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Research Article

Undergraduate Students' Definitions of Sexual Violence Labels Across the Rise of the #MeToo Movement

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Chelsea D. Kilimnik[1], Leah N. McMahon[2], and Cindy M. Meston[2]

Abstract

Examining changes in perspectives of sexual violence across the #MeToo movement is critical to understanding shifts in sociocultural contexts of sexual violence; yet the literature is still nascent. In the present study, we assessed variation across the #MeToo movement in undergraduate students' ($N = 1{,}028$) rape myth acceptance, sexual violence experiences, identification of experiences with sexual violence labels, and self-generated definitions of sexual violence labels (e.g., sexual assault). We also examined the mediating role of the relation between timepoint across #MeToo and students' self-generated sexual violence definitions. Text analyses revealed seven themes in students' definitions: Activity, Chronicity, Body, Contact, Gender, Force/Harm, and Consent. Notably, there was greater representation and a higher rate of change in the Contact theme in definitions following the #MeToo movement compared to pre-#MeToo, but only among students with sexual violence history. Rape myth acceptance did not change significantly across the #MeToo movement and did not demonstrate a significant role in time-related variability in students' definitions. These findings provide support for the role of the #MeToo movement in facilitating more inclusive perceptions of sexual violence among undergraduate students, especially among those with sexual violence histories. We hope that with increased insight into the #MeToo movement's impact on sexual violence perspectives, continued efforts of the movement and prevention initiatives can broaden their reach.

Keywords

sexual assault, rape, definitions, #MeToo, rape myth acceptance

The rise of the #MeToo movement in recent years has given a platform to the voices of those impacted by culturally tolerated sexualized violence. This unsilencing of narratives from those who have experienced sexual violence has shifted the dialogues around what sexual violence is, who experiences it, and who perpetrates it (Alaggia & Wang, 2020). Yet, the research examining changes in these dialogues and perspectives since #MeToo took off in public media is notably lacking. Given that sexual violence experiences are common among undergraduate students, with one in three women (Koss et al., 2022), one in five transgender or gender-diverse students, and 1 in 15 men reporting sexual violence experiences (Cantor et al., 2020), it is important to examine the impact of #MeToo on perceptions of sexual violence in this population. In this study, we examined changes in undergraduate students' definitions of common sexual violence labels, identification of experiences with these labels, and endorsement of stereotype-driven attitudes around sexual violence across the pre- and post-rise of the #MeToo movement.

History of the #MeToo Movement

The phrase "me too" was coined by American activist Tarana Burke in 2006 to raise awareness of the disparities of sexual violence experienced by Black women and girls. Just over a decade later, on October 5, 2017, actress Ashley Judd accused Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein of sexual harassment in an article published by the *New York Times*. Shortly thereafter (October 15, 2017), actress Alyssa Milano posted the following tweet that quickly went viral: "If you've been sexually harassed or assaulted write 'me too' as a reply to this tweet." As dozens of women came forward about their experiences of Weinstein's sexual harassment, millions of people around the globe spoke up about their own experiences—often, simply by stating #MeToo. Less than a year later (September 27, 2018), the Senate Judiciary Committee heard sexual assault allegations against Brett Kavanaugh, a Supreme Court Justice nominee

[1]Department of Psychology and Neuroscience and the Renee Crown Wellness Institute, University of Colorado Boulder, Boulder, CO, USA
[2]Department of Psychology, University of Texas at Austin, Austin, TX, USA

Corresponding Author:
Chelsea D. Kilimnik, Department of Psychology and Neuroscience and the Renee Crown Wellness Institute, University of Colorado Boulder, Muenzinger D244, 345 UCB, Boulder, CO 80309-0345, USA.
Email: chelsea.kilimnik@colorado.edu

who was sworn in just weeks after the hearing. His confirmation sent shockwaves through the United States and called into question how the country responds to allegations of sexual misconduct. While these media stories of women speaking out against their aggressors are just some of the many public and private dialogues that took place, they mark significant public examples of a global experience of challenging systems of tolerance around sexual violence. Indeed, internet searches related to sexual violence reporting and disclosure skyrocketed after the #MeToo movement began (Caputi et al., 2019). As shown in Figure 1, the frequency with which Google searches contained the terms "Me Too" and "sexual assault" fluctuated substantially around these sociocultural events of sexual violence, indicating increases in public engagement with these concepts. There is emerging evidence to suggest that sharing stories of sexual violence publicly in social movements may alter societal attitudes about these experiences (Manikonda et al., 2018), as well as increase empathy toward victims (Rodino-Colocino, 2018).

Sexual Violence Labels and Identification

Sexual violence is an umbrella term, encompassing experiences such as sexual assault, rape, and sexual abuse. It includes any form of nonconsensual sexual experience regardless of level of contact, perpetrated by use of aggression, force, substances, pressure, threats, or use of power or authority over another individual, or in instances where consent cannot be present due to the individuals' ages or incapacitation (Kilimnik & Meston, 2019). Across scholarly works, organizations, and state laws, however, the definitions of common sexual violence labels (i.e., rape, sexual assault, sexual abuse) vary greatly. Additionally, research suggests there is considerable variability in people's general understanding of these labels and, as such, in the use of these labels to identify their own experiences of sexual violence (Kilimnik & Meston, 2019; Rousseau et al., 2020).

The extent to which an experience "fits" dominant understandings of sexual violence—such as those constructed through the criminal justice system or through rape myths—may influence how people make sense of and label their experience with sexual violence labels (Loney-Howes, 2018; Peterson & Muehlenhard, 2011). Per Peterson and Muehenhard's (2011) match-and-motivation model, individuals are more likely to identify their sexual violence experience with the rape label if the experience is characteristically similar to their previously held notions of what rape includes (i.e., rape myths). Other research suggests that distress about the experience(s) paired with external influences (e.g., social supports recognizing the experience as rape) may result in acknowledgment over time (Littleton et al., 2006). Global movements that shift perceptions of sexual violence, such as the #MeToo movement, may also have a significant impact on individuals' understanding of various sexual violence labels and their endorsement of rape myths.

