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PUT YOUR STUDENTS BEFORE YOUR PUBLIC IMAGE

*A Critical Discourse Analysis of Strategic Communications in
the University of Warwick Rape Chat Scandal*

Clara Héroux Rhymes



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A Critical Discourse Analysis of Strategic Communications in the University of Warwick Rape

Chat Scandal

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Abstract

After learning that 11 of their University of Warwick classmates and friends had explicitly discussed raping them in a Facebook group chat, two female students filed a complaint with the university. Warwick's subsequent mishandling of the investigation, led by the university's media relations officer, resulted in significant public outcry including an on-campus protest, the trending of #ShameOnYouWarwick on Twitter and an in-depth BBC documentary. Through the case of what is now dubbed the 'Warwick rape chat scandal' (Lee & Kennelley, 2019b), this study seeks to evaluate what the strategic communications discourse between the university and #ShameOnYouWarwick Twitter activism reveals about institutional power within the era of popular feminism. Critical discourse analysis was conducted on eight publicly available statements published online by the University of Warwick as well as 100 Tweets from the #ShameOnYouWarwick hashtag. Supported by the literature, this paper explores the relationship between digital feminist activism and university public relations. The research argues that by drawing from the professional genre of PR, Warwick's discourse worked to distance itself from feminist discourse. Ultimately, Warwick's statements served as forms of institutional maintenance that prioritized the viewpoint of the university over those of the victims. Concurrently, the Twitter activism directly challenged this institutional power through feminist discourse, however, this was done in an uncoordinated way that simultaneously individualised and supported social change.

INTRODUCTION

Sometimes it's fun to just go wild and rape 100 girls.

Rape the whole flat to teach them all [a] lesson.

I cannot wait to have surprise sex with some freshers

What do we do with girls? RAAAAAAAAAAPE.

Excerpts from the Warwick rape chat conversation

Commonly referred to as the 'Warwick rape chat scandal' (Lee & Kennelley, 2019a), a recent series of events at the University of Warwick has generated widespread attention and debate about the role of post-secondary institutions in perpetuating rape culture. In 2018, two Warwick students filed a complaint to the university about a group chat where 11 of their male classmates explicitly discussed raping them. To their surprise, they learned the university media relations officer would lead the investigation (Lee & Kennelley, 2019b). Despite initially ruling long-term suspensions, the university eventually allowed four of the rape chat group members to return to campus the following year and neglected to inform the complainants (Lee & Kennelley, 2019b). The mishandling of the rape chat investigation led to an on-campus protest, the trending of the hashtag #ShameOnYouWarwick on Twitter, and ongoing media coverage, including an in-depth BBC documentary (Lee & Kennelley, 2019b). In time, the university publicly apologised and committed to an independent external review. This apology was coined an "eventual apology" (Owen, 2019, para. 25) by PR Week in their list of notable apologies of 2019. In response to the recommendations proposed by the external review, Warwick has stated that "comm[unication]s professionals will no longer be allowed to act as investigators into complaints involving staff or students" (Owen, 2019, para. 1). This case brings together several questions about the role of public relations (PR) professionals within institutions. To what extent is it their responsibility to support stakeholders? How do the communications strategies of an institution serve as acts of institutional maintenance and betrayal? How do contexts of neoliberalism and rape culture contribute to this topic?

Operating from a strategic communications lens, this study examines the tensions between institutional power and hashtag activism within the era of the neoliberal university and

popular feminism. Specifically, I seek to uncover how the institutional power wielded by strategic communications professionals may privilege and neglect certain discourses. This study aims to contribute to existing literature by considering how communications can both serve as maintenance of systemic injustice while also offering the possibility for transformation. To deconstruct and analyse the power dynamics between the institutional discourse and counter-discourse, I will conduct a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of eight publicly released statements from the university as well as 100 Tweets from the hashtag #ShameOnYouWarwick. After a brief overview of the case, the first chapter of this paper will review existing strategic communications and discourse literature within the contexts of campus rape culture, popular feminism and the neoliberal university. Next, I will present how the study will be operationalised and justify the selection of Fairclough's (2010) account of CDA. The final chapter of this paper will evaluate the research findings and argue that the university and Twitter activist discourse were linked in a discursive struggle over maintaining and challenging institutional power.

THE WARWICK RAPE CHAT SCANDAL

In 2018, a University of Warwick student asked her friend about the "stream of explicit messages" (Lee & Kennelly, 2019b, para. 11) appearing on his laptop. He told her, "Well, if you think that's bad you might want to see our lads' chat' [and then] he took [her] through a year and a half's worth of rape threats" (Lee & Kennelly, 2019b, para. 13). She learned that 11 of her Warwick classmates and friends participated in "a plethora of conversations about sexually assaulting other students, as well as racist, anti-Semitic, misogynistic and ableist language" (Tarrant, 2019, para. 3) in a Facebook group chat. Searching the chat for her own name generated hundreds of results (Lee & Kennelly, 2019b). The chat was later found to be named "Fuck Women, Disrespect them all" (The Boar, 2018, para. 15) and the word 'rape' was used in the chat 19 times.

The woman and another female student targeted in the chat submitted a complaint to Warwick (Lee & Kennelly, 2019b). The students immediately felt there was a "clear conflict of

interest” (para. 20) when the university’s director of media relations was appointed to lead the investigation. After screenshots of the chat’s graphic conversations were publicly released, the investigation garnered media attention, and the Warwick student community created a petition calling for the expulsion of rape chat members (The Boar, 2018; Tarrant, et al., 2018). Eventually, the university’s disciplinary process resulted in consequences for five of the group members when “two were banned for 10 years, two were excluded for one year, and one was given a lifetime campus ban” (Lee & Kennelly, 2019b, para. 38) and a collective fine of £1,150 (Suen, 2019). The victims learned of this outcome through the media and were not informed by the university (Lee & Kennelly, 2019b; Tarrant et al., 2018).

Subsequently, two of the men appealed and successfully reduced their 10-year bans to one year, by this point allowing them to return to Warwick the upcoming academic year (The Boar, 2019a). This meant that, in total, four of the students initially banned from campus would be returning the next year (The Boar, 2019a). The university did not publicly disclose this information about the appeals “due to ‘duties of confidentiality’” (The Boar, 2019a) and rejected further grievances from the victims, calling the investigation verdict ‘final’ (The Boar, 2019a). The victims took to publishing an article in the Warwick student newspaper titled *A letter to Warwick: ‘You have forgotten about the victims’* and questioned the decisions made by the university:

Does the university want its students to feel that such threats, comments and ‘jokes’ are acceptable and normal? This is the message sent out by the recent decision to allow the perpetrators back onto campus next year. ... Most importantly though, you have forgotten about and humiliated the victims. ... It is a source of shame for past, present, and future Warwick alumni that you lack the courage to stand by us. Who are you protecting Warwick? (The Boar, 2019b, para. 4)

Soon, the hashtag #ShameOnYouWarwick was trending on Twitter with criticism towards the university and statements of solidarity from University of Warwick departments and alumni (Warwick English, 2019). The same day that a protest took place on campus, the university announced a “thorough, external and independent review of [their] disciplinary and appeals

processes" (Normington, 2019, para. 3) and hired a "legal expert" (BBC, 2019, para. 1) shortly after. Amongst several findings, the independent external review identified a widespread sentiment from those involved "that, throughout, the University had been more concerned with its own reputational interests than in a fair or just assessment of the case" (Persaud, 2019, p. 5) and ultimately "there was a profoundly unsatisfactory outcome for almost every single person involved" (p. 5). Two of the victims are now suing the university for thousands of pounds (Pynn, 2019).

THEORETICAL CHAPTER

Literature Review

To understand this case from a theoretical standpoint, I will now present a review of relevant literature in three parts. Firstly, I will discuss the complex and often ambivalent relationship between feminist discourse and social change in this current era of popular feminism. Next, I will explore the power exercised by strategic communications industries and consider who benefits from this power within the neoliberal university. Finally, I will underscore how strategic communications within this climate can range along a spectrum from acts of institutional maintenance to attempts at transformation.

Rape Culture and Popular Feminist Activism

To understand popular feminist activism, I will begin by defining the wider context of rape culture. Rape culture describes the socio-cultural practices that allow sexual violence to be normalised and perpetuated (Sills et al., 2016). Despite rape itself being illegal, rape culture fosters an "environment in which sexism, misogyny, and elements of rape culture merge as a normalised backdrop to everyday life" (Sills et al., 2016, p. 940). This means that beyond explicit rape or sexual assault, rape culture extends to include "rape jokes, sexual harassment, cat-calling, [...] the re-direction of blame from the perpetrator in an assault to the victim; and impunity for perpetrators, despite their conduct or crimes" (Mendes, 2015 as cited in Keller et al., 2018, p. 24). Some scholars underscore the "group-oriented" (May & Strikwerda, 1994, p. 137) nature of rape and the fact that these dynamics can be exacerbated online by working "to

diffuse moral or legal responsibility for group members, displace accountability, provide greater anonymity, and dehumanize and blame victims in ways never before imagined” (Henry & Powell, 2015, p. 769). Some feminist scholarship has deemed current legal systems and institutions at large to be inadequately addressing rape culture and systemic sexual violence, both online and offline (Salter, 2013; Henry & Powell, 2015; Keller et al., 2018). In response, some feminists have taken to the internet to challenge current systems that fail to attribute accountability to perpetrators of sexual violence and to seek justice for survivors (Salter, 2013; Rentschler, 2015).

