,377) = 5.59, p = .019$, “it wasn’t really rape,” $F(1,377) = 4.93, p = .027$, and “she lied,” $F(1,377) = 11.42, p < .001$, subscales compared to the 360 respondents whose comments did not reflect rape myths.

Discussion

The present study examined awareness and perceived legitimacy of the #MeToo movement among adults residing in the United States and the degree to which perceptions were associated with sociodemographic characteristics and personal attitudes. Using a constructionist framework, we also examined how participants’ conceptualizations of sexual assault and consent and partnered sexual behavior shifted as a function of the #MeToo movement, and whether exposure to the #MeToo movement was associated with changes in sexual assault survivors’ understandings of their own victimization experiences.

Quantitatively, our sample had moderate awareness of the #MeToo movement, with younger, Black, and LGBTQ+ adults reporting the greatest awareness. However, when we restricted

analyses to young adults (age 18–34), demographic differences in awareness were not significant, suggesting these differences exist mostly within older generations. We also found moderate legitimacy ratings for the #MeToo movement, with younger and more liberal adults rating the movement as more legitimate than older and more conservative adults. Greater rejection of rape myths was associated with stronger legitimacy perceptions of the #MeToo movement, suggesting that openness to the movement is associated with fewer victim-blaming views. Although self-reported changes in perceptions and behaviors as a result of the #MeToo movement were in the small-to-moderate range, men reported more change in perceptions compared to women and Black, Asian, and LGBTQ+ respondents reported greater change in perceptions and behaviors with sexual partners compared to White and straight respondents.

Qualitatively, participants in the current study described increased knowledge and awareness of sexual assault and consent and changes in the definitional understandings of both concepts as a function of #MeToo. These findings support prior literature on the effects of the #MeToo movement (Acquaviva et al., 2021; Bogen et al., 2021; Cary et al., 2022; Williamson et al., 2020) and highlight the role of fourth-wave feminism, including internet activism, in raising awareness of sexual assault. Notably, many comments about increased awareness were from men of all ages and races, while many comments about changes in definitional understandings were from women and non-binary respondents. Considered through the lens of social constructionism, men's relative privilege may have limited the degree to which they attended to and acknowledged sexual violence pre-#MeToo (Gemignani & Peña, 2007). Waiting until marriage to have sex curricula is prevalent in the U.S. (Lindberg & Kantor, 2022), and largely glosses over the topic of sexual violence (Santelli et al., 2018). Consequently, men with no personal exposure to sexual assault who never received comprehensive sex education may have been unaware of its prevalence until encountering #MeToo narratives on social media. In contrast, gender-based violence and other consequences of sexism are more readily perceived by those directly affected by these issues (McIntosh, 1998), including women and non-binary people. Media coverage and the open sharing of stories that took place throughout the #MeToo movement may have exposed women and non-binary people to a range of experiences beyond their own and consequently shifted their understanding of what constitutes sexual assault.

In addition to increasing awareness and understanding of sexual assault and consent, our findings also suggest that the #MeToo movement made it easier to share sexual violence experiences and communicate with partners about sexual consent within their relationships. People may feel safer and more comfortable sharing their experiences of sexual violence because longitudinal studies have found that the #MeToo movement reduced dismissal of sexual assault (Szekeres et al., 2020). Although prior studies have suggested that #MeToo has changed conceptualizations of consent (Cary et al., 2022), none to our knowledge have examined whether the movement has encouraged changes in consent approaches within partnered sexual encounters. Encouragingly, some comments reflected the need for ongoing and mutual attention

to consent (Glance et al., 2021); however, many respondents in long-term relationships made comments suggesting that there is not a need to obtain consent with established partners, which could reflect the idea that sexual precedent negates the need to communicate directly about consent (e.g., Willis & Jozkowski, 2019). These comments highlight areas in which the #MeToo movement may not have addressed sexual assault or violence within partnered relationships.