Rape Myths

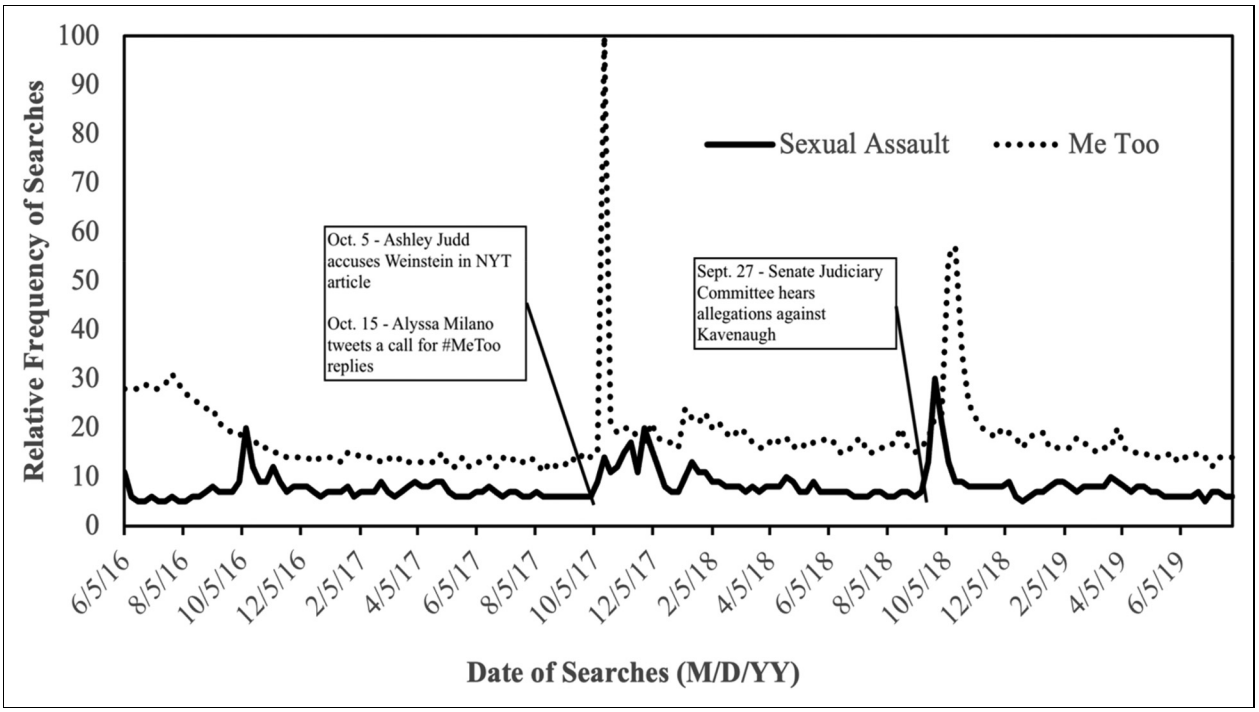
Rape myths are false beliefs, stereotypes, and prejudicial attitudes that displace blame from sexual violence perpetrators onto the individuals who experienced the violence (Brownmiller, 2005; Schwendinger & Schwendinger, 1974). Decades of research has indicated a strong link between endorsement of rape myths and a number of detrimental outcomes, such as the positive association between rape myth acceptance and sexual violence perpetration (Trottier et al., 2021; Yapp & Quayle, 2018). Additionally, for individuals with sexual violence histories greater acceptance of rape myths is associated with a lower likelihood of identifying experiences with sexual violence labels (LeMaire et al., 2016) and reporting experiences to authorities (Holland, 2020). In turn, this may prevent individuals from receiving adequate support and perpetrators from being held accountable (Heath et al., 2013; Holland, 2020). Furthermore, lower rape myth acceptance among college students has been associated with more positive social reactions to sexual violence disclosures and less victim blaming (Wilson et al., 2021). As such, social movements that influence the discourse on sexual violence such as the #MeToo movement may alleviate social costs (e.g., victim blaming) of sexual violence by reducing societal rape myth acceptance.

The Impact of the #MeToo Movement on Perceptions of Sexual Violence

There is a growing body of research on how global social movements around denouncing sexual violence, such as the #MeToo movement, may have influenced identification with sexual violence labels, as well as perceptions of sexual violence (e.g., less rape myth acceptance). One qualitative study revealed that the #MeToo movement allowed survivors to identify their experiences as sexual violence for the first time (Alaggia & Wang, 2020). In addition to facilitating identification, the #MeToo movement also provided an avenue for disclosing experiences of sexual violence into a virtual community that readily offered support and validation. Another recent study suggested that more university students reported experiencing unwanted sexual activity in 2019 relative to 2017 (Palmer et al., 2021). In a 3-year, cross-sectional study Jaffe et al. (2021) found that college students were increasingly likely to label experiences of sexual violence as "sexual assault" with more time passing following the rise of the #MeToo movement, despite stable rates of sexual violence being reported across this time frame.

Beshers and DiVita (2021) found that undergraduates' rape myth acceptance at one northeastern university in the United States significantly declined overall from 2010 to 2017. They suggested that the contemporaneous Women's

Figure 1. Google trends depiction of searches for "me too" and "sexual assault" across 3 years surrounding the rise of the #MeToo movement.



Note. The current study data collection took place from June 2016 to July 2019 and during this time the #MeToo movement took off on social and traditional media outlets globally, surrounding accusations and trials of public figures. Figure 1 demonstrates the fluctuations in Google searches containing the words "Me Too" and "Sexual Assault" around these events across the 3-year period. This graph of relative changes in frequency of searches can provide a visual index for the sociocultural context of engaging with the discourse on sexualized violence during the time of the #MeToo movement.

March of 2017, the #MeToo movement, and several high-profile rape cases of young women may have contributed to the observed shifts in attitudes toward sexual violence. Byrne et al. (2021) replicated these findings by observing a substantial decline in rape myth acceptance between 1998 and 2018 among undergraduates at a university in the U.S. Pacific Northwest. Similar to Beshers and Divita, Byrne and colleagues attributed their findings to the sociocultural and statutory shifts that occurred in the two decades between their samples. It seems feasible that social movements such as the #MeToo movement allow for broader cultural shifts in understanding what sexual violence is and a reduction in rape myth acceptance.

Current Study

To further elucidate #MeToo-related changes in sexual violence experiences, identification, and perspectives, in the present study we assessed how undergraduate students' definitions of common sexual violence labels (i.e., rape, assault, and abuse) and endorsement of rape myths have changed from pre- to post-#MeToo. We did this by examining differences in relations between these variables based on whether data were collected pre- or post-#MeToo onset. We also examined the differential effects of the #MeToo movement on rape myth acceptance and sexual violence label definitions for those with and without sexual violence histories. Finally, we tested the mediating role of rape myth acceptance in the relation between time (across the 3 years of the study) and themes in the sexual violence label definitions.