In the context of rape culture, popular feminism can be understood through the “sometimes liberating and other times harmful” (Henry & Powell, 2015, p. 763) relationship between technology and feminist activism. Digital social movements have leveraged social media platforms to expose rape culture, gendered oppression, and patriarchal systems, such as the notable #MeToo movement (Lewis et al., 2018; Mendes et al., 2018; Clark-Parsons, 2019). Hashtags, in particular, serve as a useful tool to incite online attention, solidarity and conversation (Mendes et al., 2018; Nunez Puente et al., 2019; Gallagher et al., 2019). This ‘hashtag activism’ provides feminist movements “the ability to organise, mobilise, revitalise and unite positions in an unprecedented feminist political call to action” (Puente et al., 2019, p. 2). Beyond raising the profile of feminist issues through “networked visibility” (Clark-Parsons, 2019, p. 2), hashtag activism can also bring otherwise marginalised people together in their shared experiences and “produce social, cultural, and political possibilities” (Mendes et al., 2018, p. 33). Traditional media can further amplify these social media affordances, such as in the case of #MeToo in the United Kingdom (UK) where news media played a significant role in increasing the social movements’ visibility (De Benedictis et al., 2019).

At the same time, scholars question the extent to which this feminist discourse can successfully achieve social change (Rottenberg, 2014; Banet-Weiser & Portwood-Stacer, 2017; Banet-Weiser, 2018; Clark-Parsons, 2019). By emphasising individuals, this kind of popular feminism seemingly favours visibility as an end in itself rather than aiming to dismantle patriarchal structures (Banet-Weiser, 2018). For instance, in the case of #MeToo, focusing on the experiences of elite celebrities creates a distraction “from systemic, structural sexism

across all industries, [and] can end up working against the calls for social change promised at its beginning, producing more and more visibility - and increasingly narrowing the discourse of that visibility in the processes" (Banet-Weiser, 2018, p. 17). Further, UK media coverage spurred by #MeToo was found to be presented in problematic frames that de-politicized and individualised the issue (De Benedictis et al., 2019). By extension, the individualisation of systemic gendered inequality can also be argued as characteristically neoliberal (Rottenberg, 2014). This line of market-logic based thinking allows feminist pursuits to become individualised acts of self-regulation, such as personal fulfilment, representation in corporate leadership, and balancing career advancement and motherhood (Rottenberg, 2014). Thus, instead of viewing rape culture as a collective responsibility, De Benedictis et al. (2019) contend that:

Encouraging women to speak out can easily become the default solution to questions of sexual harassment and assault, placing the onus on the individual women rather than on the structures that create and sustain inequality, thus dovetailing quite seamlessly with popular and neoliberal feminism (p. 732)

In a similar vein, I argue that cancel and callout cultures (Munro, 2013; Bromwich, 2018; Finley & Johnson, 2019) serve as additional examples of how priority is often placed upon the individual, rather than the collective. As a debated term, I use cancel culture here to explain the phenomenon where individuals and organisations are increasingly subject to a "cultural boycott" (Bromwich, 2018, para. 8) because "when you deprive someone of your attention, you're depriving them of a livelihood" (para. 8). Similarly, callout culture focuses on publicly identifying and shaming individuals (Finley & Johnson, 2019). Phipps (2020) suggests that this widespread public scrutiny "can be seen as quintessentially neoliberal: naming, blaming and shaming individuals is a key currency" (p. 239). In the case of rape culture, this can also extend to discourses termed 'carceral feminism' or 'punitive narratives' which call for punishment attributed to perpetrators (Phillips & Chagnon, 2020a). While it seems understandable for some to seek to compensate for failures of the legal system by demanding consequences for perpetrators, others contend that it remains problematic because "naming and shaming [...] does nothing to address how rape culture is institutionalized" (Finley & Johnson, 2019, p. 122). Overall, I support the argument that individualising rape does not

work to prevent future harm by challenging how it is institutionally and culturally embedded. Limiting the conversation to demands for punishment seemingly neglects a wider discussion about how to collectively address this societal issue.

This literature about the complexity of rape culture discourses mirrors the often ambivalent nature of feminist discourse more generally (Banet-Weiser, 2012). In other words, these are not distinct feminist 'movements' or 'groups' with contradictory beliefs. Instead, it is the discourses themselves that can be complex and contradictory (Phillips & Chagnon, 2020). By examining media coverage of the notable Stanford rape case in the United States, Phillips and Chagnon (2020) found "the positions of antirape culture advocates and criminal justice reformers [were] not inherently mutually exclusive" (Phillips & Chagnon, 2020, p. 61). Therefore, it is important to approach feminist discourse from the perspective of intersectionality and recognise that gendered oppression experienced by individuals can converge and compound (Munro, 2013). This study, therefore, aligns itself with a feminist line of inquiry that appreciates the unique experiences, complexities, and contradictions revealed within feminist discourse (Gill, 2009). Phillips and Chagnon (2020) summarise this issue and contend that "how to increase accountability for rapists and better serve victims of sexual assaults are far from settled issues, and begs the question, in cases of sexual violence, 'what is justice?'" (Phillips & Chagnon, 2020, p. 62). Overall, it seems that rape culture literature is disproportionately focused upon media coverage. This leads me to the next area of inquiry to explore the role that strategic communications plays and perhaps contributes to perpetuating gendered inequality through discourse.

Strategic Communications and Power in the Neoliberal University

Building upon functional perspectives that define strategic communications as "purposeful communication activities by organisational leaders and members to advance the organization's mission" (Hallahan et al., 2007, p. 27), critical scholars go further to also consider how communication is embedded within a wider socio-cultural context (Edwards, 2018). Through this lens, power is considered a central area of examination because "it reveals how public relations work plays into the struggles between dominant and subordinated groups that mark all societies" (Edwards, 2018, p. 6). Communications scholarship reveals a deep-rooted debate surrounding the question of who ultimately benefits from this kind of

promotional work. On the one hand, PR is argued to serve the powerful and elite systems which it represents. On the other hand, it is also possible to conceptualise PR practitioners as advocates for both its publics and the public interest at large. Giddens' (1984) theory of structuration suggests power operates as an interactive and negotiated dynamic between systems and agents. From this view, it is possible to see how communications practitioners and their audiences interact and mutually-evolve through a structural process (Giddens, 1984; Falkheimer, 2007).

Alternatively, a Bourdieusian view argues that struggles over power take place amidst a system or 'field' of relations between agents in society (Bourdieu, 1993). Powerful groups draw from their resources to assert and maintain their dominance over time within the field. This symbolic power (Bourdieu, 1991) illustrates how "those that dominate have the power to present a normalised version of reality to other members of the field, which reinforces their own position" (Edwards, 2006, p. 252). Applied to PR, this line of thinking suggests that practitioners and by extension, the industry at large, work to reinforce and legitimise norms to gain symbolic power through language. The PR industry, therefore, arguably holds disproportionate power across several levels: at once misrepresenting the interests of clients, and also perpetuating the dominant structures within society (Edwards, 2006; 2009). In short, PR can be viewed as an industry holding disproportionate material and symbolic power.

However, Bourdieu's view does not comprehensively account for individual agency and change (Edwards, 2006). Therefore, it is relevant to recognise the wide range of levels of individual agency available to PR practitioners because "the ways that their organizations', their industry's, and society's understandings of the nature, boundaries, and practice of PR constrain what representations are possible" (Tilley, 2015, p. 93). This means that the role of a PR practitioner varies by the way it is defined within a particular context — most often, but not necessarily, based on the needs of the client (Bourne, 2019). PR practice is underpinned by a relational foundation in which practitioners are responsible for relationships with their publics (Ledingham, 2003). Yet, the extent to which PR practitioners wield enough power to adequately support these external interests is widely debated. Leichty and Springston (1996) argue for the role of PR practitioners to be further developed to serve as 'boundary spanners'

by extending beyond their employer's agenda to interact with publics outside the organisation. From an ethical perspective, Leeper (1996) argues for a communitarian approach to PR that is rooted in the idea that "what is best for the community is ultimately in the best interest of the organization" (p. 173). Some scholars go as far as to reject the notion that activists operate solely outside an organisation (Curtin, 2016) and propose that practitioners themselves "will act as organizational activists" (Holzhausen & Voto, 2002, p. 58) to embody the 'conscience' of the organisation (Neil & Drumwright, 2012). In fact, activist groups are said to practice PR strategies. It is thus possible to understand how "the identities of activism and public relations are fluid, multiple, conflicting, and at times overlapping" (Ciszek, 2015, p. 453).

Further, the advent of the neoliberal university seems to bring an additional layer of complexity and implications for the role of strategic communications. Scholars argue that universities seem to have internalised and institutionalised neoliberal logics, to the extent that education is treated as a service that can be bought and sold (Fairclough, 1993; Ball, 2012). The global competition between institutions to attract and retain their students, better understood as 'customers', inherently prioritises producing high-profile research findings and attaining performance rankings (Ball, 2012) within the 'digital reputation economy' (Hearn, 2010). Taken together amidst the context of promotional culture where "the need to promote has simply become unconsciously internalised by people and institutions" (Davis, 2013, p. 4), neoliberal logics create a dynamic that understands "reputation as an instrumental and unstable form of value" (Cronin, 2016, p. 399). In other words, Cronin (2016) suggests that the neoliberal university highly values 'reputational capital' as a resource to support its market position. Within universities then, PR's purpose seemingly prioritises reputation. Taken together, it remains unclear how PR can support stakeholder interests, and by extension, social change in this context. Overall, it seems that the neoliberal university, as a site of disproportionate material power striving for legitimacy, is poorly positioned to support the public interest. This leads me to consider the relationship between university PR and campus rape culture.

