Tweeting Disgust: A Reflexive Thematic Analysis of the Language of Disgust used in Response to the Belfast Rape Trial

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Abstract This study is an exploration into the political potential (or lack thereof) of the vocabulary of disgust that was expressed in Tweets in response to the controversial Belfast rape trial in 2018. Although research has largely examined the positive role that emotion can play in feminist activism, literature exists which suggests that this is not the case for all emotional responses to injustice (Nussbaum 2004; Sullivan 2022). The political potential of the vocabulary of disgust was interrogated using Braun and Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis within a case study research design. The generation of themes was deeply influenced by the work of political philosopher Chantal Mouffe (2013) on agonism, the political and counter-hegemonic struggles. This work adds to the field of study surrounding the narratives that we construct around rape, as it uses theories of rape and political emotion to interrogate what is really being said when the vocabulary of disgust is chosen when confronted with rape. Ultimately, this article is one that focuses on the importance of reflexivity in how we respond to disclosures of rape, and how this may, or may not, challenge the structural underpinnings that lead to rape and sexual violence.

Key Words: Belfast rape trial, Twitter, disgust, rape narratives, feminist online activism

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Introduction

This paper investigates whether the vocabulary of disgust used in tweets relating to the 2018 Belfast rape trial facilitated political engagement with the issue of rape in Irish society, or whether said language was instead mobilised to frame the case as an isolated event, therefore effectively withdrawing from political critique.

This paper addresses the complexity of articulated moral disgust, specifically in the context of online reactions to a high-profile and controversial rape trial. Conflicting opinions coexist about the political use of disgust when confronted with injustice (see Nussbaum 2004; Sullivan 2022; McGinn 2011; Pantti 2016). Disgust vocabulary is commonly articulated in response to cases of rape, however disgust and sexual violence have a complicated history. Nussbaum (2004) has noted that a link between misogyny and expressed disgust exists, therefore describing such language as 'a slippery and double-edged way of (apparently) expressing feminist sentiments' (p.128). This research interrogates how the same 'slippery' vocabulary of disgust behaves on Twitter[1] within the context of the Belfast rape trial.

The Belfast Rape Trial

The Belfast rape trial took place over a nine-week period in Belfast, Northern Ireland, from January to March of 2018. The case involved the plaintiff, a woman of 19 years old at the time of the incident, and four men, two of whom were professional rugby players for the Ulster and the Republic of Ireland teams. Of the four men, two were accused of rape, with one additional charge of sexual assault for one of the two defendants; one of the three was charged with exposure and the fourth man was accused of perverting the course of justice (Comyn 2018). All men pleaded not guilty to the charges, and on the 28th of March 2018, the jury of the Belfast Crown Court acquitted the men of all charges that had been brought against them (McKay 2018).

The verdict resulted in an outcry from those who saw it as a gross injustice for the plaintiff, with rallies and feminist protests being organised in major cities across Ireland. In addition to the verdict, WhatsApp messages the accused had sent to each other following the incident were a cause of indignation and condemnation, with over 69,000 people signing a Change.org petition calling for a thorough review of the accepted behaviour of the Irish rugby team after the worrying conduct that was highlighted during the trial (Whyte 2018).
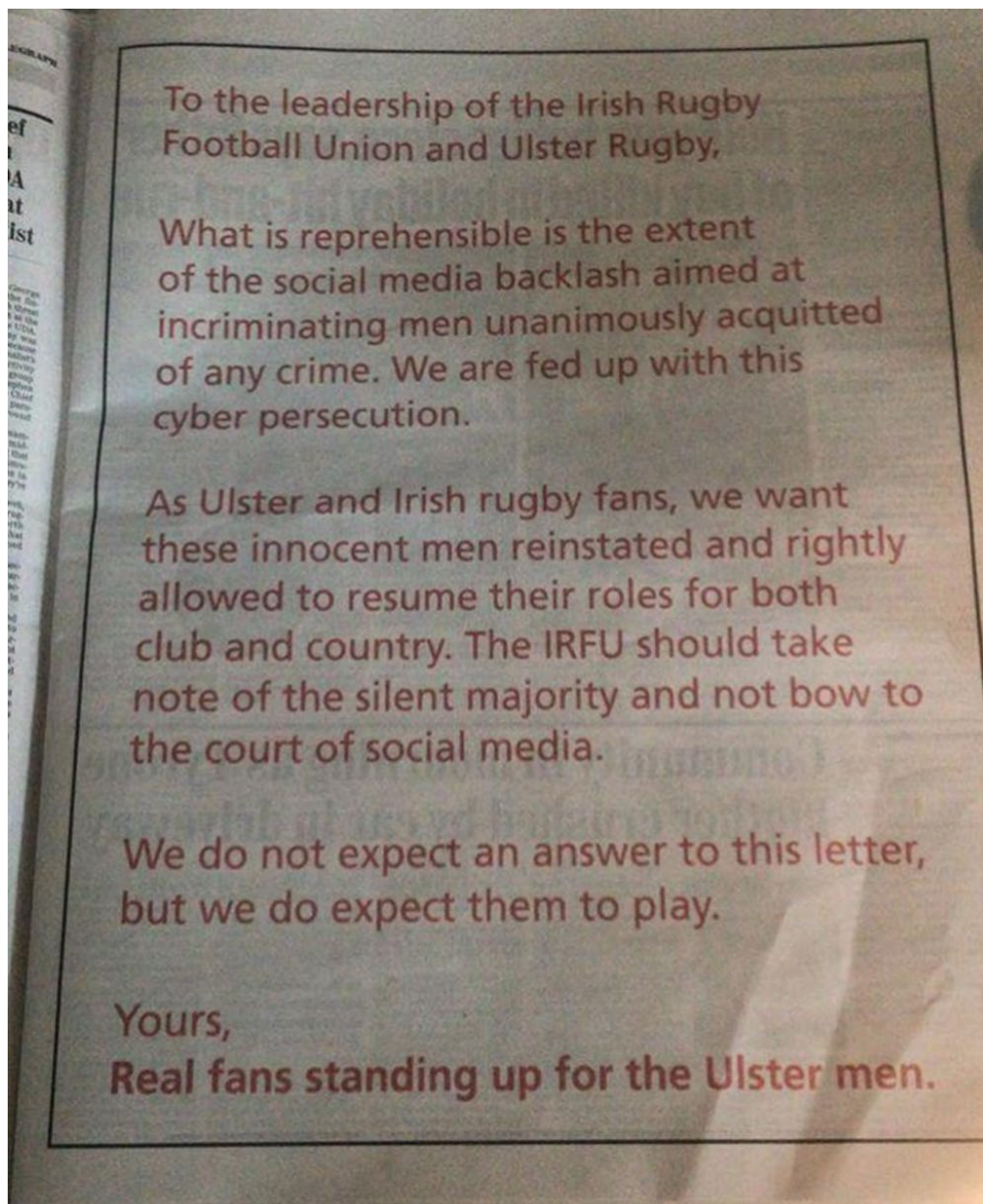
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[1] The research and writing of this paper were carried out before Twitter became rebranded as X (23rd July 2023).