Hypothesis 1: Stability and change in rates of sexual violence and identification of these experiences with common sexual violence labels.

(a) As prior research has demonstrated no differences in the rates of sexual violence experiences across the pre- to post-#MeToo movement (Jaffe et al., 2021), we predicted that behaviorally measured rates (assessing sexual violence experiences using behavioral descriptions, such as penetration without consent, without using sexual violence language, such as "sexual assault") of sexual violence experiences would not change significantly across the study from pre- to post-#MeToo.
(b) Similar to the findings from Jaffe et al. (2021), we anticipated an increase in the rates of identification as further time passed following the rise of the #MeToo movement compared to changes in the rates of identification before the #MeToo movement.

Hypothesis 2: Changes in pre- to post-#MeToo average levels of rape myth acceptance and sexual violence definitions.

(a) Given that rape myth acceptance is an index of stereotypical and victim-blaming perspectives of sexual violence, we anticipated that rape myth acceptance would be lower following the rise of the #MeToo movement compared to before #MeToo due to individuals' likely exposure to media discussions of the wide range of experiences that can constitute sexual violence.
(b) The automated text analysis procedure of Meaning Extraction Method (Chung & Pennebaker, 2008) was used to quantitatively derive themes from students' written definitions of common sexual violence labels. These themes demarcate topics of understanding around these labels. As the text analysis approach to deriving themes is inductive and data-driven, no specific hypotheses were established for themes derived or changes in the themes. Despite this, we had a general expectation of changes in the average levels of themes that are aligned with narrow definitions of sexual violence (i.e., rape myths) from pre- to post-#MeToo.
(c) As the nature of the #MeToo movement (i.e., public disclosure of experiences) may result in increased engagement with the movement among those with sexual violence histories compared to those without, we predicted that these differences in average levels of rape myths and sexual violence definitions from pre- to post-#MeToo would be more pronounced for those with sexual violence histories compared to those without such histories.

Hypothesis 3: Mediation of the changes in the themes by changes in rape myth acceptance.

(a) The match-and-motivation model of understanding sexual violence suggests that previously developed attitudes and beliefs around what sexual violence entails inform our identification of experiences as sexual violence (Peterson & Muehlenhard, 2011). Following this, we predicted that rape myth acceptance would partially mediate changes in the definition themes following the rise of the #MeToo movement.
(b) We also expected that within this mediation model, there would be a greater decline in rape myth acceptance across study completion date following the rise of the #MeToo movement in comparison to changes pre-#MeToo.
(c) Similarly, we anticipated greater changes in the definition themes over time following the #MeToo movement in comparison to before #MeToo. These changes were anticipated to follow a similar trajectory to those of rape myth acceptance, such that ongoing exposure to the #MeToo movement would be associated with more inclusive and less stereotypical definitions of sexual violence labels.

Method

Participants

Participants in the current sample were 1,028 undergraduate students (64.2% women) at a large southern university in the United States. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 41 years old ($Mdn = 19$), with the majority of participants falling between the ages of 18 and 22 years old (97.3%). Full demographic information for the sample is reported in Table 1.

Measures

Nonconsensual Sexual Experience Inventory. The Nonconsensual Sexual Experience Inventory (NSEI; Kilimnik et al., 2018) was used to assess individuals' sexual violence experiences that occurred across their lifespan. Various forms of sexual violence (e.g., vaginal penetration, anal penetration, oral sex, fondling) were assessed through six behaviorally descriptive items (e.g., "Has anyone ever fondled your breasts or genitals against your will or made you fondle their breasts or genitals against your will?" with a Yes/No response set). Participants reported on different characteristics of each of their experiences (e.g., age of experience; not reported here). Participants were asked if they identified their experiences (as reported on the behaviorally descriptive items) with common sexual violence labels, such as sexual assault, sexual abuse, and rape (e.g., "Do you consider this experience to be one of sexual assault?" with a Yes/No response set). Participants who reported an experience on the behaviorally descriptive items of the NSEI were considered having a sexual violence experience history. Individuals who reported an experience on the NSEI and identified their experience(s) with at least one of the sexual violence labels were considered "identifiers," while those who reported experiences on the NSEI but did not identify them with any of the sexual violence labels were considered "non-identifiers." Those who did not report any experiences on the NSEI were categorized as having no sexual violence history. The rates of reported sexual violence experiences and identification are reported in Table 1.

Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale—Short Form. The Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale—Short Form (IRMAS-SF; Payne et al., 1999) is a 20-item survey that measures general rape myth acceptance. It has items such as "If someone doesn't physically fight back, you can't really say that it was rape." Participants respond to statements using a 1 (*completely disagree*) to 7 (*completely agree*) scale. Three of the 20 items are "filler" items meant to minimize the degree to which participants can estimate the true purpose of the survey and reduce the chance of response bias. A total sum score for the remaining 17 items is created and higher scores reflect a greater degree of rape myth acceptance. Cronbach's alpha for the 17 items in the current sample was .89.

Table 1. Demographic Information for the Sample and Descriptive Information for the Study Variables Presented by MeToo Group and for the Full Sample.