Strategic Communications Discourse as Institutional Maintenance and Transformation

While feminist scholarship has begun to examine the relationship between the neoliberal university and sexual violence (Phipps, 2020), there remains an opportunity for continued focus and analysis from a strategic communications perspective. Issues resulting from campus rape culture can be understood as ‘disruptive activities’ that threaten the neoliberal logics of universities in the Global North (Phipps & Young, 2015). To combat this threat, universities seem to undertake what is called ‘institutional work’ to assert their legitimacy (Fredriksson, 2014). Universities’ neoliberal imperatives to control reputational capital and competitive market positioning (Phipps, 2020) arguably reinforce the importance of maintaining their legitimacy as an institution (Fredriksson, 2014). Feminist scholars have identified how universities’ desire to maintain legitimacy can work to “foster environments where sexual violence is normalized, insufficiently addressed, and/or actively punished” (Musselman et al., 2020, p. 6). This can take place in various ways, including erasing sexism and ‘lad culture’ altogether (Phipps & Young, 2015); exacerbating the harm and trauma experienced by victims through ‘institutional betrayal’ (Smith & Freyd, 2013; Smith & Freyd, 2014); and minimising cases of sexual harassment or rape (Phipps, 2020). Phipps (2020) goes further to argue that in times of crisis, universities practice ‘institutional airbrushing’ by prioritising “maintaining a marketable appearance to the detriment of [students] welfare” (p. 230). Phipps (2020) also points to the fact that callout culture or ‘naming and shaming’ perpetrators is often the primary strategy to confront incidents of rape culture. While Phipps’ (2020) work focuses upon cases of employee sexual assault, I argue that it remains relevant to rape culture more generally.

Another key consideration stems from the inherently complex nature and structure of universities as institutions with competing internal priorities. In a study of strategic communications aimed at improving rape culture on campus, Musselman et al. (2020) found “patterns of institutional language and programming that are internally inconsistent or in conflict with the stated goals of the discourse or institution itself” (p. 11). This begs important questions about who and what may be privileged or neglected within institutional communications, and more specifically:

How is it that universities have become institutions where some actors work from the perspective of survivor centered feminism while other actors work from the perspective of legal compliance, bureaucracy, and institutional protection? Can multiple institutional logics be complementary? (Musselman et al., 2020, p. 22)

Returning to the relational foundation of PR, it is also critical to consider the relationship between the university and its publics. Student collectives have proven themselves to “model key practices, and languages, of community accountability” (Rentschler, 2018, p. 506) in the face of rape culture. As a result, universities seem to be challenged by the fact that their communities can “provide fertile environments for resistance to sexism” (Lewis et al, 2018, p. 3). This is apparent within the Warwick rape chat case, through the widespread acts of resistance and organising such as the consistent reporting in The Boar student newspaper, the online petition as well as the Twitter hashtag of #ShameOnYouWarwick. From this view, tension seems to have emerged between university discourse and the counter-discourse expressed through highly visible forms of digital feminist activism. This kind of dynamic means that as interdependent and mutually constitutive forces, “discourse is shaped by structures, but also contributes to shaping and reshaping them, to reproducing and transforming them” (Fairclough, 2010, p. 59). Thus, university PR professionals may be situated at the intersection between institutional maintenance and change (Fredriksson et al., 2013). PR’s long-standing pursuit of professionalisation and legitimacy within the marketplace (Edwards, 2014; Grandien, 2017; Bourne, 2019) have provided PR professionals with “critical social skills that are essential for effecting field-level change [and make them] uniquely qualified to engage in ‘institutional work’, i.e. creating, maintaining, or altering institutions” (Suddaby & Viale, 2011, p. 436). In other words, it seems that institutional work can offer the potential for both maintenance and transformation. By extension, strategic communications itself could reveal discourses of both institutional maintenance and transformation.

Conceptual Framework

This research brings together strategic communications and digital feminist activism in the context of the neoliberal university, rape culture, and popular feminism and serves as justification for this study's conceptual analysis and interpretation. Through the case of the Warwick rape chat scandal, this study will focus on discourse and power to examine the way "the complex realities of power relations are 'condensed' and simplified in discourses" (Fairclough, 2010, p. 4). More specifically, this study is interested in how strategic communications discourse between an organization and its publics can construct, resist, or support gendered injustice (Lazar, 2005; Fairclough, 2010). This feminist lens primarily seeks to question and deconstruct those "relations of power that systematically privilege men as a social group and disadvantage, exclude and disempower women as a social group" (Lazar, 2005, p. 5).

This study focuses on the mutually-constitutive discursive relationship between the university and the #ShameOnYouWarwick Tweets. Drawing from the theoretical debates within the literature, I have identified that the discursive struggle may in part be contingent upon whose interests are served by Warwick's strategic communications. I will draw from a Bourdieusian view of PR that suggests that practitioners and the industry overall largely privilege organizational interests and reflect the dominant structures within society (Edwards, 2006; 2009). This means that PR practices rely heavily on industry norms to assert and sustain their dominant position within the field (Edwards, 2009). At the same time, I take a balanced view to acknowledge the potential for the role of PR to range along a spectrum (Leichty & Springston, 1996). Warwick's statements may simultaneously include discourse that could sustain institutional legitimacy or serve as social transformation (Suddaby & Viale, 2011).

The decision to include digital feminist activism serves to bolster my inquiry with what could be considered as counter-discourse or 'emancipatory discourse' (Luke, 2002; Salter, 2013). In other words, this study is also interested in "those forms of talk, writing, and representation that are counter-ideological and act to articulate and configure collective interests in

transformative ways” (Luke, 2002, p. 105). Through a sample from the #ShameOnYouWarwick Tweets, I will consider the counter-discourse expressed through this hashtag activism that brought considerable public attention to the case. Further, in alignment with scholarly critiques of popular feminism, I am interested in the extent to which the emergent discourses may either serve to individualise rape culture or suggest aims to collectively dismantle gendered oppression (Banet-Weiser, 2018).

Research Objectives

Existing literature focused on rape culture and strategic communications is overrepresented by instrumental perspectives on crisis communications management (Works et al., 2019) or critical examinations of media coverage (De Benedictis et al., 2019; Phillips & Chagnon, 2020; Worthington, 2020). While there are several case studies about university rape culture, to date, few cover the Warwick rape chat crisis specifically (Heslop, 2019; Prats, 2019; Phippen & Bond, 2020). Therefore, this study seeks to address this gap by contributing an in-depth examination of the Warwick case from a strategic communications perspective. This viewpoint provides an opportunity to better understand how the strategic communications discourse between an organization and its publics can either perpetuate or transform gendered inequality and power relations more broadly. This study will thus focus on the power-driven construction and negotiation of discourse between the university and the #ShameOnYouWarwick activism. This theoretical focus on discourse and power serves as justification to conduct a critical discourse (CDA) analysis which seeks to answer the following research question:

RQ: In the case of the Warwick rape chat crisis, what does the strategic communications discourse between the university and #ShameOnYouWarwick reveal about institutional power within the era of popular feminism?

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

This chapter provides the rationale for the selected methodology, outlines the details of the research design, and addresses ethical considerations and reflexivity of this study.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

Discourse can be understood as a constitutive force that at once shapes and is shaped by reality (Fairclough, 2010). To investigate the stated research question, this study will undertake a CDA given its “particular interest in the relation between language and power” (Wodak, 2011, p. 2). CDA is mainly interested in examining systems of domination and negotiation with the ultimate goal of supporting social change (Fairclough, 2010). This focus on power sets CDA apart from descriptive and linguistic approaches to discourse analysis. Specifically, this study aligns itself with Fairclough’s approach to CDA which examines “the effect of power relations and inequalities in producing social wrongs [...] on dialectical relations between discourse and power” (Fairclough, 2010, p. 8).

By bringing together both strategic communications and feminism, this study aligns with Fairclough’s (2010) transdisciplinary view of CDA. Uniting these two disciplines makes sense given the interdependence between ideology and discourse manifested through language (Purvis & Hunt’s, 1993). Therefore, a feminist form of CDA understands that language can both reinforce and resist gendered oppression and patriarchal ideology. Lazar’s (2007) conception of feminist CDA thus helps to inform this study given that it “offer[s] a critical perspective on such discursive representations vis-a-vis the prevailing structural relations of power” (p. 160). Given the widespread debates about how power is exercised through strategic communications, I argue a clear connection between strategic communications and CDA. Motion and Leitch (2013) go as far as to contend that “a central goal of much public relations work is to establish the legitimacy of particular institutions or actors in relation to areas of knowledge and, in the process, enhance their power” (p. 266-267). Strategic communications and feminist perspectives, therefore, serve as complementary and intersecting disciplines that warrant examinations of how power is manifested through

language. Overall, I conclude that CDA provides an adequate theoretical and methodological foundation to analyse the university discourse and Twitter counter-discourse of the Warwick rape chat case.

Research Design

Sampling

The “information-rich” (Patton, 2015, p. 75) nature of the Warwick case warrants an in-depth, qualitative investigation. Unlike cases that question the legitimacy and believability of sexual violence and misconduct, the rape chat provides concrete evidence of rape culture. In this incident, the screenshots made explicit the identities of the male group chat members and the misogynistic comments they made. Additionally, the significant media attention and trending Twitter discussion further reinforce the relevance of this case as a “high-visibility case [...] because of the impacts it illuminates and its significance to a field” (Patton, 2015, p. 266).

While I cannot claim the specific findings of this study to be generalisable, instead, I forward this study as an in-depth examination of the intersection between strategic communications practice and rape culture within a university setting. To ensure the relevance and richness of the materials, I selected the sample through purposeful sampling in combination with specific criteria (Patton, 2015). The criteria states:

1. In alignment with a relational understanding of strategic communications in which organisations, communications professionals and their publics are interdependent, the sample will include texts from both Warwick’s perspective and the public’s perspective.
2. Corresponding with the parameters of a case study, the texts will be selected within a specific timeframe at the height of the crisis.
3. Finally, to ensure the richness of the CDA, texts must reach a minimum word count, to be set depending on their format.

To capture the University of Warwick official discourse, I selected eight publicly available statements published online by the university in response to the ongoing crisis between January 31, 2019 and July 10, 2019. One text of 200 words during this timeframe was deemed too short and lacking depth and was thus excluded from the sample. These statements were

found under the 'Press Releases' section of Warwick's website and labelled 'Group chat – update and further information' (Ingram, 2019). This categorisation of the statements under the press releases section demonstrates a connection to the University of Warwick's PR function. The statements were signed by various members of Warwick's senior leadership team, illustrating the organisational legitimacy of the statements.

