

CULTURE & MEDIA



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#Hashtag: How Selected Texts of Popular Culture Engaged With Sexual Assault In the Context of the Me Too Movement in 2019

Abstract. The paper seeks to explore recent shifts within the popular culture with regard to oppression involving gender, class, race, and ethnicity that can be traced back to the #MeToo movement which was revived as a social media hashtag in October 2017 and has since spread all over the world. The paper starts with a brief overview of Western popular culture that “has recently been seen as a champion for feminism... with many high-profile female musicians and actresses visibly promoting the movement in their work” (Woodacre 2018, 21). Next, the paper discusses the origins of the Me Too Movement and the way it approaches the meaning of gendered oppressions as well as individualized and collective experiences of survivors of sexual abuse. This is later explored in the examination of the impact of the hashtag-led movement on three works of popular culture: Amazon’s TV series *Lorena* (2019), Nancy Schwartzman’s documentary *Roll Red Roll* (2019), and *We Believe: the Best Men Can Be* (2019) advertisement by Gillette. The entire case study is informed primarily by feminist theory understood as inseparable from feminist activism, following bell hooks’ *Feminist theory from margin to center* (1984).

Keywords: MeToo, feminism, gender, abuse, popular culture

1. Introduction

Western popular culture’s interest in dominant ideas about power and gender as well as its tendency to reproduce the normative discourses of the two, result in its status as one of the reflective lens on beliefs and values accepted by most members of

the given dominant society at the given time. Similar to many other umbrella terms, popular culture is “in effect an empty conceptual category, one that can be filled in a wide variety of often conflicting ways, depending on the context of use” (Storey 2012, 14). Thus, for the purpose of this paper, I am adopting the broadest definition of popular culture as a constantly evolving mainstream culture that appeals to the dominant groups in the given society (in this article, a Western patriarchal society of the United States of America) that is often (but not always) reflected commercially. I am applying Ray Browne’s (2006, 21) approach rejecting the high-culture low-culture dichotomy and following Susan Sontag’s (1966, 302) belief that “the distinction between ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture seems less and less meaningful.” It should be noted that among multiple definitions, I have chosen one that enables me to analyze selected texts of American popular culture alongside #MeToo, the social media-based movement against sexual assault and sexual harassment. Historically, Western popular culture has been the site of patriarchal consumerism invested in the construction and reinforcement of rigid gender roles reasserting heterosexuality and both shaping and reflecting traditional regimes of consumption closely tied to the masculine identity with women being “absent from images that appeared in popular culture” or acting as “sexual objects to prop up and sustain a staunchly heterosexual masculinity that was constructed and understood as ‘natural’” (Geczy and Karaminas 2017, 37). While the 1990s and early 21st century were the time of increasing engagement of popular culture with “a somewhat superficial feminism, with several positive female authority figures” (Evans 2018, 277) presented in the texts, in the more recent years there has been a notable shift towards feminist thought and thus, “popular culture has recently been seen as a champion for feminism; 2014 was noted as being a particular high point for feminism with many high-profile female musicians and actresses visibly promoting the movement in their work” (Woodacre 2018, 21).

While the phrase “Me Too” turned later into a hashtag (#MeToo) was first used in the context of a response to sexual violence in 2006 by a Black social activist Tarana Burke, it was not until Alyssa Milano, an actress, sent a tweet on October 15, 2017 encouraging women to say, “me too” that the movement gained momentum and started to have global impact¹. Milano’s tweet was a response to multiple allegations of sexual harassment and abuse against movie mogul Harvey Weinstein and meant to show the scale of similar problems. Within 24 hours, the “MeToo” hashtag was used over

¹ Initially, the revival of the term and the media coverage of the 2017 #MeToo omitted Burke and were centered around the experiences of privileged women who had power to challenge their abusers. While there is no doubt that the current movement is important, its spotlight on white elites, the exclusion of men, transfolk, and nonbinary folk from the conversation about sexual harassment and assault, as well as the erasure of black and indigenous survivors of abuse limit the revolutionary potential of #MeToo. As Trott (2020, 15) points out, “[i]n this way, oppression is reproduced within #MeToo by the combination of nominally inclusive frameworks, the centering of white women, and the context of a neoliberal society in which the accused are discursively constructed as individual ‘bad men’ rather than part of a broader systemic problem.”