	Pre-#MeToo		Post-#MeToo		Full Sample	
Categorical Variables	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*	%
Gender						
Woman	271	65.14	389	63.56	660	64.20
Man	141	33.89	218	35.62	359	34.92
Gender queer	3	0.72	3	0.49	6	0.58
Other	0	0.00	1	0.16	1	0.10
NSE history						
No NSEs	297	71.39	397	64.87	694	67.51
NSEs	119	28.61	215	35.13	334	32.49
Overall identification						
No NSEs	297	71.39	397	64.87	694	67.51
Non-identifier	69	16.59	154	25.16	223	21.69
Identifier	50	12.02	61	9.97	111	10.80
Race						
Native American/Indigenous/ American Indian	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00
Pacific Islander/Hawaiian Native	2	0.48	1	0.16	3	0.29
Black/African American	32	7.69	32	5.23	64	6.23
Hispanic/Latinx	101	24.28	149	24.35	250	24.32
Asian	95	22.84	116	18.95	211	20.53
Middle Eastern	3	0.72	12	1.96	15	1.46
White	155	37.26	261	42.65	416	40.47
Multiple races/ethnicities	26	6.25	38	6.21	64	6.23
Other	2	0.48	3	0.49	5	0.49
Sexual orientation						
Lesbian/gay	22	5.29	35	5.72	57	5.54
Bisexual	27	6.49	56	9.15	83	8.07
Pansexual	5	1.20	9	1.47	14	1.36
Straight/heterosexual	351	84.38	489	79.90	840	81.71
Queer	2	0.48	2	0.33	4	0.39
Prefer not to ascribe a label	7	1.68	10	1.63	17	1.65
Other	2	0.48	9	1.47	11	1.07
Continuous Variables (Observed Range)	*M* (*SD*)	95% CI [LL, UL]	*M* (*SD*)	95% CI [LL, UL]	*M* (*SD*)	95% CI [LL, UL]
Age (18–41)	19.27 (1.95)	[19.07, 19.47]	19.23 (1.59)	[19.16, 19.44]	19.29 (1.77)	[19.17, 19.41]
Sexual attraction (1–5)	4.43 (1.15)	[4.31, 4.55]	4.26 (1.28)	[4.14, 4.34]	4.32 (1.22)	[4.24, 4.40]
Sexual behavior (1–5)	4.50 (1.22)	[4.38, 4.62]	4.31 (1.39)	[4.20, 4.44]	4.39 (1.32)	[4.31, 4.47]
IRMAS-SF (1.00–4.71)	1.91 (0.04)	[1.84, 1.98]	1.81 (0.03)	[1.76, 1.87]	1.85 (0.02)	[1.81, 1.90]
Activity theme (0.00–8.00)	0.93 (0.06)	[0.80, 1.06]	1.07 (0.06)	[0.96, 1.18]	1.01 (0.04)	[0.93, 1.10]
Chronicity theme (0.00–9.00)	1.51 (0.08)	[1.36, 1.66]	1.51 (0.07)	[1.38, 1.64]	1.51 (0.05)	[1.41, 1.61]
Body theme (0.00–8.00)	0.56 (0.05)	[0.45, 0.66]	0.60 (0.04)	[0.52, 0.69]	0.58 (0.03)	[0.52, 0.65]
Contact theme (−3.00 to 13.00)	2.33 (0.11)	[2.11, 2.54]	2.63 (0.09)	[2.45, 2.81]	2.51 (0.07)	[2.37, 2.64]
Gender theme (0.00–8.00)	0.66 (0.06)	[0.55, 0.77]	0.56 (0.04)	[0.49, 0.64]	0.60 (0.03)	[0.54, 0.67]
Harm theme (0.00–16.00)	2.68 (0.12)	[2.44, 2.92]	2.56 (0.09)	[2.38, 2.73]	2.61 (0.07)	[2.46, 2.75]
Consent theme (0.00–12.00)	3.37 (0.12)	[3.14, 3.60]	3.22 (0.09)	[3.04, 3.40]	3.28 (0.07)	[3.14, 3.42]

Note. CI = confidence interval; LL = lower limit; NSE = nonconsensual sexual experience; UL = upper limit; IRMAS-SF = Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale–Short Form.

Open-Ended Questions on Sexual Violence Labels. Participants, regardless of their own experience with sexual violence, were provided with three open-ended questions that asked them to write their definitions for common sexual violence labels (i.e., "sexual assault," "sexual abuse," and "rape") using their own words. Participants were prompted to write in full sentences.

Procedure

Participants were recruited from the undergraduate psychology student subject pool (students enrolled in an Introduction to Psychology course) between June 2016 and July 2019 to take part in a study "examining how individuals with different sexual experiences (consensual and nonconsensual) understand and define sex-related terms." The eligibility criteria were that they must be at least 18 years old and proficient in English. Interested students were provided with detailed information about the study before consenting to participate. Consenting students then completed the online survey assessment in the order presented above. If students wrote five words or more in the open-ended response and completed at least 50% of the survey portion, they were provided with a full credit for research participation that was used for partial fulfillment of their course requirements. All procedures and materials for the study were approved by the Institutional Review Board for research with human subjects.

Data Analysis

The study design and analyses were not pre-registered, and the data are not publicly available; the data may be provided by request to the corresponding author along with IRB approval for secondary data analysis. We report how we determined data exclusions and missing data consistent with reporting standards for quantitative research. Of the 1,168 participants who started the survey, only 1,028 were retained for analysis. Participants were removed from analysis if they did not complete at least 50% of the questions ($n = 53$), missed one of the two attention check items in the IRMAS-SF ($n = 52$), or if they did not write the minimum of five words in the definition question ($n = 35$). This resulted in a remaining sample of 1,028 participants for the current analyses. As we only had seven of 1,028 participants who identified as gender diverse (e.g., non-binary), these seven individuals were not included in the gender covariate variable which was binary coded (0 = identified as men, 1 = identified as women). Of the 1,028 participants, none were missing more than 10% of their data on a given survey (NSEI or IRMAS-SF), and as such no imputations were used though full information maximum likelihood procedures were used for missing data in the regression models.

Written definitions for the three sexual violence labels (i.e., rape, sexual assault, sexual abuse) were analyzed using the Meaning Extraction Method (Chung & Pennebaker, 2008) to quantitatively derive themes from participants' definitions. The Meaning Extraction Helper software was used to assist in the automation of this process (Version 2.3.00; Boyd et al., 2022). Words used in the definitions were all abbreviated to their root word (e.g., "touching" and "touched" both become "touch") and then assigned a binary presence score (0 = not present, 1 = present) to indicate if participants did or did not use a given word in their definitions of the sexual violence labels. Written definitions that included a minimum of five words were included in this process and the words that appeared in 10% of definitions were retained for further analysis. These binary-coded word variables were then subjected to a principal component analysis (PCA) with a Varimax rotation to derive meaningful clusters of words (i.e., themes) based on their tendency to be used together across participants' definitions. Participants' scores for each theme were then computed by summing the scores for each word that loaded onto a given PCA-derived theme. Notably, 64 participants had missing data on the theme variables as their written texts did not include the words that comprised the resultant themes.

Within the quantitative analyses used to explore across time differences in means and trends, multiple time variables were used as independent variables throughout the analyses. The continuous variable (Time) was calculated based on the week that the participant took the survey, with week one being the first week of survey administration in June 2016 through the end of data collection in July 2019. A binary variable for time (Tbinary) was also created to indicate if the participant completed the survey pre-#MeToo (coded as 0) or post-#MeToo (coded as 1). This binary time variable was used to build an interaction variable (Tknot) with the continuous-time variable and thus create a "knot" in time. A knot in the models allowed us to examine differences in the slopes of a model at different levels of the knot (i.e., is the change in each variable over time different after the rise of the #MeToo movement in comparison to the change over time before #MeToo). As both age and gender (men = 0, women = 1) are anticipated to be related to rape myth acceptance and the definitions of sexual violence labels, they were entered into all models as covariates.