To capture the Twitter activism, I selected 100 Tweets from the #ShameOnYouWarwick hashtag. I first generated a chart of #ShameOnYouWarwick hashtag usage over time using Google Trends (Appendix A). These peaks aligned with the timeframe of the university statements. Through an advanced Twitter search within this timeframe, I selected Tweets with no less than 30 words and that had at least four likes, retweets or comments from other Twitter users to demonstrate their relevance within the conversation.

Analytical Framework

Following Fairclough's (1992; 2010) model of CDA, this study will analyse the textual, discursive and societal dimensions of the sample. Specific analytical frameworks were established for both the university discourse and the Twitter discourse, respectively (Appendix B).

Textual: The textual level will be focused on the use of linguistic components including word selection, active or passive verb voice, expressions, and overall grammar and structure (Fairclough, 1992). More specifically, this dimension will examine the vocabulary used to describe the various aspects of this case, including the University of Warwick, the investigation, the victims, and the rape chat members. This level will also consider how "agency and responsibility of actions" (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 104) are attributed through language.

Discursive: The discursive level will be largely concerned with how the text was produced and consumed and the ways it calls upon or draws from other types of texts or discourses (Fairclough, 1992). For the university portion of the sample, I will consider the professional PR context and genres, such as industry norms (Bathia, 2010), image management strategies

(Kuhn, 1997) or image restoration strategies (Benoit, 1997). For the Twitter activism portion of the sample, I will also consider the types of argumentation, the tone and what kinds of references are made to other texts. The extent to which feminist discourses are present will also be relevant to this level across the entire sample.

Societal: The societal level will be interested in the wider socio-cultural context and broad 'forms of knowledge' that may be present within the text (Fairclough, 1992). This dimension will examine the references to broader social practices such as the current context within the United Kingdom of campus rape culture, university disciplinary processes, online misogynistic abuse or gendered injustice within Western society more broadly.

Limitations and Considerations for Future Research

Despite the strengths and alignment of CDA to the research question, it is important to address the limitations of this study and the corresponding implications for future research. CDA is concerned with the texts themselves as the object of inquiry and does not seek to provide a comprehensive account of "what really happened" (Gill, 1996, p. 141) or the discourse's true meaning, intent or reception (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). CDA favours the interpretations of the researcher over and above the range of other possible interpretations by other individuals. Thus, the positionality and underlying assumptions of the researcher set the foundation for what will be privileged and neglected by CDA (Breeze, 2011).

Conducting a CDA means that the interpretations and agency of individuals directly involved in the case were not examined. As a result, it is not possible to comment on or claim to find how the university's statements or the #ShameOnYouWarwick Tweets were intended to mean or how they were subsequently interpreted by those involved. Further, anonymising the identity of the Twitter users for privacy considerations weakens the research as I cannot confirm that those posting with the hashtag are stakeholders of the University of Warwick. This is a significant limitation of this study given the relational view of PR which considers organisations and their publics as holding interdependent relationships (Ledingham, 2003). Thus, future research on the Warwick case could be undertaken in the form of in-depth interviews with those involved to provide a first-hand account of the lives and experiences of

those involved from various perspectives of the Warwick community, such as leadership, strategic communications professionals, staff, students, alumni and other members of the Warwick community at large.

Further, this study is limited by its purposeful sample that only includes select publicly available information during the height of the crisis. The decision to only include university statements and Tweets does not provide a comprehensive overview of all communications relevant to the Warwick case. This means that posts on other social media platforms aside from Twitter as well as internal or private communications such as email correspondence, memos, staff reports, direct messages, or text messages were not included. The sample also excludes the more recent developments of the independent external review's findings and recommendations for improvement. The timely and ongoing nature of the Warwick rape chat case means this study is limited to information available up to August 2020 and cannot be applied to any future developments.

Ethics and Reflexivity

My supervisor at the London School of Economics reviewed and approved the theoretical and methodological approach of this study. Given the publicly available nature of the university statements and Tweets, specific ethical concerns were not raised (Townsend & Wallace, 2016). The Twitter usernames and user profile photos have been redacted to protect the anonymity of the Twitter users who posted with the hashtag #ShameOnYouWarwick. However, given the interdependency between researcher positionality and CDA, thorough reflexivity is critical to "be attentive to and conscious of the cultural, political, social, linguistic, and economic origins of one's own perspective and voice" (Patton, 2015, p. 71).

First, I recognise that my interest in and passion for this topic stems from my experience as both a feminist and PR professional. When learning about the Warwick case, I was immediately struck with the intuitive sense that Ahmed (2017) describes as: "Something can be sharp without it being clear what the point is.. Things don't seem right" (p. 22). Further, my professional and academic background as a PR professional and Master's in Strategic

Communications student contributed to my decision to pursue this case. It is possible my personal experience in crisis communication, and personal beliefs about the duties of the profession may have embedded themselves into my research focus and design.

Importantly, I acknowledge my privilege as an able-bodied, heterosexual-cis-gendered Caucasian middle-class Canadian woman inherently limits the perspective of this study. As a Canadian who undertook this research while studying abroad, my direct cultural experience within the UK was short-lived after leaving the region during the pandemic. There may be cultural nuances and contextual factors that I did not identify or understand.

Finally, studying this case study from a university in the UK means this study is built upon a Western-centric viewpoint that favours the Global North and may or may not be representative of the PR industry, universities, and rape culture within the Global South. In addition, this study does not comprehensively address the intersectional oppressions implicated with rape culture (Munro, 2013). Feminist scholarship has identified that forms of popular feminism, such as hashtag activism, can work in harmful ways that centre whiteness, exacerbate inequality, and further marginalize oppressed voices (Clark-Parsons, 2019). As a researcher, I recognise that this study did not address all issues within the Warwick rape chat, such as the explicit comments about ableism, antisemitism, and other forms of hate speech. The Warwick case and the way this study was conducted privileged gendered inequality over other forms of inequality. As a feminist researcher, I recognise that feminism is not homogenous, and I do not strive to align this research with white feminist pursuits.

Overall, I was critical about my preconceived ideas about the Warwick case throughout the research process and ensured that my theoretical and methodological decisions were conducted with proper justification.

RESULTS AND INTERPRETATION

This chapter presents the findings of the CDA across textual, discursive, and societal dimensions for both the Warwick statements and Twitter activism to answer the research question:

In the case of the Warwick rape chat crisis, what does the strategic communications discourse between the university and #ShameOnYouWarwick reveal about institutional power within the era of popular feminism?

By examining the similarities, differences and intersections between the discourse and counter-discourse, the results will be categorised under the three theoretical areas of focus from the research question: popular feminism, strategic communications, and institutional power.

Popular Feminism

The university statements and Twitter activism revealed contrasting findings about feminist discourse. Feminist discourse was highly visible throughout the entire sample of #ShameOnYouWarwick Tweets, while it was largely absent from the first few University Statements and then inconsistently present for the remainder. This was first made clear by the way that Warwick's statements mention and describe the male group chat participants, the women who filed the complaints, and the group chat itself.

University Sample

Within the first two texts of the university sample, the words 'men', 'women', 'rape', 'sexual', 'victim', 'survivor' or 'abuse' were not used. The word 'rape' was never used in the sample except for two mentions of the Coventry Rape and Sexual Abuse Centre. Throughout the

entire university sample, the word 'men' was used once, and the words 'women' and 'gender' were never used.

The first two statements evoked a persuasive rhetorical style that primarily explained and defended the procedural details of how the university disciplinary process arrived at the decisions and sanctions for the rape chat members. In the first text, the male group chat members are mentioned several times. While the discourse presented these men as responsible for their actions, it is suggested vaguely and indirectly. Rather than explicitly acknowledging the harmful conversations these men took part in, Warwick focused on the procedural information by saying 'the issue of culpability [...] was not challenged':

The appeals panel gave each case thorough and detailed consideration. In neither case was the appeal about the issue of culpability (this was not challenged and the students concerned accepted that aspect of the original decision). (University; Text 1.1)

Throughout this text, the male students and their conversations are solely identified from the lens of the university's process and not in any other capacity. This works to suggest that the wrongdoing of the men was only relevant in the eyes of the university's disciplinary process:

- Individuals who have been found culpable as a result of the investigation (University; Text 1.1)
- Those individuals sanctioned (University; Text 1.1)
- All those students for whom the major disciplinary cases were proven (University; Text 1.1)
- The penalties imposed combine direct punishment for the deeply offensive and threatening comments made during the chats (University; Text 1.1)

Additionally, the women who filed the complaint and were directly impacted by the group chat were only mentioned briefly in this text in relation to the sanctions imposed by the process:

As a consequence, all those students for whom the major disciplinary cases were proven have broadly comparable penalties, and those penalties were set to allow the complainants to complete their studies before the disciplined students were given the opportunity to return (and there are a range of conditions imposed on that return). (University; Text 1.1)

This lack of acknowledgement for the tangible harm experienced by the women who filed the complaint continued in the second text from the university sample. The victims were not acknowledged except in one passage which described the university's responsibility to support both 'those who were affected by the group chat, and those who were part of it'. By neglecting to address the victims in any other capacity other than grouping them together with the perpetrators, this statement effectively places equal value on both the men who said the abusive comments and the women who were the subjects of those comments:

I say that now because, of course, we have a duty of care to all involved – supporting those who were affected by the group chat, and those who were part of it - as they are our students too. When any student is convicted of a disciplinary offence, that is not an end to our duty of care, in the same way in which the state has a duty of care to someone convicted and punished. (University; Text 1.2)

Further, the first two statements described the group chat conversations in ambiguous ways that do not acknowledge their misogynistic nature. The group chat conversations are referred to as 'the material', 'the content', and 'deeply offensive and threatening comments'. In one instance, the university stated that the group chat opposed 'everything that everyone holds dear in any society' — which serves as a platitude that once again erases the gendered violence displayed in the chat.