Findings that middle-aged and older White men highlighted a need for reporting, investigation, and prosecution are consistent with data suggesting that White men generally have more positive views of police compared to other racial and gender groups (Wu, 2014) but suggest these men may be unaware of valid reasons for not reporting (Cohn et al., 2013; Reich et al., 2022). However, some primarily younger White women who had experienced sexual assault described a new desire to report as a result of #MeToo. These sentiments are reflected in data from the U.S. (Morgan & Oudekerk, 2019) and Canada (Rotenberg & Cotter, 2018) that show the number of sexual assaults reported to police jumped dramatically in 2017 compared to those reported to police in previous years, highlighting the role that the #MeToo movement may have played in encouraging formal help-seeking. Some data, however, suggest that reporting to police may be one of the ways that society determines a victim to be credible (Shi, 2022), so it is important to ensure that social narratives recognize the many valid reasons why a survivor may not report an assault (Cohn et al., 2013; Reich et al., 2022).

Consistent with studies suggesting higher rape myth acceptance among men (see Russell & Hand, 2017), women in the full sample had greater rejection of rape myths compared to men. However, nearly all of the comments reflecting rape myths were from middle-to-older aged White women, and women whose comments reflected rape myths had significantly lower rejection of rape myth scores compared to those whose comments did not reflect rape myths. These comments and scores suggest that some women may internalize societal messaging that blames victims. While these views may stem from just world beliefs (i.e., that bad things don't happen to good people unless they've done something wrong; Dalbert, 2009), the gendered nature of the comments also suggests that internalized misogyny, whereby women adopt societal sexist thoughts and behaviors and apply them to themselves and other women (Bearman et al., 2009), may be contributing to these attitudes and comments.

Although many respondents reported being more cautious in their approach to sexual relationships as a function of learning more about all the ways sexual violence can happen, some of the more negative comments about changes as a result of the #MeToo movement reflected themes of distrust and paranoia. For example, among men, concerns about being unjustly accused of assault were voiced, which could reflect backlash to the #MeToo movement (Ellis, 2018; Lisnek et al., 2022; Nutbeam & Mereish, 2022). Yet false allegations are exceedingly rare, with conservative estimates suggesting that, "of all rapes (those reported and not reported to the police), 0.005% are false allegations" (Belknap, 2010, p. 1335).

Under the broad umbrella of gendered social norms, many comments reflected heteronormative scripts about sex,

consent, and sexual assault whereby women were labeled as people who could consent or victims of assault, and it was implied that men were responsible for obtaining consent and committing assault. These scripts rely on social constructionism, as they represent sexual expectations and learned sequences of behavior assembled through gender role socialization (Gagnon & Simon, 1974; Wiederman, 2015). Although statistics support the notion that women are more likely than men to be victims of sexual assault (e.g., Leemis et al., 2022), the gender role assumptions and references to rape scripts (Ryan, 2011) that cut across several comments in the current study suggest that some participants could have difficulty identifying sexual assault victimization as violence among men. Gendered social norms about how to properly embody masculinity have been shown to disrupt men's cognitive and emotional processing of sexual violence experiences, promote maladaptive behavioral responses, and impede post-assault service-seeking among this demographic (PettyJohn et al., 2022).

Sexual assault survivors had mixed emotional responses to the #MeToo movement. Some described reductions in self-blame and feeling less alone as a result of the movement, which are notable as lessening self-blame, increasing social support, and reducing social isolation can predict improvements in survivors' mental health (Campbell et al., 2009; Kline et al., 2021) and protect against hopelessness and suicidality (Chang et al., 2015). However, other survivors reported feeling triggered by the movement, which included experiencing more shame and self-blame, as well as behavioral changes such as avoidance of men and sex. These findings are consistent with qualitative work among sexual assault survivors suggesting that the #MeToo movement has triggered symptoms and resulted in burnout, but also has aided in the healing process and allowed survivors to move from shame to empowerment (Strauss Swanson & Szymanski, 2020). Related to this last finding, a number of responses underscored the role of #MeToo in fostering feelings of empowerment, particularly among women and those who had experienced sexual violence.