Two initial binary logistic regressions were run, using the Stats package in R (R Core Team, 2022) to assess if time pre- versus post-#MeToo (i.e., the independent variable Tknot) was associated with differences in the likelihood of experiencing sexual violence (Hypothesis 1a) or of identifying sexual violence experiences with a sexual violence label (Hypothesis 1b). In the binary logistic regressions, the dependent variable was either sexual violence history (0 = no history of sexual violence, 1 = sexual violence history) or sexual violence identification (0 = non-identifiers, 1 = identifiers). In the logistic regression examining rates of identification, only those participants with sexual violence histories were included in the analysis ($n = 334$). The independent variables included were Time, Tbinary, and Tknot, in addition to the age and gender covariates.

Eight multivariate analyses of variance (MANOVAs) were conducted using the Stats package in R (R Core Team, 2022) to examine differences in the average levels of rape myth acceptance (IRMAS-SF scores; Hypothesis 2a) and the seven definition themes derived using the Meaning Extraction Method (Hypothesis 2b) post-#MeToo in comparison to pre-#MeToo. Bonferroni corrections were applied to adjust for the multiple comparisons (corrected α for eight comparisons = 0.006). In these models, the dependent variable was either the IRMAS-SF scores or one of the derived theme scores. The independent variables were Tbinary, sexual violence history, and the interaction term of Tbinary by sexual violence history (Hypothesis 2c), in addition to the age and gender covariates. Significant interaction terms were followed up with a MANOVA for that given outcome variable within both those with and without sexual violence histories separately. If there was not a significant interaction term, the interaction was removed from the model and differences in the outcome were compared for the main effects of Tbinary and sexual violence history.

Lastly, a mediation analysis was run using the Lavaan package in R (Rosseel, 2012) on the whole sample to examine the mediating role of rape myth acceptance (IRMAS-SF scores) in the relationship between Tknot and the sexual violence definition themes while controlling for participant age and gender (Hypothesis 3). In line with typical mediation models, the path from Tknot to IRMAS-SF scores is the "a path," the paths from IRMAS-SF to the seven definition themes are the "b paths," and the path from Tknot to the seven definition themes are the "c paths." Coefficient estimates were obtained using bootstrapping with 1,000 iterations, and missing data were handled using full information maximum likelihood within the models and no imputation methods were used. All of the definition themes were allowed to covary within the models.

Results

Between-group analyses were conducted on demographics between those who completed the study before ($n = 424$) and after ($n = 604$) the rise of the #MeToo movement using independent-samples *t*-tests and chi-square tests with Bonferroni corrections for multiple comparisons ($\alpha/k = 0.05/6 =$ corrected $\alpha = 0.008$). There were no significant differences in pre- to post-#MeToo sample demographics. Despite this, there is evidence to suggest that sexual violence identification and rape myth acceptance differs across age and gender, so these variables were included as covariates in the current analyses. Descriptive information for the variables is reported in Table 1.

Sexual Violence Label Definition Themes

Through PCA of the Meaning Extraction Method derived binary word presence scores (from participants' definitions of sexual violence labels), seven themes emerged which explained 10.31% of the variability in the texts of sexual violence definitions. Notably, this is within the expected amount of variation explained in natural language. The Activity theme describes specific sexual acts involved in sexual violence experiences. The Chronicity theme describes variability in length and frequency of experiences. The Body theme involves discussion of different body parts involved in the experience(s). The Contact theme describes how sexual violence can take the form of contact or non-contact experiences. The Gender theme discusses how it can happen to or be perpetrated by people of any gender. The Force/Harm theme involves the degree of physical or emotional force or harm. The Consent theme discusses how sexual violence encompasses the lack of given and/or received consent, willingness, or agreement to engage in sexual acts. Table 2 provides additional information about the themes, including example quotes from individuals scoring high in each theme. Participant scores on the various themes are reflective of the relative representation of that theme in their writing, such that higher scores are reflective of a greater representation of that theme.

Pre- and Post-#MeToo Differences in the Likelihood of Sexual Violence Experiences and Identification (Hypothesis 1a and 1b)

An initial binary logistic regression indicated that there were no significant differences in the likelihood of participants endorsing sexual violence experiences on the NSEI from pre- to post-#MeToo. Furthermore, a second logistic regression suggested there was no significant change in the likelihood of participants identifying their experiences with sexual violence labels following the rise of #MeToo movement in comparison to pre-#MeToo. Table 3 displays the estimated coefficients for both of these logistic models.

Pre- and Post-#MeToo Differences in the Average Levels of Rape Myth Acceptance and the Definition Themes by Sexual Violence History (Hypothesis 2)

MANOVAs were used to examine differences between pre- to post-#MeToo in rape myth acceptance and definition themes by sexual violence history. For rape myth acceptance, there was a trend toward significance for the interaction between sexual violence history and Tbinary ($p = .055$), indicating average levels of rape myth acceptance being lower following the #MeToo movement for those with sexual violence histories but not for those without sexual violence histories; but this effect did not meet the cutoff of the Bonferroni corrected alpha of 0.006. In examining this model with the interaction removed (sexual violence by Tbinary), Tbinary was also not significant ($p = .010$), indicating that regardless of sexual violence history there was no significant difference on rape myth acceptance from pre- to post-#MeToo. There was, however, a significant effect of

Table 2. Meaning Extraction Method Derived Themes With Example Words and Quotes for the Full Sample.