The penalties imposed combine direct punishment for the deeply offensive and threatening comments made during the chats ... (University; Text 1.1)

Those comments are against everything that everyone holds dear in any society. Dehumanising, humiliating, and revolting. (University; Text 1.2)

From the third statement onwards, the tone of the university's statements shifts. The evolution of the type of apologies expressed in each statement illustrates the eventual emergence of culpability and feminist-oriented discourses over time. The first apology narrowly apologised for the fact that the outcome of their processes upset people, the second broadened to acknowledge the emotional toll on the 'victims of the abuse', the third reiterated the impact on the victims, the fourth acknowledged the wider impact within the Warwick community. The last apology finally displayed a 'mortification' (Benoit, 1997) strategy and specifically acknowledged responsibility for the university's mistakes and direct impact in the rape chat case.

1. We are sorry that the decision as a result of our processes has upset so many members of our own community and beyond. (University; Text 1.1)
2. We are deeply sorry and understand the distress this has caused the victims of this abuse and the wider impact which we know has been felt by our students and our staff. (University; Text 1.3)
3. We, as the University leadership, are deeply sorry about the distress that has been caused, first and foremost to the victims of the events surrounding the group chat. (University; Text 1.4)
4. First and foremost, we want to apologise for any part we played in causing distress to members of our community. (University; Text 1.7)
5. We acknowledge that we made some mistakes and we apologise for this, including how we communicated with the victims. (University; Text 1.8)

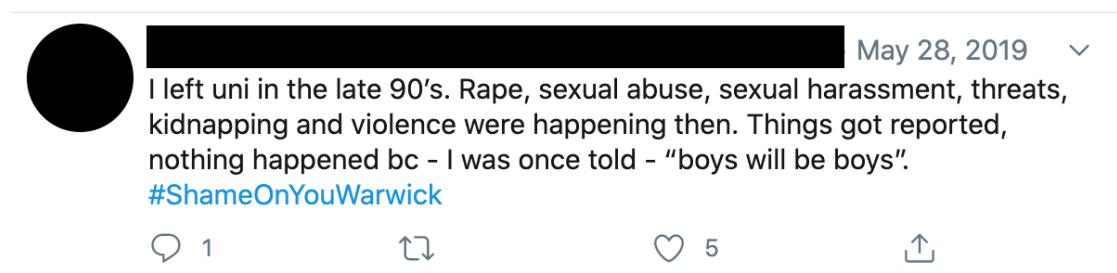
The eventual emergence of feminist discourse was also observed through the introduction of the concept of 'sexual misconduct' over time. The concept was first introduced as a reference to the Zellick Report, research conducted in the 90s to provide guidance to UK universities about disciplinary processes for sexual violence. While this reference does highlight the responsibilities of universities to handle cases of sexual violence, it does not directly acknowledge the challenges and realities of campus rape culture. The next time 'sexual misconduct' is referenced is in the sixth statement, when the university provided information about support resources and condones 'sexual misconduct or harassment of any kind'.

Three years ago, the University agreed a closer working relationship with the Coventry Rape and Sexual Abuse Centre (CRASAC) in the aftermath of the Zellick Report. This included having an Independent Sexual Violence Advisor on campus. (University; Text 1.4)

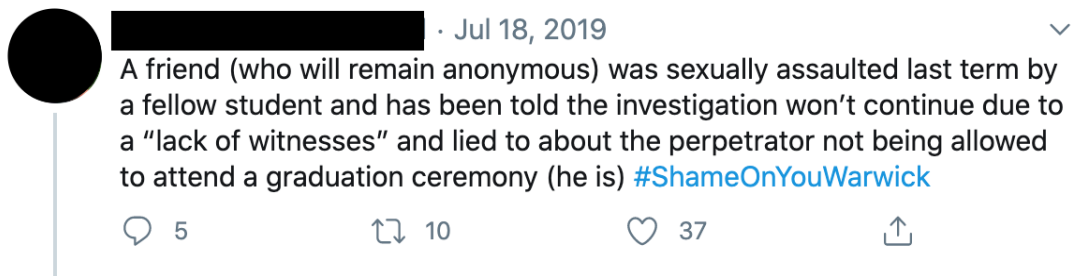
We continue to offer wellbeing services for all students and staff who require support on any issue related to the group chat case or sexual misconduct more generally. If you would like to raise an incident or seek support, please do not hesitate to contact these services. Sexual misconduct or harassment of any kind is completely unacceptable, and we are committed to ensuring the safety and wellbeing of the Warwick community. (University; Text 1.6)

Twitter Activism

Meanwhile, the hashtag posts overwhelmingly included explicit textual, discursive and societal references to feminism. The overall frame of reference for those posting with the hashtag demonstrated a feminist point of view, most evident through the consistent word choices related to gender and gendered inequality such as 'women', 'woman', 'men', 'misogyny', 'rape culture', 'toxic masculinity', 'victims' and 'sexual assault'. The sample also aligned with the forms of popular feminist discourse presented in the literature. Empathy and concern for the victims throughout the process and for female students at Warwick more generally demonstrated survivor-centred discourses. Hashtag participants participated in acts of 'disclosure and solidarity', contributing their own personal experiences with rape culture, sexual violence or university disciplinary processes to the wider discussion. There were also echoes of punitive discourses which called for the rape chat group members to be expelled from campus and a few instances of carceral feminist discourse that suggested 'surely there are criminal offences' and the men should be 'locked up':



(*Twitter activism, Text 2.95*)




(Twitter activism, Text 2.100)



(Twitter activism, Text 2.80)

While these examples largely displayed a focus on calling out the perpetrators, others presented the Warwick crisis as an opportunity for ‘meaningful action on rape culture’ and, in some cases, a demand for systemic change. The widespread outcry of the Warwick rape chat crisis, on social media and beyond, served as a starting point to uncover the wider problem among ‘universities in general’ where ‘UK’s university system needs some kind [of] formal independent complaints body vested with power to redress problems’. Put simply, it seemed that ‘This is not the only case that has been mishandled like this, just the most visible’:

 [Redacted] · Feb 4, 2019

This seems to be an 'end of problem' statement. This case has exposed a system that investigates victims and vindicates perpetrators. This is not the only case that has been mishandled like this, just the most visible. The problem remains and we demand change. [#ShameOnYouWarwick](#)


 **University of Warwick** @warwickuni · Feb 4, 2019

Message from VC Stuart Croft to the Warwick Community:

warwick.ac.uk/newsandevents/...

  6  18 


(Twitter Activism; Text 2.32)

 [Redacted] · Feb 5, 2019

This shows why our research revealed many young people worry about sexual harassment every day - it took the [#ShameOnYouWarwick](#) campaign to reach this decision. Every woman and girl should have the right to say [#MyBodyIsMine](#)

 bit.ly/2BbGHNm

(Twitter Activism; Text 2.33)

 [Redacted] · May 28, 2019

I'm not defending Warwick at all because they've completely abdicated all responsibility over the rape chat scandal. But I think these issues run deep throughout uni institutions and cannot be constrained to one uni's problem [#ShameOnYouWarwick](#) bbc.co.uk/news/amp/uk-48...

 2  3  12 

(Twitter Activism, Text 2.93)

Strategic Communications

Negotiated Meaning

Juxtaposing the university statements with [#ShameOnYouWarwick](#) revealed overlap and tension about the meaning of the crisis at hand. In fact, the Twitter activism repeatedly used quotations to reference direct statements made by the university and denote differences in meaning. Two key messages emerged as areas of equal concern and importance across both

the Warwick statements and Twitter activism: 'safety and wellbeing' and 'values and behaviours'. Firstly, Warwick's statements consistently reiterated the level of priority they attributed to the safety and wellbeing of their community. In other words, these concepts were presented only as a means for Warwick to underscore their 'paramount concern', 'determined' and 'committed' level of priority:

We want to reassure the university community that the paramount concern of everyone on the council is, and will remain, the safety and wellbeing of our students and staff.

(University; Text 1.3)

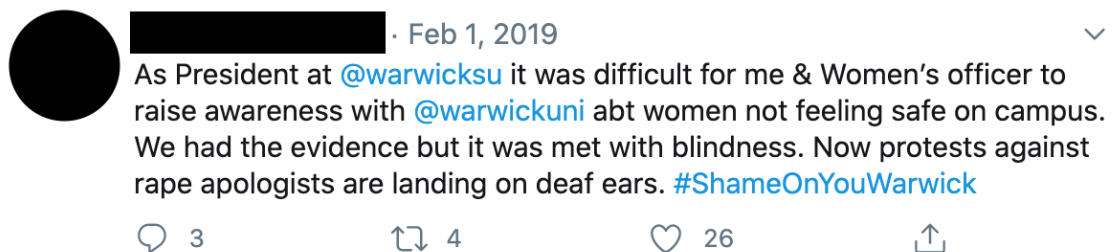
We are determined to provide our students with a campus where they are, and can feel, safe.

(University; Text 1.4)

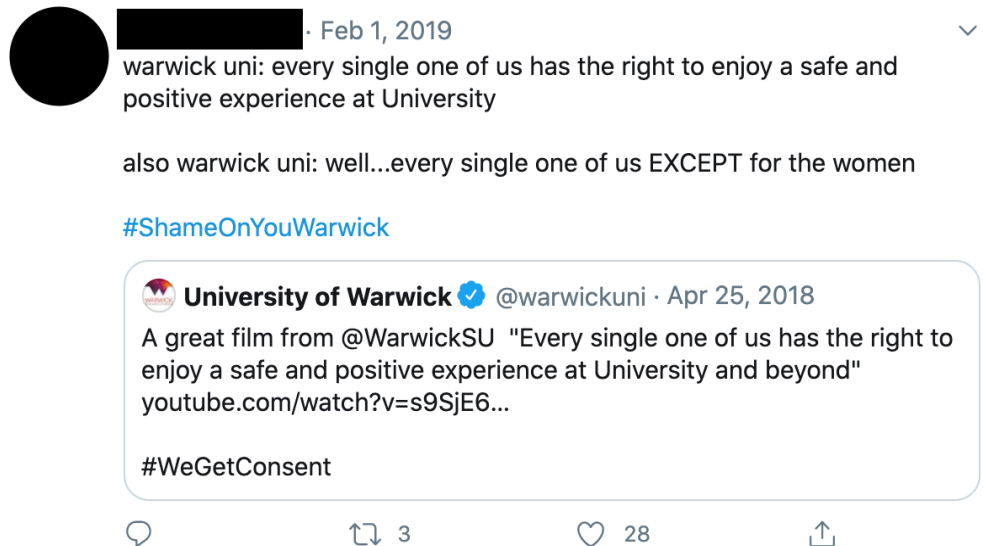
And we are committed to ensuring the safety and wellbeing of the Warwick community.