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However, the case also saw notable support for the men accused, especially after the acquittal, encapsulated by a full-page advertisement that was placed in the Belfast Telegraph. This advert was funded by over 100 Ulster rugby supporters, urging the Irish Rugby Football Union (IRFU) and Ulster Rugby to reinstate the players (Doherty 2018; see Figure 1). In light of these conflicting opinions regarding who were the true victims of the trial, it is not difficult to conceive why the media reported that this was a case that 'divided Ireland', igniting debates relating to sexual violence on both sides of the Irish border (McKay 2018).

Figure 1 – Advertisement funded by supporters of the accused.

To the leadership of the Irish Rugby Football Union and Ulster Rugby,

What is reprehensible is the extent of the social media backlash aimed at incriminating men unanimously acquitted of any crime. We are fed up with this cyber persecution.

As Ulster and Irish rugby fans, we want these innocent men reinstated and rightly allowed to resume their roles for both club and country. The IRFU should take note of the silent majority and not bow to the court of social media.

We do not expect an answer to this letter, but we do expect them to play.

Yours,
Real fans standing up for the Ulster men.

(Belfast Telegraph 11th April 2018, p.9)

Following the announcement of the verdict, the hashtag #IBelieveHer trended on Twitter in support of the plaintiff (The University Times 2018). This hashtag became Northern Ireland's answer to the #MeToo movement. In the days following the verdict #IBelieveHer was used to show support for the plaintiff, in contrast to #IBelieveThem and #IBelieveTheJury, which were used, amongst others, to show support for the acquitted (Whyte 2018). The Belfast rape trial resulted in the publication of the Gillen Review in 2019, which contained 253 recommendations to ensure that complainants in cases of serious sexual crimes receive fair treatment by the courts. The report placed a large emphasis on the work that needs to be done in removing rape myths, a concept which will be expanded upon further on in the paper, from rape trial proceedings (Gillen 2019).

Literature review

Rape and its Narratives in Feminist Research

Feminist research and activism began focusing on sexual violence, including rape, towards the end of the twentieth century. This study focuses on discussions within feminist literature regarding the narratives that surround rape, online feminist activism and research which focuses on the use of affective-discursive language to explain and understand rape. While this paper will concentrate on rape, many studies included in the literature review relate to the continuum of sexual violence, which includes rape but also sexual assault, harassment and threat of violence (Kelly 1988).

Anderson and Doherty's (2008) *Accounting for Rape: Psychology, Feminism and Discourse Analysis in the Study of Sexual Violence* employs a feminist psychological perspective to analyse the discourses that are constructed around rape. Specifically, the authors are interested in examining how rape narratives are dominated by the idea that victim-survivors of rape should be held to account for their 'role' in the rape. Importantly for this research, Anderson and Doherty (2008) maintain that narratives surrounding sexual violence and victimhood are 'social creations', and that these creations are reliant upon the meaning making that happens through the discourses that emerge in the aftermath of alleged rape (p.5).