Theme Label	Example Words	Example Quotes
Activity	intercourse, anal, vaginal	When someone tries to interact in any sort of sexual activity without your permission. That could include: sexual intercourse (anal, vaginal), touching, verbally pressuring, or showing private parts. (18 y.o., woman)
Chronicity	occur, time, period, repeat	Sexual abuse is similar to sexual assault, but the difference being that sexual abuse occurs over a period of time or repeatedly while sexual assault is usually a short or one-time occurrence. (19 y.o., woman)
Body	penis, body, vagina, penetration	…actions such as catcalling, leering, unconsented to touching of someone else's breasts, butt, or genitals, and unconsented to penetration of one's mouth, anus, or vagina with any body part or object. (21 y.o., woman)
Contact	verbal, form, harassment, tough	Any action that someone conducts that could be sexual in nature or intent. This includes groping, fingering genital areas, intentional touching or fondling or outward sex…. I believe it can also be verbal or communicated through social media…. (18 y.o., woman)
Gender	man, woman, happen, commit	Mostly men commit sexual assault but that doesn't mean women can't commit sexual assault. (19 y.o., man)
Force or harm	threat, violence, victim, harm	When sex or sexual experiences are forced upon someone against their will, typically violently. It associates sex or sexual experiences with pain rather than pleasure, which affects the victim's perception of intimacy. (18 y.o., woman)
Consent	action, consent, give, continue	…unwanted/unconsented sexual actions either done to you or forced you to do to another person…. This is a complete violation of personal rights and can be any situation where one member is not completely comfortable and did not give blatant consent. (20 y.o., woman)

Note. Quotes are pulled from definitions provided by individuals who scored high in the given theme's possible range. y.o. = years old.

gender, such that women had significantly lower levels of rape myth acceptance than men ($p < .001$).

Regarding the sexual violence definition themes, only the Contact theme showed a significant difference in average levels from pre- to post-#MeToo movement, though it was moderated by sexual violence history (Sexual Violence History × TBinary $p = .005$). Those with sexual violence histories had higher average levels of the Contact theme following the #MeToo movement ($M = 2.86$, $SD = 2.30$) compared to before the #MeToo movement ($M = 2.00$, $SD = 1.98$; $p = .001$), but those without sexual violence histories did not demonstrate a significant difference in average levels of the Contact theme from pre- ($M = 2.48$, $SD = 2.16$) to post-#MeToo ($M = 2.49$, $SD = 2.16$; $p = .878$). For the follow-up MANOVAs without the interaction term included, there was only one main effect that indicated significance with the Bonferroni correction. There was a significant effect of gender for the Consent theme, such that women ($M = 3.47$, $SD = 2.30$) had significantly more representation of the Consent theme in their definitions of sexual violence labels than did men ($M = 2.94$, $SD = 2.10$; $p < .001$). Table 4 shows the estimated coefficients for the MANOVAs with interactions of sexual violence history and Tbinary included in the model.

Mediation of Pre- and Post-#MeToo Changes in Definition Themes by Rape Myth Acceptance (Hypothesis 3)

A mediation model was conducted to assess the role of rape myth acceptance in the relationship between Tknot and sexual violence definition themes. There were no significant indirect effects for Tknot on the definition themes through IRMAS-SF. In other words, variation in rape myth acceptance over time did not account for variation in the definition themes over time. The *a path* was not significant (Tknot to IRMAS-SF; $p = .415$), but the *b path* (IRMAS-SF to theme; $p = .006$) and *c path* (Tknot to theme; $p = .019$) were significant for the Contact theme. As such, lower levels of rape myth acceptance were associated with more representation of the Contact theme in students' definitions of sexual violence labels; and time since the #MeToo movement was associated with a greater increase in the representation of the Contact theme in comparison to before the #MeToo movement. The significant TxTKnot interaction indicates that as time progressed past the rise of the #MeToo movement, there was an increase in the presence of the Contact theme in individuals' definitions of sexual violence labels and this slope is significantly greater than the pre-#MeToo slope. There were no other significant paths in the mediation model. Full mediation model results are demonstrated in Table 5 and portrayed pictorially in Figure 2.

Discussion

The goal of the present study was to examine how the #MeToo movement impacted undergraduate students' rates of identification with sexual violence labels, their self-generated definitions of sexual violence labels, and their rape myth acceptance. This study also examined the extent to which changes in rape myth acceptance mediated any of the time-associated variation in their definitions of sexual

Table 3. Binary Logistic Regression and Odds Ratio for Likelihood of Sexual Violence Experiences and Identification Across the Rise of the #MeToo Movement.

						95% CI	
Variable	*B*	*SE*	*z*	*p*	*OR*	LL	UL
Outcome variable: SV histories ($N = 1028$)							
Age	0.076	0.040	1.907	.057	1.089	0.999	1.169
Women	0.965	0.157	6.142	<.001	2.624	1.938	3.587
Time	−0.009	0.007	−1.266	.205	0.991	0.977	1.005
TBinary	−0.216	0.506	−0.427	.669	0.806	0.298	2.178
TKnot	0.010	0.008	1.276	.202	1.010	0.995	1.025
Outcome variable: SV identification ($n = 334$)							
Age	0.315	0.090	3.486	<.001	1.371	1.160	1.651
Women	0.988	0.336	2.943	.003	2.687	1.426	5.358
Time	0.013	0.012	1.064	.287	1.013	0.990	1.037
TBinary	−0.289	0.877	−0.330	.742	0.749	0.133	4.201
TKnot	−0.011	0.013	−0.831	.406	0.989	0.963	1.015

Note. Women is a binary variable coded with women as the indicator group (1) and men as the reference group (0). Time was measured in weeks since the start of the study. TBinary was a binary variable calculated based on pre- (0) or post- (1) initiation of the #MeToo movement. TKnot is the time-based knot variable creating a way to assess changes in the slope of time from pre- to post-#MeToo. CI = confidence interval; LL = lower limit; UL = upper limit; SV = sexual violence.

violence labels. Seven broader themes were derived from participants' self-generated definitions of sexual violence labels: Sexual Activity, Chronicity, Body, Contact, Gender, Force or Harm, and Consent.

In support of Hypothesis 1a, our findings evidenced no change in the likelihood of endorsing sexual violence experiences across the #MeToo movement. In contrast to Hypothesis 1b, however, we did not observe a significant change in the likelihood of identification with sexual violence labels following the rise of the #MeToo movement, whereas Jaffe and colleagues found an increased rate of identification following the rise of the #MeToo movement. Notably, Jaffe and colleagues assessed the degree to which participants identified their experience as "sexual assault" on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (*definitely not sexual assault*) to 7 (*definitely sexual assault*), while participants in the present study were asked whether or not they identified their experiences as "sexual assault," "rape," and/or "sexual abuse" using a yes/no response set. The current study's findings may differ slightly from Jaffe and colleagues' findings due to the way in which sexual violence identification was assessed. It is possible that the granularity of response options in Jaffe and colleagues' study enabled them to detect more nuanced changes in the degree of identification over time.