(University; Text 1.7)

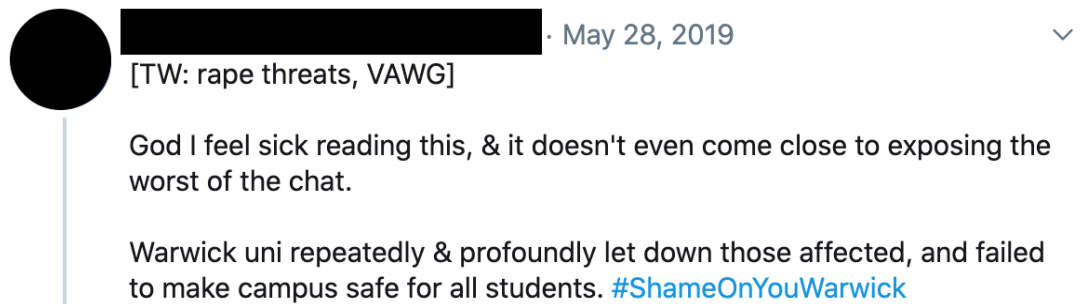
#ShameOnYouWarwick posts mirrored this focus on safety as a fundamental concern. However, the discourse revealed that the reality of rape culture was 'landing on deaf ears' and care was being taken for 'every single one of us EXCEPT for the women'. Overwhelmingly, there was a sense that Warwick's handling of the case neglected women's safety while the rape chat members' safety was privileged. This lack of alignment about what safety means shows a negotiation between the university and the public:



(Twitter activism, Text 2.6)



(Twitter activism, Text 2.19)



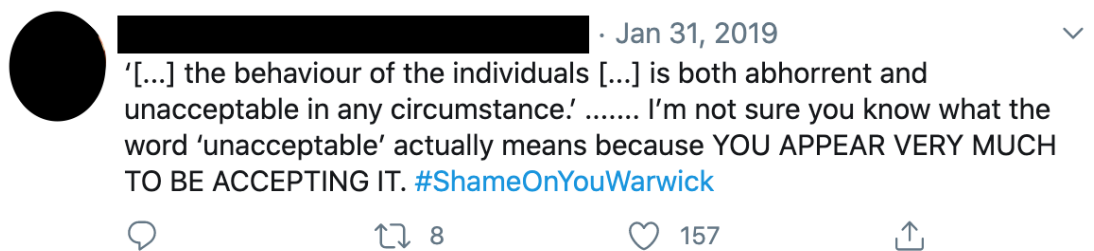
(Twitter activism, Text 2.83)

In the first two statements, Warwick focused on the behaviour of the rape chat group members as behaviour that 'goes against all of [their] values as a community'. Rather than specifically addressing what was problematic about the comments, Warwick described them in ambiguous and truistic ways such as stating, 'the offence was deeply offensive'. Beyond the neglect of feminist-oriented discourse, this initial focus on the group chat behaviour failed to acknowledge the university's behaviour. In contrast, the Twitter activism went further to expose the problematic behaviour of the university, as well as the broader systemic issues of gendered injustice and misogyny. The behaviour of the group chat members was taken for granted as problematic while the behaviour of the institution was the real issue worth discussing. In the third statement when the university's statements denoted a clear shift in strategy, the university announced the independent external review of their disciplinary

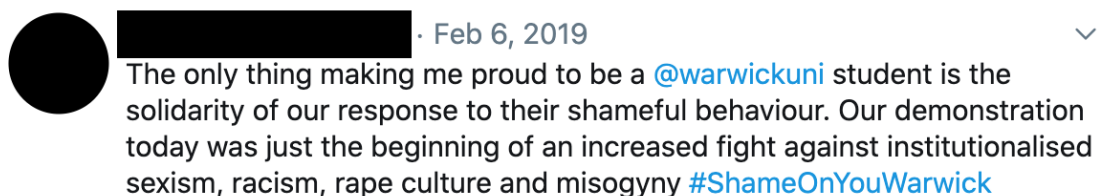
processes. The announcement of the review seemed to reflect a direct response to the Twitter activism.

The University remains clear that the behaviour of the individuals who have been found culpable as a result of the investigation, and in the subsequent student disciplinary processes, is both abhorrent and unacceptable in any circumstance. The behaviour shown by the individuals concerned goes against all of our values as a community. (University; Text 1.1)

What can we say further about what all this means though? Quite a lot. I have not responded in public so far because it is important to listen. And what I am hearing is this. Firstly, that the offence was deeply offensive. (University; Text 1.2)



(Twitter activism, 2.7)



(Twitter activism, 2.60)

We have agreed that in collaboration with the Senate, there will be a thorough, external and independent review of our student disciplinary and appeals processes. (University; Text 1.3)

Oppositional views of PR

Within the discourse and counter-discourse, strategic communications was constructed in oppositional ways. Questions about who benefits from PR activities echo the wider debate about the role of the PR industry and its responsibility to its publics. Warwick leveraged professional communication best practices to be symbolic of their commitment to the community and as a path forward to rebuild trust. 'What you think' was presented as a valuable insight that will be considered in Warwick's research and plans to determine 'the best direction forward' for their processes and the overall campus environment:


We fundamentally believe that collaboration between members of the community and leadership team, as well as the external perspective of Dr Persaud, will help us determine the best direction forward for the community and University as a whole (University; Text 1.4)

Alongside consideration of the many comments already shared by members of our community via University channels and social media, the independent review and the joint group are keen to listen to what you think. (University; Text 1.5)





We also continue to encourage open dialogue and discussion about how we can ensure Warwick is a supportive and inclusive environment. (University; Text, 1.6)

If you have any further questions regarding the documentary, please contact us at externalaffairs@warwick.ac.uk. (University; Text 1.7)


However, Twitter discourse compared the strategic communications efforts of the university to mere 'fluff' that was contrived, untrustworthy and inherently self-serving. For instance, the role of the press officer leading the internal investigation was presented as a clear conflict of interest. References to the neoliberal university were also made that characterized universities as places where 'profit is more important than safety' and 'public image' is paramount:

 [Redacted] · Jan 31, 2019

For @warwickuni to claim "The behaviour shown by the individuals concerned goes against all of our values as a community" and yet act this way, suggests they see their 'values' as PR and fluff & not the guiding principles they should be #ShameOnYouWarwick
bbc.co.uk/news/newsbeat-...

  2  23 

(Twitter Activism; Text 2.9)

 [Redacted] · Jan 31, 2019


No remorse? thetab.com/uk/warwick/201...

No sympathy. thetab.com/uk/warwick/201...



Actions must have consequences, even if Warwick has decided profit is more important than student safety. Shameful stuff. What sort of academic environment are you cultivating here???

[#ShameOnYouWarwick](#)





(Twitter Activism; Text 2.25)

 [Redacted] · Feb 4, 2019

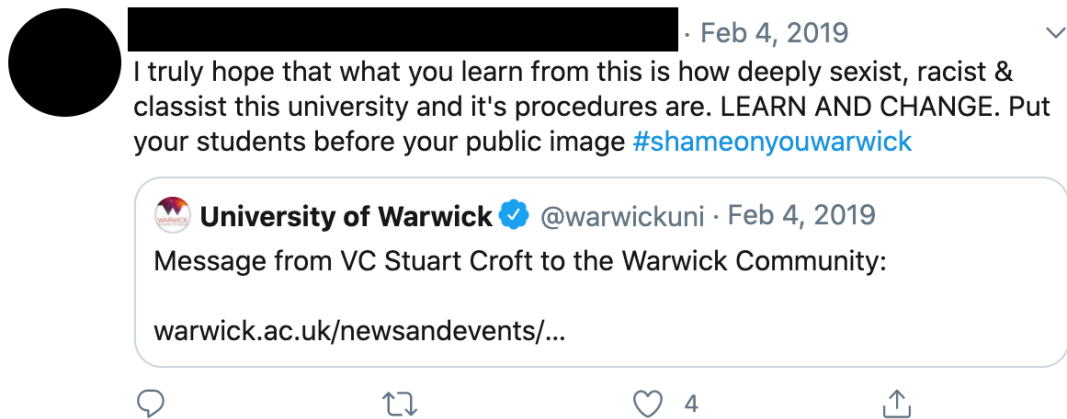
At this point it's chillingly clear that Warwick University is making decisions about the well-being of its students based on the kind of press its receiving...Our universities need to be better than this
[#ShameonyouWarwick](#)

 **The Boar**  @WarwickBoar · Feb 4, 2019

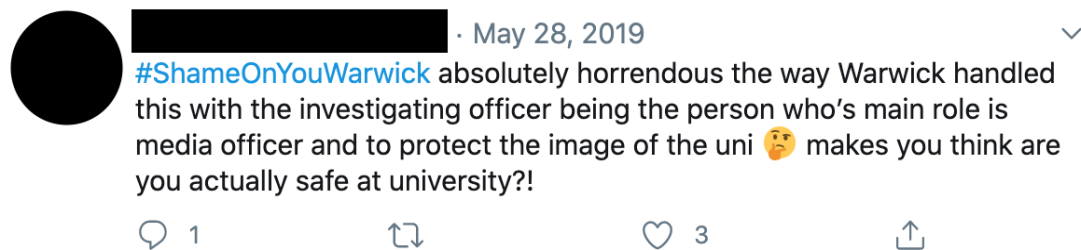
One complainant told The Boar about @warwickuni : "I haven't heard from the university once this week. The response of the university was never about the victims. This was about saving face."
theboar.org/2019/02/fail-i...