half million times on Twitter and by more than 4.7 million Americans on Facebook. According to the Pew Research Center, a year after the first tweet the hashtag was still being used over 55 thousand times a day on Twitter alone and, as Dalvin Brown (2018) reports, “roughly two-thirds (65 percent) of U.S. adults who use social media said they regularly see posts that relate to the topic. Twenty-nine percent of that group said a great deal of what they see on the social networking sites is focused on the issue.” The initial impact of the movement was intensified by a number of #MeToo responses from celebrities working in all branches of entertainment who also pointed to the gender/power relations in workplace dynamics that allowed for the normalization of the abuse. As Ashwini Tambe (2018) points out “#MeToo has tilted public sympathy in favor of survivors by changing the default response to belief, rather than suspicion; the hashtag has revealed how widespread sexual coercion is.” This steered the resulting discussion towards accountability for actions previously deemed if not acceptable, then at least understandable. Ultimately, it led to a certain change in the public perception of assault and an attempt at reevaluation of the idea of consent.

Even though the original #MeToo discussion was focused largely on the experiences of white heterosexual women from the Global North, “it has quickly expanded, with more and more stories of queer women and men, women of colour and women and men in other countries coming into the limelight” (Gill and Orgad 2018, 1317–1318). However, one can say that the intersectional approach has been part of #MeToo since its very beginnings as at its core lies the intersection between gender and power and experiences raising from it that are both highly individualized and representative of multiple groups sharing a collective identity of survivors of various forms of sexual violence who live “at the intersections of different oppressions along lines such as race, class or caste” (Kagal, Cowan, and Jawad 2019, 145). Thus, both as a movement and as an act of digital activism, #MeToo served as a relatively mainstream platform of feminism understood here as “a struggle to end sexist oppression” (hooks 1984, 24) and recognizing the significance of “the ways in which gendered oppressions are differently experienced in relation to other structural forms of oppression, including race, class, age, sexuality, disability, religion and gender identity” (Boyle 2019, 9).

While the stories about allegations of sexual misconduct and/or harassment concerning high-profile people (including, among others, Louis C.K., Russell Simmons, Richard Dreyfuss, Sherman Alexie, Brett Kavanaugh, Cristiano Ronaldo, and Ryan Adams) usually shared the aforementioned power dynamics and cultural norms factors and were covered by major media outlets, the resulting shift in awareness enabled ordinary men and women to discuss sexual assault and power imbalance between genders more openly and made it possible and (more) socially acceptable for the survivors to speak out.

Since October 2017, a number of popular culture texts have tackled issues of consent and sexual harassment and included the #MeToo subplots, among them some mainstream TV series such as *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*, *Grey’s Anatomy*, *Younger*, *Jessica Jones*, and *The Good Fight*. However, what I want to focus on here is an attempt at contextualizing and retelling real-life stories of sexual assault undertaken by Ama-

zon's TV series *Lorena* (2019) and Nancy Schwartzman's documentary *Roll Red Roll* (2019). I also touch upon the controversy surrounding the *We Believe: the Best Men Can Be* (2019) advertisement by Gillette. These works of popular culture were selected for this analysis as unlike many other texts that started to incorporate subplots related to sexual harassment and abuse, they explicitly engage with the Me Too Movement. Moreover, they were all released within the same time-frame: in 2019, over a year after the initial popularization of the hashtag online and in the media.

2. *Lorena* and the Ultimate act of Aggression Toward a Woman

Amazon's *Lorena* is a documentary series that revisits the story of domestic violence against Lorena Bobbitt culminating in her trial after posttraumatic stress disorder led to her cutting her husband's penis following years of abuse. The original coverage from 1993 presented the tragic story as a sensationalized tabloid joke, with the male-dominated press rejecting domestic abuse, marital rapes, and bullying and focusing on what they considered to be "the ultimate act of aggression toward a man" (Piwowski 2019). Predictably, the documentary series received much less attention of both media and the general public than the original case. Those writing about it saw the role of the media in decontextualizing and sensationalizing the Lorena Bobbitt's case in 1993 and the shift in the perspective offered by the series as one of the core strengths of the documentary as evidenced by the critics consensus published on Rotten Tomatoes, an online repository of reviews and a site of participatory culture (Farrelly 2009, 38) that gave the series critics' composite score of 82% and users' composite score of 75%: "[f]ascinating and frustrating, *Lorena*'s ample footage and fresh perspective on a long-mocked moment provide welcome context and vindication to the woman at its center" ("*Lorena* – Rotten Tomatoes").