With regard to cross #MeToo change in the levels of rape myth acceptance and the sexual violence definition themes (i.e., Hypothesis 2), there were no significant differences in rape myth acceptance across the #MeToo movement regardless of sexual violence histories. Notably, our sample showed a relatively low level of endorsement of rape myths on average. As a result, there may have been a floor effect that prohibited us from detecting any meaningful decreases in rape myth acceptance over time. This is in line with prior research that has demonstrated that rape myth acceptance has been steadily changing over time and becoming more subtle, a change documented even before the #MeToo movement (Byrne et al., 2021; McMahon & Farmer, 2011). It may be that a measure designed to detect more subtle rape myths would have demonstrated an effect not captured by the IRMAS-SF. Additionally, similar to previous meta-analyses on rape myths (Anderson et al., 1997; Suarez & Gadalla, 2010) and recent studies of large U.S. college student samples (Angelone et al., 2021; Barnett et al., 2018; Navarro & Tewksbury, 2017; Reling et al., 2018; Stoll et al., 2017), women in our sample demonstrated significantly lower levels of rape myth acceptance than men and higher rates of sexual violence experiences.

In partial support of Hypothesis 2 and in contrast to the stable rape myth acceptance, there was an increase in the Contact theme across the #MeToo movement in the sexual violence definitions provided by those with sexual violence histories, though not in those without sexual violence experiences. The Contact theme suggests that sexual violence can include either contact (e.g., physical force, penetration) or non-contact (e.g., harassment, verbal pressure) experiences. The difference being only observed in those with sexual violence histories may be indicative of those with these experiences engaging more in the #MeToo movement than those without these experiences. Indeed, the sociocultural movement involved individuals publicly disclosing their experience on social media, which may have limited the ways in which those without sexual violence experiences could engage with the #MeToo movement and, in turn, the level

Table 4. MANOVAs With the TBinary × Sexual Violence History Interaction for Rape Myth Acceptance and the Sexual Violence Label Definition Themes for the Full Sample.

				95% CI	
Variable	*F*	*p*	Partial η^2	LL	UL
Outcome variable: rape myth acceptance ($N = 1028$)					
Age	0.505	.478	0.001	0.000	0.007
Women	136.391	<.001	0.121	0.085	0.158
SV history	0.025	.875	0.000	0.000	0.003
TBinary	3.206	.074	0.003	0.000	0.014
SV Hist. × TBinary	3.697	.055	0.004	0.000	0.015
Outcome variable: contact theme ($N = 964$)					
Age	2.633	.105	0.003	0.000	0.014
Women	0.222	.638	0.000	0.000	0.006
SV History	0.061	.805	0.000	0.000	0.004
TBinary	2.941	.087	0.003	0.000	0.014
SV Hist. × TBinary	7.776	.005	0.008	0.001	0.024

Note. Due to page number restrictions, only the results for the sexual violence definition theme that showed significant findings (i.e., the contact theme) are reported here. Full model results are available upon request from the corresponding author. SV History and SV Hist. = sexual violence history; Women = binary variable where women were coded as 1 and men as 0; TBinary = binary variable calculated based on pre- (0) or post- (1) initiation of the #MeToo movement. MANOVAs = multivariate analyses of variance; CI = confidence interval; LL = lower limit; UL = upper limit; SV = sexual violence

Table 5. Coefficients for the Mediation Model of Rape Myth Acceptance in the Association Between TKnot and Sexual Violence Definition Themes.

			95% CI			
Variable (Path)	*B*	*SE*	LL	UL	*z*	*p*
a path (outcome variable: rape myth acceptance)						
Women	−0.517	0.046	−0.612	−0.428	−11.158	<.001
Age	−0.026	0.010	−0.044	−0.005	−2.593	.010
Time	−0.003	0.002	−0.007	0.002	−1.252	.210
TBinary	−0.121	0.153	−0.406	0.208	−0.791	.813
TKnot (a)	0.002	0.002	−0.003	0.006	0.813	.391
b and c paths (outcome variable: contact theme)						
Women	−0.085	0.159	−0.415	0.234	−0.532	.594
Age	0.073	0.034	0.008	0.143	2.138	.033
Time	0.015	0.006	0.004	0.027	2.510	.012
TBinary	1.053	0.470	0.219	2.048	2.239	.025
RMA (b)	−0.280	0.101	−0.470	−0.078	−2.765	.006
TKnot (c)	−0.016	0.007	−0.030	−0.003	−2.346	.019

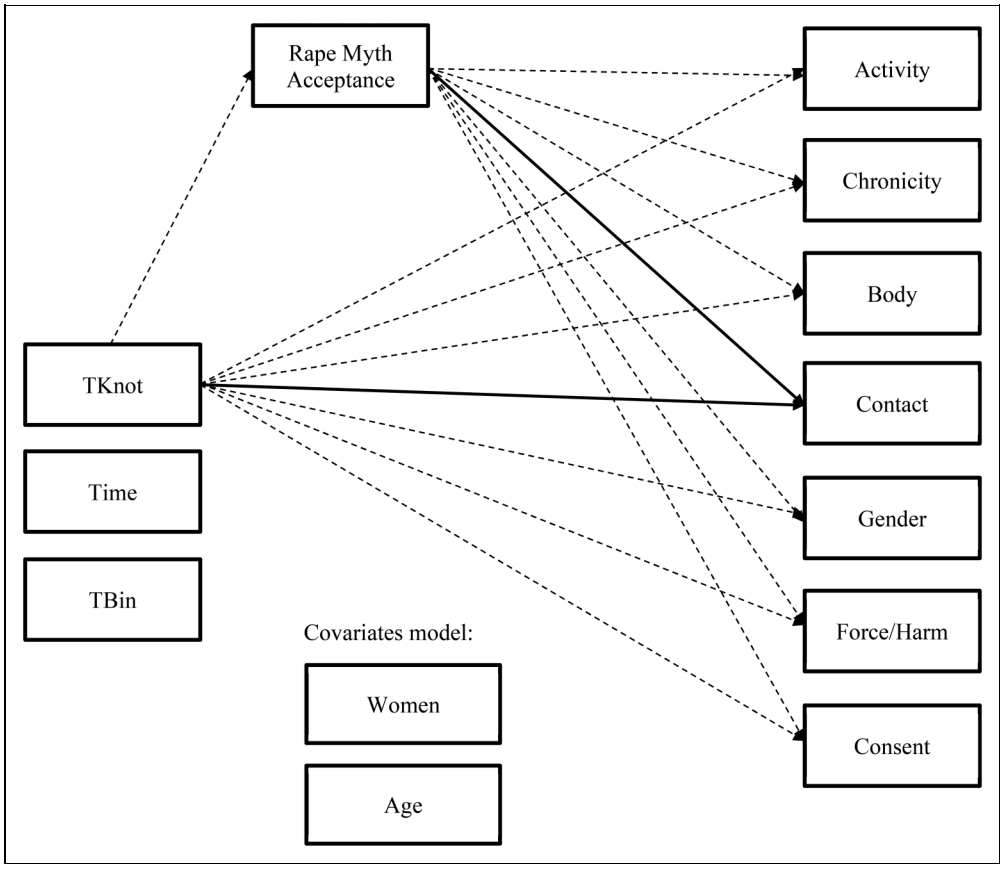
Note. Due to page number restrictions, only the results for the sexual violence definition theme that showed significant findings (i.e., the Contact theme) are reported here. Full model results are available upon request from the corresponding author. Women is a binary variable where 1 = women, 0 = men; Age is a continuous variable of participant age; Time is a continuous variable of the number of weeks since the start of the study; TBinary is a binary variable of participant completion data being pre- or post-#MeToo; TKnot is an interaction variable made from the product of Time and TBinary. RMA is the rape myth acceptance variable. This model is also shown pictorially in Figure 2. CI = confidence interval; LL = lower limit; UL = upper limit.