  1  11 

(Twitter Activism; Text 2.37)



(Twitter Activism; Text 2.39)



(Twitter activism, Text 2.81)

Institutional Power

University Statements

Drawing from 'issues management' and 'image restoration' strategies allowed Warwick's statements to evoke strategic culpability to suggest that they were partially in control and partially unable to intervene. In this sense, Warwick's discourse positioned the university to be at once in power and powerless. The use of passive verb choices throughout the sample revealed aims to practice 'evasion of responsibility' (Benoit, 1997) and distance the university leadership from accountability. For instance, by attributing the mass public outrage to 'the decision as a result of our processes', the university's disciplinary process was presented as an independent actor responsible for the current situation, instead of the university itself. In this apology, the university did not acknowledge its own role in causing harm to the community. Rather, the process was attributed the responsibility:

We are sorry that the decision as a result of our processes has upset many members of our own community and beyond. (University; Text 1.1)

Warwick's discourse also called on larger societal systems of authority, expertise and credentialism to demonstrate that the university was similar to others in the field and adhered to societal norms (Van Leeuwen, 2007). Warwick's second statement compared the university to the government several times to assert Warwick's legitimacy as a normative organisation that operates 'like all other universities and public bodies'. From this lens, the university leadership was constructed to be unable to intervene because, since they operate like everyone else, they 'do not have that authority':

The police were consulted at the very start of the process and they reviewed the material. (University; Text 1.1)

In court, facts and reactions are decided by a jury. We have a very similar process at Warwick (University; Text 1.2)

"In the same way that a government does not control the judiciary, university senior management does not control the disciplinary process. Many of you have said that it should; specifically, that we should ban the 11 individuals involved in the group chat from campus. I need to explain why that is not going to happen. First, I do not have that authority." (University; Text 1.2)

Like all other universities and public bodies, we allow appeals to be made against the outcomes of disciplinary process. (University; Text 1.2)

The Council have asked Dr Sharon Persaud, a solicitor with over 25 years of experience, to lead the independent review. (University; Text 1.4)

Over time, the focus of Warwick's statements turned away from the rape chat case itself, and towards an idealistic vision of the university in its future state. The university pointed to its external environment of an 'increasingly complex world' as a new challenge to overcome. As soon as Warwick announced the launch of an independent external review, the temporality

of the discourse changed to prioritise future outcomes instead of past events. The future realm of possibility and potential for the university manifested within the modality 'we will ensure / this will allow us / ensure we are putting / we will comment / we need to change / we can improve', verb selection 'adapt / build / learn / improve / develop / cultivate' and references to the Warwick community across time and space such as 'The Warwick community, past, present and future'. These types of textual strategies evoke a fresh start, a future for Warwick that is separate, renewed and distanced from its rape chat past.

We understand that our world is becoming increasingly complex, not least because of social media, and that we need to look at how our processes are able to adapt to this new context. (University; Text 1.4)

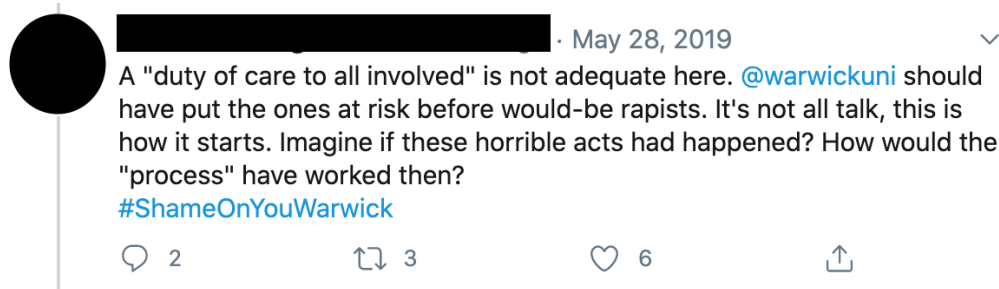
By the last statement within the university portion of the sample, Warwick expressed a desire to 'offer what we have learned to other universities' after completing the independent external review. This suggested that deciding to partake in an independent review of the rape chat case guaranteed Warwick to be a future expert with valuable knowledge to share on this topic. This future-focused statement can be understood as Warwick's aim to leverage the rape chat crisis as an opportunity to re-assert their position within the wider institutional field of higher education. Alternatively, this desire to share findings with other universities could be considered as an attempt to transform the field and improve institutional practices to better support public interests:

We want to go even further than Dr Persaud's recommendations, so that we can learn from these experiences, improve and develop our processes, and offer what we have learned to other universities. (University; Text 1.8)

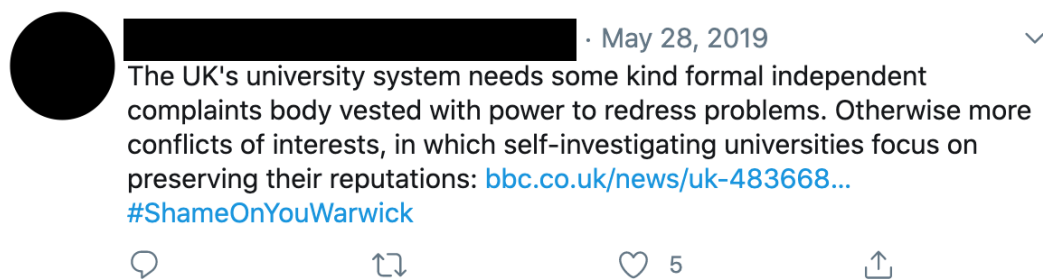
Twitter Activism

At the same time, the Twitter activism shows that Warwick's institutional power was worthy of being threatened. #ShameOnYouWarwick posts challenged Warwick's credibility, decisions and ability to proceed with objectivity in the aftermath of the rape chat case.

Through normative language such as 'should' and 'needs', the discourse called into question how matters such as rape chat case ought to be handled:





(Twitter activism; Text 2.70)







(Twitter activism; Text 2.76)



Further, the manifestations of punitive feminist discourse showed that the activists made tangible threats to Warwick. Those posting with the hashtag expressed a desire to couple their dissatisfaction with action. Activists expressed intent to take matters into their own hands and avoid Warwick in any way within their ability. In a sense, these calls to action mirrored the mindset of cancel culture which seeks to remove any benefit away from an organisation that has been publicly shamed. #ShameOnYouWarwick contributors committed to declining offers to study at the university, cancelling events, and encouraged others to do the same. One user went as far to express that they had 'revoked [their] Alumni status' altogether. This displays not only a desire to undermine supporting Warwick but goes further to remove any personal associations between this individual and the university.

  · May 28, 2019





Until Warwick Uni officially comes clean and openly admit they hadn't got a clue how to respond appropriately to this scandal, organisations booking conferences and meetings at the Campus should look elsewhere [#ShameOnYouWarwick](#)

   5 



(Twitter Activism; Text 2.85)

  · Feb 1, 2019





Offer day of first choice [@warwickuni](#) cancelled by son. Proud that he's chosen not to attend a university that supports rape culture and toxic masculinity. [#ShameOnYouWarwick](#) [#offthelist](#)

 15  148  1.1K 

(Twitter activism; Text 2.24)

  · May 28, 2019

I again wish to state that I have revoked my Alumni status with [@warwickuni](#) and [@warwickalumni](#) due to the unacceptable behaviour of Peter Dunn and the way the formal investigation took place into the rape chat scandal. [#ShameOnYouWarwick](#)

  1  4 

(Twitter activism; Text 2.84)

Interpretation

These findings demonstrate that Warwick and the digital activists were linked in a discursive negotiation. In some ways, the discourse was found to be oppositional and in other ways, it was found to be overlapping. This took place throughout the sample, but most notably at the height of the hashtag's popularity around the timing of the on-campus protest in February 2019. Above all, through the visibility and erasure of feminist perspectives, the Warwick rape chat case seems to reveal how institutional power can be threatened and reclaimed by digital feminist activism.

By avoiding addressing rape culture directly and inconsistently acknowledging survivors, University of Warwick's discourse worked to erase and distance the university from the

inherently gendered issues of the rape chat case. In the first few statements, Warwick's significant focus on process overshadowed the wrongdoing of the rape chat members. More importantly, the key messages of 'safety and wellbeing' and 'values and behaviours' allowed Warwick to construct a position that avoided specificity and directness toward rape culture and the role of the institution within it. While the counter-discourse mirrored the importance of these concepts, it also brought to the forefront a significant lack of alignment on the issues at hand. For Warwick, safety was constructed to be dependent upon the behaviour of students 'within the community'. For the Twitter activists, safety was intrinsically linked to the actions carried out by the university itself, not only its community. #ShameOnYouWarwick placed priority upon the university's behaviour as an institution responsible for ensuring the safety and wellbeing of victims throughout the disciplinary process and entire university experience.

Despite eventually acknowledging this responsibility by announcing an independent external review of the disciplinary process, Warwick's initial negligence continued to be scrutinized within the #ShameOnYouWarwick resistance. Without explicitly acknowledging or unpacking the responsibility of Warwick, as an institution, to actively combat rape culture on campus and treat victims with dignity and care, Warwick's 'commitment' to safety and wellbeing and appropriate values and behaviour was rendered an empty promise. Ultimately, #ShameOnYouWarwick revealed that Warwick itself exacerbated the harm of the rape chat case in the form of institutional betrayal.

This discursive struggle reveals a reckoning and negotiation of institutional power. For the university, drawing from industry norms of issues management and image repair discourse, the Warwick discourse overall served as institutional work that prioritized maintaining its legitimacy. That said, the last statement provided some evidence of an attempt towards institutional transformation by offering to share 'what [they] have learned to other universities'. #ShameOnYouWarwick, as an effort of popular feminism, advanced its own agenda by directly challenging Warwick's institutional power. By expressing dissonance between meanings as well the distrust of PR, the Twitter activism seemed to strengthen the movement's feminist agenda and weaken Warwick's statements. In effect, the

#ShameOnYouWarwick posts exposed the university's duty to the survivors, by using the same messages as the university but repurposing them with their own, feminist-oriented meanings.