Lorena shows how in the trials that ensued from the wounding, John Bobbitt was acquitted of rape despite presenting numerous versions of the events and the numerous testimonies witnesses of his violence against wife. Lorena Bobbitt was found not guilty of malicious wounding due to "temporary insanity" caused by the rape and abuse. The retelling of the story focuses heavily on the mishandling of the case by the media as in 1993 and 1994, many newspapers, talk-shows, and news stations were making jokes of the situation and siding with John. The series presents footage from Howard Stern's 1993 *New Year's Eve Special* that had John Bobbitt as a guest and hosted fundraiser for the costs of Bobbitt's penis reattachment surgery.

This and other gimmicks are intertwined with video footage from the 1993 trial that shows Lorena Bobbitt graphically describe the abuse, assaults, and rapes she had to suffer for several years of marriage. Viewers see neighbors of the couple recalling John's violence against Lorena as well as newspaper clippings portraying Lorena Bobbitt as vengeful, crazy woman. In 1993 and 1994, domestic violence was almost never mentioned in relation to this situation.

Amazon's series does not offer any direct comments on the Bobbitt case. However, it includes something that has never been offered before: it shows what happened later with John and Lorena. The latter got remarried after a few years and now leads a nonprofit foundation for women in shelters who are survivors of abuse. The former has been arrested on charges of domestic battery against multiple women since. However, his sentences were never long as the American legal system of the time was ill-equipped to fight domestic violence.

By making the viewers decide by themselves what they want to focus on – the story of assault, the story of empowerment, the story of society's attitudes towards women who come forward with tales of abuse, the story of tabloid culture – the creators force them to reevaluate their approach to both sexual assault and media and see it, as Lorena points out, "through the eyes of the #MeToo movement" (Piwowarski 2019). When examining the ways in which Lorena Bobbitt was "othered" by and through mass-mediated representations in the 1990s, Charla Ogaz (2007, 202) emphasizes that "both in the media coverage and in the trial itself, the representation of *Lorena Bobbitt* was fictionalized not just through interpretive extrapolation but also through social and cultural decontextualization." The *Lorena* series makes an attempt if not at undoing this cultural construct of Lorena Bobbitt as a news object then at least at putting the events in the context of "patriarchy and its various forms of violent masculinity, the ritual abuse of women, and other misogynist acts" (Ogaz 2007, 203). Furthermore, it explores the interconnected and heavily gendered issues of class and ethnicity by discussing the impact of her experiences as an immigrant worker and a woman of color who became dependent on her husband as she was made to believe that she did not belong among U.S. American women and that she would not be given protection against a white U.S. American husband, her abuser. While dismantling the racialized archetype of a vengeful Latina and (re)constructing the public perceptions of Lorena and John Bobbitt, the TV series points to the role of popular culture in the still-prevailing discourse discrediting "the logic of retaliatory violence and the right to self-defend in an environment of consistent and perpetual physical, emotional, and psychic abuse" (Ogaz 2007, 216) and concludes with the final observations made by four women: a veteran sex worker, an American feminist, a journalist, and a witness in Lorena's case. They all reveal that they are not optimistic about women's rights to defend themselves and fight for themselves.

3. *Roll Red Roll* and the Exploration of the Dynamics of Victimization

Nancy Schwartzman's documentary *Roll Red Roll* chronicles the rape of a teenage girl by the star players of football team and seems to mirror this lack of optimism. The case dubbed the Steubenville High School rape happened in Ohio on the 11th of August 2012. A heavily intoxicated 16-year old high-school girl was undressed, photographed, and taken by four football players to several parties. They gang-raped

her in the car a number of times and ended up taking her to the house of one of the players where further rapes followed. All of this was heavily documented by the offenders who live-tweeted everything, shared pictures on Instagram and posted about it on various social media outlets. The victim was unconscious throughout the entire ordeal that lasted 6 hours. She learned about the events of that night by reading the story in the local newspaper that listed tweets, pictures, and videos recorded mostly by the bystanders. The trial that followed and its media coverage were initially structured almost exclusively around victim blaming, with teachers and parents trying to cover for the players. After a crime blogger Alexandria Goddard got involved and started posting about the case and KnightSec, members of the hacker collective Anonymous, posted a video featuring the “self-proclaimed ‘rape crew’ from the night of the attack, making jokes about what had happened” (O’Donnel 2013), the story received international attention.