Building upon the emphasis of rape narratives as 'social creations', Gavey's (2019) *Just Sex? The Cultural Scaffolding of Rape* employs a social constructionist lens and the theories of post-structuralism to inform her feminist discussion of what she terms 'the cultural scaffolding of rape' (p.3). This 'cultural scaffolding' refers to the socio-cultural context within which rape is perpetrated and then is understood by society. What is especially noteworthy is Gavey's (2019) examination of feminist narratives that have developed in anti-rape activism and literature. Gavey (2019) rightly argues that, although feminist researchers and activists have made great

strides in challenging historical understandings of rape, how feminists have constructed discourses around rape and victimhood must not go unexamined, as these counter narratives may also result in unwanted negative repercussions for victim-survivors. For example, the dissemination of understandings of men as sex-crazed and women as passive victims within the context of a rape could ultimately result in the reproduction of gender relations that facilitate rape in the first place (p.3). For Gavey (2019), reflexivity is essential in both feminist literature and activism in order to avert potential unwanted harms, an understanding which was extremely helpful while carrying out this study.

Online Activism and Its Conflicts

The influence of the online sphere has grown, meaning that the internet, and especially social media, has become an arena in which rape narratives are constructed. However, it is also a space where the substantive nature of such activism is contested. Fileborn and Loney-Howes' (2019) *#MeToo and the Politics of Social Change* focuses on recent online meaning making surrounding sexual harassment and violence in the wake of #MeToo. A noteworthy chapter by Mendes and Ringrose (2019) argues that Twitter campaigns such as #MeToo can be transformative in nature despite their limitations, by making rape culture visible, allowing for awareness raising and education on issues such as consent, showing solidarity with the victim-survivor and, importantly, locating sexual violence as a political issue. The potential of online feminist activism is also stressed by Rentschler (2014), who argues that feminist online 'response-ability' enables a challenging of rape culture, of holding individuals accountable for their behaviour and also create networks of support for those who have experienced sexual violence (p.64).

Empirical research has been published to support the assertion that Twitter campaigns can have a substantive impact, such as the longitudinal study by Kaufman et al. (2021). By examining Google search trends after #MeToo, the authors underline that there was a sustained increase in users searching for information regarding sexual assault and harassment in response to the movement. They argue that this is evidence of the potential impact that online Twitter activism can have for educating and awareness-raising around the issues of sexual violence (Kaufman et al. 2021). The findings of this study were supported by others, such as the work of Szekeres et al. (2020), which noted a link between the visibility of the #MeToo movement and a drop in self-reported dismissal of reports of sexual assault exhibited by both men and women (Szekeres et al. 2020).In contrast, there exists literature that argues online activism lacks substantive political impact in the off-line world. For example, Bouvier and Machin (2021) argue that the nature of Twitter's cancel culture negates the possibility for a nuanced discussion of complex social justice issues. Instead, the authors argue, it creates 'binary polarities between good and evil', which ultimately cannot address complex issues such as racism in its structural entirety, and instead individualises (p.308). In addition, Blair (2021) argues how the Instagram movement "Blackout Tuesday" can be seen as an example of

performative utterances against online racism, or in other words was an empty cyber gesture instead of being political (Blair 2021).

Although these studies examine anti-racism online activism, the papers by Bouvier and Machin (2021) and Blair (2021) are helpful for this research, as they underline issues which affect not only online anti-racism activism, but also can be applied to interrogate the work of online anti-rape activism. As already noted, reflexivity in how rape and sexual violence are discursively framed is essential to avoid unintended harms, and to support gendered understandings that underpin rape-supportive cultures (Gavey 2019). The assertion of Bouvier and Machin (2021) that online discourse in the face of injustice tends to rely on the oversimplification of complex issues into matters of good versus evil can also be applied to online narratives of rape and sexual assault.

Disgust and Its Conflicts

Online activism is emotive in nature. Literature studying emotions includes scientific explorations into their cognitive functions, but also their cultural and social functions. An example of the latter is Ahmed's The Cultural Politics of Emotion (2004). Here, Ahmed (2004) insists that emotions cannot be disconnected from the social, and that emotions play an increasing role in our politics and culture. The socially and culturally contingent nature of emotions that Ahmed (2004) puts forward is especially relevant to consider in the context of the Belfast rape trial. The emotion at the centre of this paper is moral disgust. The study of disgust has been undertaken by feminist scholars looking to investigate the gendered elements of this powerful feeling (see Kristeva 1982; Kanai and Coffey 2023). It has been noted that the language of disgust is commonly evoked in response to disclosures of sexual assault and rape (Niemi 2018), as a result of what Ahmed (2004) refers to as the 'stickiness' of disgust (p.89). The language of disgust seems to 'stick' to rape discourses, and Ahmed (2004) explains this is a result of widespread repetition that transforms individual word choices into unconscious linguistic signs (p.91).

The literature is divided as to whether moral disgust can be helpful in the face of injustice, or whether it creates an invisibility of larger structural issues and the individual's role within them. Advocates of moral disgust, such as McGinn (2011), argue that it is a reaction generated through exposure to injustice and therefore works to rectify it, or that it works as a civilizing force. Munch-Jurišić (2014) agrees that disgust can be a helpful response to injustice, however with the assertion that what is understood as disgusting is 'always culturally and socially conditioned' (p.280).