That said, the results did not find #ShameOnYouWarwick to be a homogenous front working towards a common goal. The calls to action within the hashtag were diverse and uncoordinated, ranging from rejecting offers to attend the university, cancelling speaking engagements, all the way to calling for the rape chat members to be expelled or imprisoned. In some ways, these threats were made in the spirit of cancel culture and punitive discourses that individualised the forms of action. For instance, the significant focus on the harm victims experienced throughout the university disciplinary process places the burden of reporting on victims. However, in alignment with the ambivalence of feminist discourse, #ShameOnYouWarwick also revealed a sense that the rape chat crisis could become a watershed moment for dismantling rape culture within higher education in the UK. Ultimately, the different calls to action remain united under the shared belief that Warwick deserved to be shamed. This movement identified the shame and trauma experienced by the victims of the rape chat case and forcefully redirected it. By associating the university with shame through the hashtag, #ShameOnYouWarwick subjected Warwick to distress and discomfort similar to that felt by the victims of the case.

CONCLUSION

This is not the only case that has been mishandled like this, just the most visible. The problem remains and we demand change.

-Excerpt from a #ShameOnYouWarwick Tweet

This research undertook an in-depth case study examination of the recent 'rape chat scandal' at the University of Warwick. This paper contributes to a gap within emergent feminist scholarship on digital feminist activism and campus rape culture by adopting a strategic communications standpoint. By studying both university statements and Tweets from the trending hashtag #ShameOnYouWarwick, this CDA was interested in the emergence of power dynamics and their relevance to the current moment of popular feminist discourse.

The results showed that Warwick's discourse revealed a sense of threatened institutional power. Warwick drew from a variety of professional industry strategies to assert their legitimacy and worked to distance the university from feminist discourse. Despite offering support resources for sexual misconduct and eventually apologising for their 'failings', Warwick's statements at the height of the crisis largely served as forms of institutional maintenance that failed to adequately represent the victims and the broader Warwick community. Meanwhile, #ShameOnYouWarwick used feminist discourse, negotiations of meaning, and an overall distrust in PR, to challenge the university's institutional power and redirect it. The results aligned with the ambivalent nature of popular feminist discourse by finding that the #ShameOnYouWarwick digital activism, while clearly advancing a feminist agenda, included both individualised and emancipatory discourse.

While this case study highlights one specific university 'rape scandal', these findings support the literature which argues the widespread and deep-rooted challenges universities face in communicating about rape culture. Future research on this topic could expand upon this study's weaknesses by conducting a wider-scale, mixed-methods study of UK universities that have faced public scrutiny for their disciplinary processes for sexual violence. This could

include examinations of internal organisational communications materials and first-person experiences. Findings from this kind of study could help to inform functional standards and practices within the public relations profession. Further, the scope of future research could be broadened to consider intersectional implications of campus rape culture, including those related race and sexual orientation.

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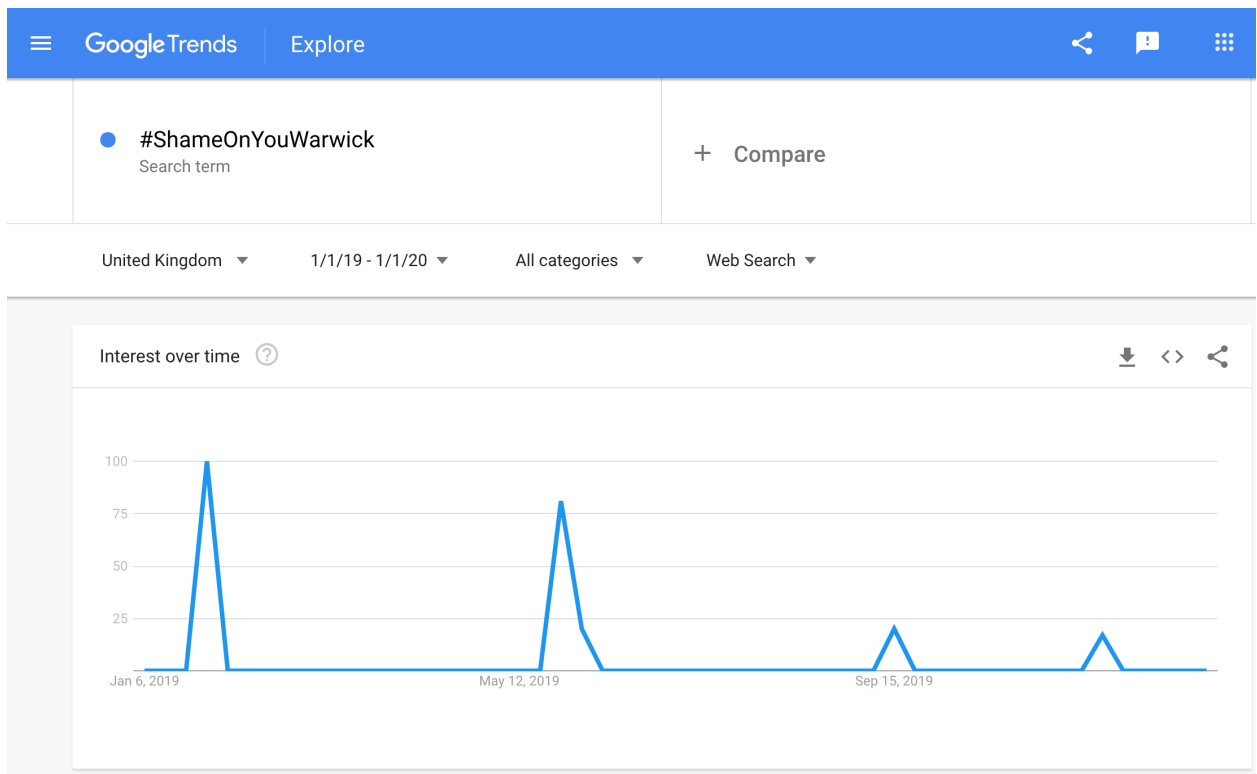
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Appendix A

Google Trends frequency of #ShameOnYouWarwick hashtag over time.



Note: Google Trends. (2020). [#ShameOnYouWarwick interest over time]. Retrieved from <https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?date=2019-01-01%202020-01-01&geo=GB&q=%23ShameOnYouWarwick>

Appendix B
Analytical Framework

#ShameOnYouWarwick Tweets	
Dimension	Framework
Textual	<p>The words that are used to describe Warwick (management, employees, students, broader community), the investigation, the victims, the rape chat members (Fairclough, 1992; 2010)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Grammar/structure/cohesion/strategies <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Modality ○ Force ○ Style ○ Hedging ○ Nominalisation ○ Idioms/metaphors ● Verbs and attribution of responsibility <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Active or passive ● Vocabulary and word choice <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Gendered language ○ Emotional language ○ Neoliberal / market-based vocabulary
Discursive	<p>Genre, intertextuality and interdiscursivity (Fairclough, 1992; 2010)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Argumentation: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ What is meant by ‘Shame’ in #ShameOnWarwick, and what purpose does it serve? ● Tone: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Positive/supportive, negative/rejecting or neutral ● Feminist discourses: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Punitive/carceral feminism (Phillips & Chagnon, 2020) ○ Survivor-centred (Musselman et al., 2020)

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Institutional betrayal (Smith & Freyd, 2013; Smith & Freyd, 2014) ○ Personal experience disclosure and solidarity (Keller et al., 2018) ● Manifest intertextuality: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Quotes from news articles ○ Quotes from Warwick statements ○ References to the rape chat content ● Temporality: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Past/Future of feminism
Societal	<p>The overarching political, economic and socio-cultural context (Fairclough, 1992; 2010)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Higher education in the UK <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Campus Rape Culture (Sill et al., 2015) and UK lad culture (Jeffries, 2019) ○ University disciplinary processes ● Societal gendered injustice <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Online abuse and misogyny ○ Cancel/callout culture (Munro, 2013; Bromwich, 2018; Finley & Johnson, 2019)
Warwick's Institutional Discourse	
Dimension	Framework
Textual	<p>The words used to describe the investigation, Warwick (management, employees, students, broader community), the victims, the rape chat members (Fairclough, 1992; 2010).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Grammar/structure/cohesion/strategies <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Modality ○ Force ○ Style

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Hedging ○ Nominalisation ○ Idioms/metaphors ● Verbs and attribution of responsibility <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Active or passive ● Vocabulary and word choice <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Gendered language ○ Emotional language ○ Neoliberal / market-based vocabulary
Discursive	<p>Genre, intertextuality and interdiscursivity (Fairclough, 1992; 2010)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● The professional context of PR as interdiscursive (Bathia, 2010) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ References to professional genres, practices and culture ● The professional genre of ‘issues management campaigns’ as sites of “tensions between organisational legitimacy and social responsibility” (Kuhn, 1997, p. 207) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Types of argumentation: Fear appeals, ambiguous suggestions, statistical support, endorsement of opinion leaders, false dilemma arguments, requesting public involvement in decision making ● Image restoration discourse as a form of crisis communication (Benoit, 1997) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Types of image restoration strategies: denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing offensiveness of event, corrective action, mortification ● Feminist discourses <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ “Survivor-centred discourse” (Musselman et al., 2020) ○ Punitive/carceral feminism (Phillips & Chagnon, 2020)
Societal	<p>Political, economic and socio-cultural context and ‘forms of knowledge.’ (Fairclough, 1992; 2010)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Higher education in the UK <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Campus Rape Culture (Sill et al., 2015) / UK lad culture

	<p>(Jeffries, 2019)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">○ University disciplinary processes● Societal gendered injustice<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Online abuse and misogyny○ Cancel/callout culture (Bromwich, 2018; Finley & Johnson, 2019)
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Appendix C

Sampled Texts

- #ShameOnYouWarwick. (2019). [Twitter hashtag]. Retrieved from https://twitter.com/hashtag/ShameOnYouWarwick?src=hashtag_click
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