Nancy Schwartzman’s film shifts the focus from the survivor (she is neither named nor shown in the documentary) to the perpetrators, bystanders, community, and media. The film’s goal is to “uncover the deep-seated and social media-fueled ‘boys will be boys’ culture” and, using a social impact campaign structured around it, to offer “tools and pathways for men and boys to challenge ingrained thinking about masculinity and explore their leadership potential in the fight against gender-based violence” (Roll Red Roll Film 2019). It has no narrator and does not comment directly on the case. The footage of the assault is not there. However, the video found by Anonymous which was being recorded while the victim was undergoing the abuse offers the perpetrators’ perspective (*Roll Red Roll* 2019) as they comment: “She is so raped right now,” “You don’t need any foreplay with a dead girl,” “She’s deader than O.J.’s wife,” “They raped her harder than that cop raped Marsellus Wallace in Pulp Fiction. They raped her quicker than Mike Tyson raped that one girl.”

This is contrasted with the prevalent responses from Steubenville at the time expressed on various social media and public media outlets, once again presented mainly in the forms of short interviews and screenshots. The survivor’s reliability is especially strongly contested: “You know, anybody can make an allegation. These girls at these parties sometimes maybe drink a little bit too much, sometimes they get a little promiscuous... It’s real easy to all of a sudden say you were taken advantage of rather than own up to the fact that, hey look, I did what I did. It’s easier to tell your parents you were raped... than hey, mom, dad, I got drunk and decided to let three guys have their way with me” (*Roll Red Roll* 2019). This is consistent with the way in which rape culture shaping media and public discourse excuses “the rape of women by male perpetrators through the delegitimization of claims of rape by attacking the components of the rape itself (it was not really a rape) [and] the victim (she did something to invite the rape or is lying)” (Kosloski, Diamond-Welch, and Mann 2018, 168).

Nancy Schwartzman’s documentary unravels the sequence of events and explores the constellation of factors which led to this crime, influenced its outcomes and shaped the resulting narrative. It reveals the “boys-will-be-boys” and “she was asking for it”

attitudes underlying the behaviors of perpetrators, bystanders, and people participating in the attempts to cover-up the story. These and similar statements belong to what Martha R. Burt (1980) defines as “rape myths”: “prejudicial, stereotyped, or false beliefs about rape, rape victims, and rapists” (217). Other significant rape myths reported by Burt (1980) include: “only bad girls get raped,” “women ask for it,” “women ‘cry rape’ only when they’ve been jilted or have something to cover up” (217). All of them were mentioned in various forms in the film by people defending the perpetrators and blaming the survivor for her own victimization.

Roll Red Roll opens critical discussion on the perpetuation of violence against women by denying its existence or validity, evading, using double standards, and ultimately, placing the blame for sexual abuse on the survivor. Moreover, it raises an important issue of the power of bystander intervention: something that did not happen in that particular case despite numerous opportunities for it. The film brings to light the deeply instilled sexism and rape culture that are still prominent in popular culture by emphasizing that many news shows focused on the impact of the crime on the young boys, disregarding the survivor almost entirely, and described the story as a cautionary story the moral of which was that a person’s actions online (in this situation, perpetrators’ sharing pictures of the survivor on social media) have consequences. Finally, it offers a detailed and disturbing picture of a culture of toxic masculinity among young Americans and the complicity of parents, teachers, and school administrators in fostering a climate that is hostile for young women. Schwartzman admits that what ultimately convinced her that a project such as this can lead to a positive change was the #MeToo movement as it caused men and mainstream audiences to listen to the reality of women’s experiences. Her goal is to raise understanding about how rapes happen and how they can be prevented.

After a limited theatrical release in the US, *Roll Red Roll* had a nationwide broadcast on PBS as an opening film for the 32nd season of the Public Broadcasting Service series. It is currently advertised on the PBS (2019) website as a “[t]rue-crime thriller that goes behind the headlines to uncover the deep seated and social media-fueled ‘boys-will-be-boys’ culture at the root of high school sexual assault in America” which places it in the center of mainstream television as a crime thriller.