In contrast to the above work (McGinn 2011; Munch-Jurišić 2014), literature exists which argues against the beneficial nature of disgust. A key contributor to this body of work is Nussbaum's (2004) *Hiding from Humanity: Disgust, Shame, and the Law.* Of notable interest

is the distinction Nussbaum (2004) draws between reactions of disgust and anger to a violation, arguing that while anger can mobilise, disgust nullifies. Nussbaum's (2004) work looks to unearth why the reaction of disgust is elicited instead of others. Notable throughout the text is the assertion that what is deemed disgusting is culturally contingent and unfixed, as Nussbaum (2004) explicitly warns against the use of disgust to justify laws and legal decisions, citing the criminalisation of homosexuality as an example of how this can be deeply harmful and problematic.

Whilst Nussbaum (2004) focuses on the limitations of disgust in the legal sphere, Sullivan's (2022) paper argues the limits of reactions of disgust in the #MeToo movement. Sullivan (2022) employs a discourse analysis to evaluate what function the language of disgust plays in reactions to accusations of systemic sexual harassment and sexual assault. The author argues that the language of disgust is a linguistic tool that works to avoid confronting the 'cultural scaffolding of rape' (Gavey 2019), refocusing the disgust solely at the accused individual and need for longer prison sentences in the cases of rape and sexual assault. In doing so, Sullivan (2022) argues that the language of disgust removes the reflexivity of the observer, making it difficult to understand the systemic issues which underpin sexual violence against women. Reflexivity is well captured in Ahmed's (2017) *Living A Feminist Life*, where it is defined as the "living" of feminist theories through constant processes of self-reflection and critical engagement with the environment one lives in and the cultural norms that shape it.

Conflict, Politics, Emotions and Chantal Mouffe

The arguments and ideas present in the work of political theorist Chantal Mouffe were helpful in navigating the potential political power, or lack thereof, of the language of disgust elicited in response to the Belfast rape trial. Her text, *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically* (2013), provided insightful arguments regarding how political hegemony comes to be established within a democratic context, and more interesting still, how this hegemony can be challenged. For example, Mouffe (2013) argues that 'What is at a given moment accepted as the "natural" order, jointly with the common sense that accompanies it, is the result of sedimented hegemonic practices. It is never the manifestation of a deeper objectivity that is exterior to the forces that brought it into being.' (p.2) This understanding of hegemony is relevant to this research in its attempt to assess political and social justice movements that seek to challenge the 'common sense' order of society and institutions, as it underlines that the only certainty of hegemony is that it is contingent and can be replaced.

Equally influential were her conceptualisations of what constitutes politics and how different approaches to political critique can impact counter-hegemonic political movements. Specifically, Mouffe (2013) highlights two conflicting approaches to politics which advocate either 'engagement with' or 'withdrawal from' the systems which organise society. 'Engagement with' is understood as the political articulation of challenges to the existing power

Family-Friendly Policies and Remote Work: Revisiting the Work-Care Conflict in a Post-Covid Labour Market

structures which cement current hegemonic institutions and social norms, and in doing so creating a new, counter-hegemony (Mouffe 2013, p.71). In contrast to this, while there is no escaping 'the political' (the ineradicable antagonism that structures relations of consensus and dissensus), withdrawing from concrete political struggle risks leaving the prevailing hegemony intact (Mouffe 2013). The concepts of 'engagement with' and 'withdrawal from' provide a valuable and novel framework with which to approach the research, as Mouffe (2013) argued that although choosing to abstain, reject or withdraw from a political issue may be understood as a political act, choosing to engage with the problematic structures that exist may be more conducive to substantive political change.

Mouffe's examination of politics has also brought her to look at the role that emotions play in politics, arguing that certain affects, such as anger or hope, can act as the catalyst to mobilise a challenge to a hegemonic status quo (2005). It is understandable that, for individuals who are invested in a political issue, emotions are often a key aspect of shaping political subjectivity and mobilisation. Mouffe (2013) underlines that although this emotional investment can be a positive force in terms of mobilisation against a perceived issue, it can also be destabilising for these individuals, who may now perceive their own identity at stake in the political field. Although Mouffe's work does not explicitly look at the role of moral disgust in the political arena, it can be argued that she does so implicitly within the broader framework of emotions she discusses, particularly when exploring how political identities are constructed against an "other" or an antagonist (Mouffe 2005). The recognition of the role that negative emotions do play in the political arena was helpful in examining to what extent could the language of disgust be involved in challenging entrenched patriarchal norms concerning sexual violence.