Implications for Prevention Programming and Clinical Practice

Findings from the current study have important implications for prevention and intervention programming. For instance, many comments suggested that the #MeToo movement has played an important role in increasing their understanding of what constitutes sexual violence. Identifying an event as an emergency is an important early step in the bystander intervention model (Latané & Darley, 1969). Thus, #MeToo may be serving an important educational function that can promote bystander intervention by increasing awareness and knowledge about sexual assault and perhaps ultimately build their motivation to act. However, it is important to note that some of the takeaways participants reported seemed to reflect gendered ideas about who is most likely to experience sexual violence, which could make it more difficult for men to acknowledge and seek support after an experience of violence. Clinicians should be highly attuned to these narratives and

ensure that biases do not prevent them from assessing experiences of sexual harassment and assault among men presenting for care (PettyJohn et al., 2022). Although survivors reported a range of responses to #MeToo, including increased support and decreased self-blame, some also felt triggered and burned out by the movement. Clinicians should make space for a range of reactions as individuals grapple with how to make sense of past victimization experiences in light of new insights and discourse arising from the #MeToo movement.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

Findings should be considered within the context of study limitations. Data for the current study were cross-sectional, precluding causal inferences about associations. The data were also retrospective, which may introduce recall bias related to beliefs or behaviors prior to the #MeToo movement. Although the ethnic and racial composition of this convenience sample was similar to the ethnic and racial makeup of adults in the U.S., the sample was highly heterogeneous in terms of age and some demographic differences related to #MeToo awareness did not hold among younger adults. Sample sizes for some subgroups of interest (e.g., gender-expansive people) were too small to thoroughly examine or conduct analyses that could consider multiple intersecting identities.

When asking participants how the #MeToo movement or media coverage of related cases has changed the way they think about certain concepts (i.e., sexual assault, sex, consent) or how they behave in interactions with potential sexual partners, we provided examples of two high-profile cases – Harvey Weinstein and Brett Kavanaugh. Prior research has demonstrated how specific cases (i.e., Aziz Ansari and Harvey Weinstein) are viewed differently by the general public and associated with different personal characteristics (e.g., O'Connor et al., 2021). Thus, the examples we provided may have primed our participants to respond with those specific cases in mind, rather than in reference to the #MeToo movement as a whole. Future studies should carefully consider which examples are given to prevent unintended priming effects. Similarly, we assessed rape myths rejection with the uIRMA, a measure that uses heteronormative language in its scale items (e.g., “Guys don’t usually intend to force sex on a girl, but sometimes they get too sexually carried away”) and thus, may be less applicable to LGBTQ+ respondents. Researchers interested in continuing this line of work may wish to explore whether the use of gender-inclusive language, such as the Gender Inclusive Rape Myth Acceptance Scale (GIRMA; Urban & Porras Pyland, 2022), yields different associations with perceptions of change in response to the #MeToo movement.

Finally, a subset of respondents in established relationships indicated that the question pertaining to changes in sexual behavior with potential partners was irrelevant to them, perhaps because some assumed the word “potential” meant interactions within current relationships did not apply. Future research should rephrase this question to include “current” and “potential” partners to better study whether responses reflect this narrow interpretation of the question or ideas consistent with sexual precedent theory, which states that

sexual intercourse becomes expected once people engage in consensual sex, thereby setting a “sexual precedent” (Livingston et al., 2004; Shotland & Goodstein, 1992).

Conclusions

The current mixed-methods study contributes to a growing literature suggesting that the #MeToo movement and associated media coverage have contributed to a cultural shift in how sexual assault and consent are viewed, how sexual behavior with potential partners is approached, and how sexual assault survivors feel about their own experiences. Positive changes as a result of the #MeToo movement included increased awareness and knowledge of sexual assault and consent, better communication about consent and with sexual partners, feelings of empowerment, and reduced loneliness and self-blame among those with assault histories. However, some responses reflected rape myths, distrust, paranoia, heteronormative sexual scripts about assault, consent, and partnered sexual behavior, as well as increased mental health symptoms among some survivors. Collectively, our findings fit with work highlighting both benefits and drawbacks of the #MeToo movement.

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