4. Gillette and the Issue of Healthy Masculinity

The final text of this paper, *We Believe: The Best Men Can Be* was created by a brand very much embedded in Western popular culture: Gillette. This two-minute advertisement urges men to act against expressions of toxic masculinity. The video starts by showing men listening silently to news about bullying, and sexual harassment, and toxic masculinity before switching to a voice-over commentary “Is this the best a man can get” and a clip from a Gillette Superbowl advertisement from 1989. What follows after are the images of negative male behavior: bullying, misogyny, sexual harassment, and aggression that are shown to be excused with the repeated line of “boys will

be boys.” Immediately after, the voice-over announces that the status quo has finally changed (with news about sexual harassment playing in the background) introduces a play on new slogan of the company “we believe in the best in men” that is reinforced by showing a number of examples of more positive behavior aimed at shaming and preventing the expressions of toxic masculinity. It should also be pointed out that no products of Gillette are presented in the short film as it is ethics and beliefs that are in its center which shows that the brand decided to move to value-based marketing and wants to openly engage with social issues in their advertising.

The short video ends with a message: “It’s only by challenging ourselves to do more that we can get closer to our best” (*We Believe: The Best Men Can Be* 2019). Viewed over 34 million times on YouTube alone, the commercial sparked a rather surprising controversy and has so far (as of the 15th of May, 2020) had over 457 thousand comments, 813 thousand likes and 1.6 million dislikes. Challenging gender stereotypes of men, it explores behaviors and attitudes associated with toxic masculinity understood broadly as an “attempt to name problems of behaviours rather than intrinsic identities; to place emphasis on acts rather than individuals” (de Boise 2019, 149). These “toxic” acts, incidentally, led to the assaults discussed in the two previous productions and to the emergence of #MeToo. Interestingly, the ad does not focus only on explicitly toxic traits of masculinity but also explores and condemns the broad category of complicit masculinities that Connell (2005, 79) saw as “constructed in ways that realize the patriarchal dividend, without the tensions or risks of being the frontline troops of patriarchy.” It focuses on both the role and the power of bystanders as it attempts to redefine the desired, positive masculinities.

However, despite the fact that the ad shows that there is a positive method of exercising privilege by demanding accountability and acting against harassment, many social media users considered it to be anti-male which led to an intense backlash centered around #boycottgillette hashtag that within few days of the publication of the advertisement was trending on Twitter. Numerous pledges to boycott Gillette products were posted on various social media with pictures of (presumably former) Gillette customers throwing away products sold by the controversial company. It was also related to an outbreak of the “Get Woke Go Broke” hashtag on social media which has been used since June 2018 to express the view that organizations and companies engaging in politically correct actions will suffer serious financial losses. However, the company does not seem to have experienced any commercial-related losses. Gillette’s (2019) website states, “It’s time we acknowledge that brands, like ours, play a role in influencing culture. And as a company that encourages men to be their best, we have a responsibility to make sure we are promoting positive, attainable, inclusive and healthy versions of what it means to be a man.” It has to be mentioned that not all of the reactions have been negative. However, as with other viral sensations, the angered masses of the so-called “haters” seemed to be the loudest. Both mass media and social media contributed to the escalation of the situation by reporting mostly on the backlash and failing to mention the positive responses.

5. Conclusions

The new, post-#MeToo knowledge of both the prevalence of sexual assault and sexist oppression of survivors of various forms of sexual violence is both put into everyday practice and used to recontextualize characters, texts, and situations from the past. While works of popular culture can help people make sense of the resulting increasingly complex world, one cannot deny the ever-growing significance of mass media and social media. Their potential for engaging with the political and social status quo and supporting or challenging it either by reinforcing patriarchal values and understanding or by interrogating norms cannot be denied. One can see it fulfilled in the analyzed texts with the *Lorena* series de-fictionalizing the representation of a survivor of domestic abuse and sexual violence, *Roll Red Roll* examining patriarchal norms and their impact on the perpetuation of rape culture, and *We Believe: The Best Men Can Be* de-normalizing toxic masculinity and the related patterns of abusive behavior. They show how popular culture can be used to examine the role of gender in the patriarchal rape culture and the resulting unequal gender relations and, ultimately, to de-normalize gendered oppression in general and sexual assault in particular.

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