Methodology

The data collected from the Belfast rape trial was in the form of tweets. The data was collected manually in April 2023, using Twitter's advanced search tool. The search parameters chosen were that tweets had to include one or more of the following hashtags: #IBelieveHer, #IBelieveHim, #Belfasttrial and #PaddyJackson. In addition, the following key words were included in the search: "disgust or disgusting or sick or sickening or gross". This allowed to search for tweets that included the vocabulary of disgust and its related metaphors, such as 'it makes me sick', that were expressed in relation to the case. Finally, temporal boundaries were established in the search for tweets that met the above criteria, which ranged from tweets posted from 01/03/2018 to 31/05/2018. These dates were chosen as the climax of tension regarding this case was evident after the return of the verdict on the 28th of March 2018. Of the 88 tweets collected, 67 of these were used in the analysis as the themes/sub-themes emerged. Indicative tweets that reflect these have been included in the paper, with the usernames anonymised to protect confidentiality. Twitter was chosen as it allows access to a vast amount of data that is

Family-Friendly Policies and Remote Work: Revisiting the Work-Care Conflict in a Post-Covid Labour Market

accessible at no cost and is simple to access using Twitter's application programming interfaces (APIs) (Hino and Fahy 2019), and has been used effectively in similar studies examining public opinion elicited in response to sexual violence in Ireland (see Gannon 2022).

The content of the tweets selected was analysed using thematic analysis (TA), specifically reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006), as it focuses on interpretation while acknowledging the researcher's positionality in relation to the research. Additionally, reflexive TA acknowledges the influence these aspects have on the researcher who is tasked with generating themes from the chosen data. For this study, a deductive approach was chosen, as before analysing the data, the arguments and ideas present in the work of political philosopher Chantal Mouffe (2013) influenced understandings of the contingency of hegemony and politics.

The biggest limitation of this research paper is using Twitter as a data source, as there is little control over what information may be removed from the website (McCormick et al. 2017). Nonetheless, enough content was available to carry out the study. Additionally, due to the time constraints and word limit of this paper, socio-demographic factors, such as age, or geographic location, were not included in the analysis of the tweets, however this would offer interesting insights and could be the focus of a future research paper.

Findings and Analysis

Using the Language of Disgust to 'Withdraw From'

25 tweets were interpreted as using the language of disgust to criticise elements of the case, but ultimately withdrew from seeing rape as a systemic and social issue, as it frames the accused as abnormal behaviour in a normal society, instead of reflecting that they may in fact be normal behaviour in an abnormal society. Although these tweets were understood as withdrawing from political engagement, this was not done in a uniform way. Four subthemes were generated within the larger 'withdrawal from' theme: personal dialogues of disgust; individuals as disgusting; lad culture as disgusting; and scandalised disgust.

Personal Dialogues of Disgust

Some tweets that commented upon the Belfast rape trial used the language of disgust to exhibit what Pitkin (cited in Mouffe 1993) has called the 'personal dialogue' of moral discourse. This 'personal dialogue' presents its critique through emphasising personal feelings of disgust towards the case. Some tweeters spoke of their feeling 'physically sick' (Figure 2)

Family-Friendly Policies and Remote Work: Revisiting the Work-Care Conflict in a Post-Covid Labour Market

and 'sick to the core' (Figure 3) in response to the content of the accused's WhatsApp messages that were made public, the alleged rape and the online support for the verdict.

*Figure 2*   *Figure 3*

In these tweets, it seems that the vocabulary of disgust functions primarily to highlight the morals of the tweeter, and doing so without any further reflection or critique of what societal and institutional forces are at play in everyday life which result in rape. In other words, these tweeters seem to use disgust as a linguistic vehicle with which to convey their 'personal dialogue' in response to the trial. By not including references to the 'cultural scaffolding of rape' (Gavey 2019) the trial unearthed, these tweets are deemed as failing to engage disgust in a political way. This supports what Pitkin has argued, stating that 'political discourse concerns a public, a community, and takes place among the members generally' (cited in Mouffe 1993, p.50). These tweets do not involve this public or community, instead it individualises, and by doing so disgust vocabulary replaces political engagement with a statement of personal moral disgust against behaviour they wish to distance themselves from.

Individuals as Disgusting

Tweeting disgust can place the accused in the crosshairs of a judgement that functions as a boundary marker separating 'them' from 'us'. One tweet stated '#IBelieveHer because even if you weren't proven to be a criminal you've proven yourself to be an animal. You disgust me and the majority of the people of Ireland' (Figure 4).

Figure 4
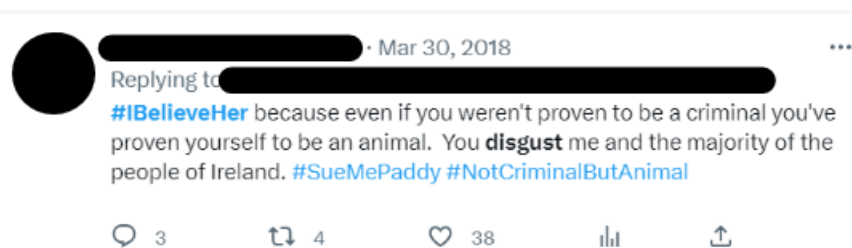
The decision to equate the accused with an animal is a notable choice. Although it allows for an apparent criticism of the behaviour as unacceptable, it also places the accused outside the confines of society within which they learned the acceptability of certain behaviours. Additionally, some tweets described the accused as 'scum' (Figure 5) and 'disgusting pigs' (Figure 6) after reading the WhatsApp messages in which the accused discussed sexual acts that occurred in a derogatory manner.
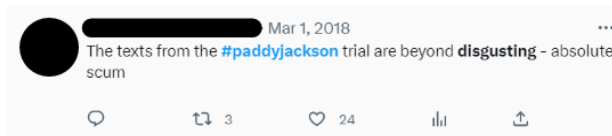
Figure 5   *Figure 6*

The fact that "disgusting" behaviour is framed as being performed by scum and animals acts to place the accused and their behaviour outside of what is framed as the normal, well-functioning society.