of impact the movement had on their perceptions of sexual violence. In line with prior literature (Jaffe et al., 2021; Manikonda et al., 2018; Rodino-Colocino, 2018), this finding provides support for a sociocultural shift to a more inclusive understanding of sexual violence experiences and broadening of definitions of these labels among undergraduate students with sexual violence histories following the #MeToo movement. Notably, the observed changes only in the Contact theme may be related to the fact that this theme reflects a more nuanced understanding of sexual violence experiences compared to the other themes. For instance, the other themes involve elements of sexual violence that may have been more commonly understood even prior to #MeToo (e.g., a lack of consent, specific sexual acts).

Contrary to Hypothesis 3, time-related variability in rape myth acceptance was not associated with time-related variability in the definition themes for sexual violence labels across the #MeToo movement. However, lower rape myth acceptance (regardless of time variability) was associated with more representation of the Contact theme in individuals' definitions of sexual violence labels. These findings suggest that less endorsement of stereotypical perspectives of rape is associated with a greater understanding that sexual violence might not involve physical contact. Societal perceptions of sexual assault and rape have traditionally involved an unknown perpetrator physically forcing a woman to have sex. Indeed, previous research suggests that events that include more physical force are more likely to be labeled as sexual assault or rape (Cleere & Lynn, 2013; Fisher et al., 2003). Insofar as rape myth acceptance involves narrower, more stereotypical perspectives on what constitutes sexual violence, it would follow that those who demonstrate lower rape myth acceptance would also have a more nuanced understanding of the range of forms that sexual violence may take (i.e., both contact and non-contact nonconsensual experiences can constitute sexual violence).

While the study has strengths in the naturally occurring pseudo-experiment due to the #MeToo movement coming to light during the course of data collection, our study is not without limitations. The rise of the #MeToo movement was unanticipated and the study was originally designed to be descriptive. As such, the cross-time between-subjects design can only be used to speculate that time-associated variability and changes observed from pre- to post-#MeToo are attributable to the #MeToo movement. Ideally, this study design would have been longitudinal, allowing for an analysis of within-person changes across the #MeToo movement and the inclusion of questions regarding participants' level of exposure to and engagement with the #MeToo movement. Consequently, time-related changes should be evaluated with caution. Additionally, the identification of sexual experiences with sexual violence labels was only assessed for those

Figure 2. Mediation Model: Rape Myth Acceptance as a Mediator Between TKnot and Sexual Violence Definition Themes.



Note. Depiction of the full mediation model where rape myth acceptance is the candidate mediator between TKnot and the sexual violence definition themes. Only the a, b, and c paths of the mediation model are shown. Solid lines indicate significant paths. All themes were allowed to covary as well.

individuals who reported any behaviorally indicated experiences in the NSEI (Kilimnik et al., 2018). It therefore remains unclear how identification may have changed among individuals who did not endorse items on the NSEI. Furthermore, as the participants in this study were undergraduate students at a Southern university, these findings may not generalize to students in other geographic locations or non-students. Finally, the sample was not diverse. Notably, the sample consisted mostly of White individuals in the gender binary (i.e., men and women). Furthermore, before "me too" was a hashtag, it was a social justice movement about the experiences of sexual violence among Black women and girls. It is a limitation of this study that we do not have appropriate representation of the experiences of this population. Notably, if we had a larger Black and African American sample, it would have been important to examine differences in trajectories among this subsample compared to White participants who may have been more likely to only become aware of the movement in the context of the hashtag. Last, given that the #MeToo movement was very gendered in its focus on women's experiences, future research may want to explore gender differences more directly, particularly with a more gender-diverse sample.

Practice Implications

Investigating the influence of the #MeToo movement on sexual violence perspectives, identification, and rape myth acceptance can increase our understanding of how culturally motivated processes of justice seeking, like social movements, can be leveraged for deep attitudinal change on a societal level. With the #MeToo movement being primarily interactive for those individuals with sexual violence histories, we may be failing to engage other groups of individuals who could benefit from meaningful attitudinal change around sexual violence and thus limiting the impact. We hope that by gaining more insight into the role of the #MeToo movement on sexual violence perspectives and who it is reaching, continued efforts of the movement, intervention programming, and prevention initiatives can broaden the reach of their impact beyond those who are already invested in changing the discourse on sexual violence.

Conclusion

This study contributes to a growing body of literature on the impact of the #MeToo movement on individual and societal

perceptions of sexual violence. The current study extends prior literature in the examination of individuals' identification with and understanding of sexual violence labels, as well as their endorsement of rape myths. Our findings provide some context to the potential of social movements, such as the #MeToo movement, to reshape and broaden attitudes for certain populations (e.g., those with sexual violence histories) while missing the mark with other groups (e.g., those without sexual violence histories). For those with sexual violence histories, the #MeToo movement may have had significant positive impacts, such as helping to reduce some of the social costs of disclosing or reporting sexual violence (e.g., victim blaming). The limitations of our study, such as the absence of a within-person, prospective design and the lack of diverse racial representation, highlight the necessity for future research to expand upon our findings in the changing sociopolitical culture around sexualized and gender-based violence.

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ORCID iD

Chelsea D. Kilimnik https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9346-7544

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