The "animalistic character" of the accused was often articulated by using various metaphors commonly associated with expressions of disgust. This is interesting to note, as it has been argued that metaphors in conversations regarding rape can have the effect of displacing accountability, effectively deflecting it away from the accused (Gavey 2019, p.107). Gavey (2019) argues that 'although the monster/fiend can be constructed at fault for his actions, this identity construct does not position him as responsible' (p.118, emphasis added), resulting in the reflection of blame back to the victim-survivor, who failed to adequately avoid the 'uncontrollable fiend/monster' (p.118). This could also be applicable to the scum/animal character given to the accused in these tweets; in choosing the vocabulary of disgust to frame the accused as a social aberration, the 'cultural scaffolding' (Gavey 2019) that sustains rape remained unexamined.

The disgust levelled at individuals was not exclusively seen in relation to the accused, but also directed to those who showed support for them, especially after the verdict was returned. Examples of such tweets include one which labels the support shown by other men as disgusting after witnessing 'a lads insta story with a photo of Paddy Jackson saying winner winner, disgusting a rape trial isn't something to be won' (Figure 7). Another tweet more pointedly framed the accused supporters themselves as disgusting, stating that 'I am beyond disgusted at all the people I see defending these disgusting men STILL' (Figure 8).

Figure 7   *Figure 8*

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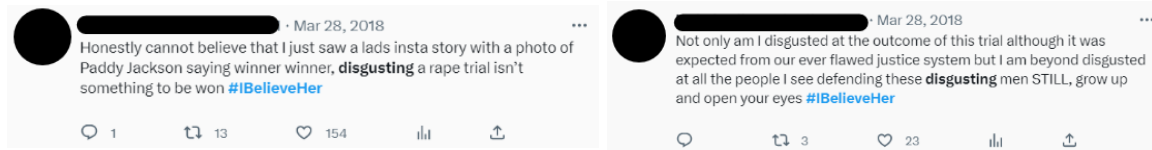
These tweets are interesting, as at one level they seem to offer a critique of patriarchal thinking. However, another reading could offer a different interpretation, namely that by framing the supporters of the accused as disgusting individuals, it gives credence to the fantasy of a moral order, which can be protected by othering the individuals who are seen to contaminate it. Although these supporters are not referred to as animals or scum, the idea that they are disgusting to the tweeters is evident, and this could be working to place them outside society, as aberrations of the normal. The potential issue here is that it results in a withdrawing from understanding this disgusting behaviour as also being normalised behaviour in society.

Targeting the language of disgust solely towards the accused individuals may have another unintended function, namely that focusing on condemning the accused comes at the expense of centring the complainant. As Ahmed (2004) has argued, disgust involves a recoiling from what is disgusting, and although this creates a distance between the disgusted and the disgusting, she argues that it also 'keeps the object at the centre of attention, as a centring which attributes the affect of sickness to the very quality of the object.' (p.86) The centring of the object of disgust could be seen to overshadow the complainant and her experience. This argument by Ahmed (2004) complements Nussbaum's (2004) assertion that disgust 'does not adequately register the thought that a harm has occurred. In short, disgust seems not quite the relevant emotion.' (p.126) The fact that the tweets outlined above chose to direct their disgust towards individuals means that individuals remain the focus of the speech act, therefore negating the possibility of looking at this case as an example of macro issues that result in widespread rape in society.

Lad Culture as Disgusting

Tweets that centred lad culture as the object of disgust had a similar effect as seen in tweets that framed rape as a problem caused by abhorrent individuals, not a societal issue rooted in patriarchal thinking. Some tweets voiced fears about an increase in lad culture acceptance after the trial, such as one user who wrote that they were 'so terrified for what this means for Ireland's lad culture' (*Figure 9*). Some tweets spoke to lad culture in a less explicit way, with assertions such as 'let's hope none of their future daughters/sisters are ever discussed in group chats like theirs' (*Figure 10*).

Figure 9   *Figure 10*

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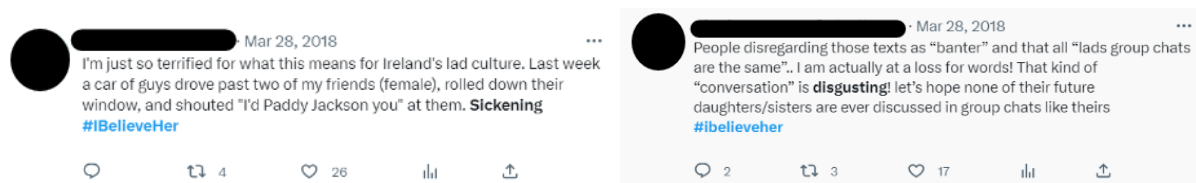
Lad culture is best understood as a "pack" mentality' among groups of men, notably evident in sports teams, with sexism and misogynistic language and behaviour branded as harmless 'banter' (Jordan *et al.* 2022, p.701). Although problematic in creating an environment where misogynistic behaviour is often tolerated and rewarded, by fixating on lad culture these tweets could also be seen to segregate the 'disgusting' individuals into a 'contaminated group' who exhibit laddish behaviour, which is then easy to separate from the rest of society.

The withdrawal that these tweets advocate is subtle. Nevertheless, it is made more evident when contrasted with tweets that removed the boundary drawn around lad culture, and instead expanded the issue to wider society. An example of this is outlined by a tweet stating: 'Important that as men we *all* take a hard look at our own actions, however small, that might contribute to this culture of disgusting behaviour towards women.' (*Figure 11, emphasis added*)

Figure 11

This tweet highlights that when it comes to understanding how larger societal and institutional structures facilitate, reproduce and sustain rape, it is impossible to stand outside these systems. Nussbaum's (2004) argument regarding the limitations of disgust is evident in the tweets condemning lad culture, notably the assertion that it allows one to avoid self-scrutiny. This reflexivity is challenging, and it is easier to expel than to explore uncomfortable aspects of our society and ourselves. Nussbaum (2004) highlights the discomfort in reflexivity, as it is 'warning us that we might have done the same under comparable circumstances. It alerts us to the presence of evil (whether active or passively collaborative) in ourselves' (p.146).

Family-Friendly Policies and Remote Work: Revisiting the Work-Care Conflict in a Post-Covid Labour Market

Scandalous Disgust

Whilst some tweets expressed disgust in tandem with placing the accused outside the realm of the human, other tweets framed the trial as a rugby scandal, making this scandal for the sport the focal point of their articulated disgust. Some tweets argued that the accused are 'disgusting human beings' (*Figure 12*), that the accused showed evidence of being a 'disgusting misogynist' (*Figure 13*) followed by vowing to never attend Irish rugby games or wear the Irish jersey again if the defendants rejoined the team.

Figure 12

One tweet stated: 'Regardless of the outcome of this verdict, there is hard evidence of their disgusting attitudes towards women. They don't deserve to represent Ireland' (*Figure 14*).
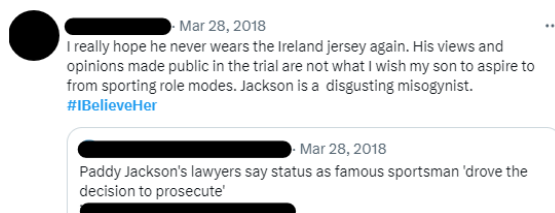
Figure 13   *Figure 14*

Gavey (2019) highlights the role that scandal can play in understanding high-profile rape cases. Using the example of the 2013 Steubenville case, she argues that although a collective response of condemnation may initially be seen as a challenge to the status quo of rape culture, in fact it could also be interpreted in another way, namely that 'there are conservative undertones to this "exceptionalising" response.' (Gavey 2019, p.236) The hidden conservative element of using the language of disgust to describe the Belfast rape trial as a *scandal* can function to show reality, in this case the reality of rape, as a singular, exceptional event. This is evident in some

tweets that see the alleged rape as a scandal for Irish rugby. The tweeters articulate disgust towards the behaviour of the accused, stating 'Shame on you @UlsterRugby @IRFURugby if this is the calibre of your players' (*Figure 15*).

Figure 15

Perhaps the fact that two of the accused were public figures made its scandalous label unavoidable, however the focus on the impact of the trial on Irish rugby worked to make invisible the reality of widespread issues of consent and rape supportive culture. Articulating this trial as the scandalous exception rather than an example of the norms of society with the language of disgust could result in the inability to see this case as part of a larger societal issue, thus neutralising the possible transformative nature of these tweets.

Using the Language of Disgust to 'Engage With'

Despite the sample of tweets that were interpreted as using the language of disgust to 'withdraw from' structural and social issues that the case brought to light, the majority of tweets collected (51) challenged the assertion that 'the most visible forms of popular feminism are the most apolitical.' (Kettrey *et al.* 2021, p.2) The users that tweeted their disgust but *also* demonstrated an attempt to engage with macro issues fell into two categories: tweets that used disgust to challenge rape myths and tweets that used disgust to criticise the judicial system and court proceedings in rape cases.

The Language of Disgust vs Rape Myths

Disgust vocabulary was notable in a number of tweets that problematised, and in some cases rearticulated, common rape myths. Several tweets challenged rape myths in a broader sense, stating that there exists a misconception of 'what being "raped" is is [sic] exactly' (Figure 16), and arguing that 'there is NO justification for raping someone!!' (Figure 17).

Family-Friendly Policies and Remote Work: Revisiting the Work-Care Conflict in a Post-Covid Labour Market
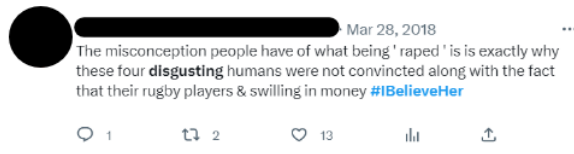
Figure 16   *Figure 17*

One of the most common rape myths challenged concerns the idea that the alleged rape victim-survivor is lying about the sexual violence. This refusal to believe the victim-survivor has been termed as 'secondary victimisation' by Williams (1984, cited in Anderson and Doherty 2008, p.9). This rape myth was rearticulated in a variety of ways, with tweets stating that this narrative disgusted the users, such as stating that such assertions were 'absolutely disgusting' (*Figure 17*).

Figure 17

These examples of tweeted disgust directed at the "victim as liar" rape myth was often accompanied by an image that outlined the evidence provided by both the defence and the complainant during the trial, ending with: 'If girl is telling the truth, it's just them lying' (*Figure 18*).

Family-Friendly Policies and Remote Work: Revisiting the Work-Care Conflict in a Post-Covid Labour Market

Figure 18

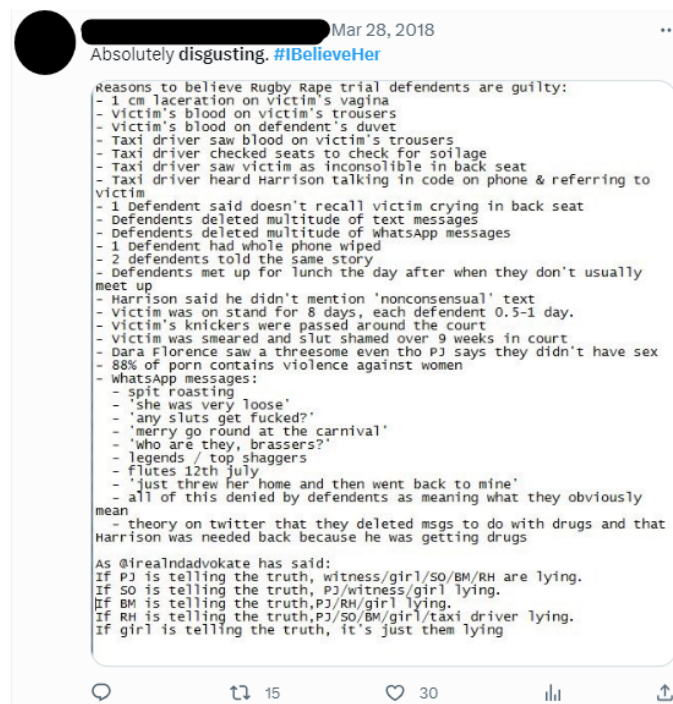Mar 28, 2018

Read this & educate yourself before you call her a liar. A not guilty verdict DOES NOT mean she was lying. I feel **sick**. #IBelieveHer

```
- 1 cm laceration on victim's vagina
- Victim's blood on victim's trousers
- Victim's blood on defendent's duvet
- Taxi driver saw blood on victim's trousers
- Taxi driver checked seats to check for soilage
- Taxi driver saw victim as inconsolible in back seat
- Taxi driver heard Harrison talking in code on phone & referring to
victim
- 1 Defendent said doesn't recall victim crying in back seat
- Defendents deleted multitude of text messages
- Defendents deleted multitude of WhatsApp messages
- 1 Defendent had whole phone wiped
- 2 defendents told the same story
- Defendents met up for lunch the day after when they don't usually
meet up
- Harrison said he didn't mention 'nonconsensual' text
- Victim was on stand for 8 days, each defendent 0.5-1 day.
- Victim's knickers were passed around the court
- Victim was smeared and slut shamed over 9 weeks in court
- Dara Florence saw a threesome even tho PJ says they didn't have sex
- 88% of porn contains violence against women
- WhatsApp messages:
  - spit roasting
  - 'she was very loose'
  - 'any sluts get fucked?'
  - 'merry go round at the carnival'
  - 'who are they, brassers?'
  - legends / top shaggers
  - flutes 12th july
  - 'just threw her home and then went back to mine'
  - all of this denied by defendents as meaning what they obviously
mean
  - theory on twitter that they deleted msgs to do with drugs and that
Harrison was needed back because he was getting drugs

As @irealndadvokate has said:
If PJ is telling the truth, witness/girl/SO/BM/RH are lying.
If SO is telling the truth, PJ/witness/girl lying.
If BM is telling the truth,PJ/RH/girl lying.
If RH is telling the truth,PJ/SO/BM/girl/taxi driver lying.
If girl is telling the truth, it's just them lying
```

The above tweets present a distinct challenge to the entrenched rape myth of the victim as the liar, and in doing so disrupting the secondary victimisation often experienced by victim-survivors who are condemned by the community after reporting an alleged rape. Although some tweets used the personal dialogue of disgust, they do not 'withdraw' in the same way as seen in the first section of the paper, as here this language was used to frame a discursive engagement with an element of the 'cultural scaffolding of rape' (Gavey 2019). This was done by making visible the hidden rape myth that places the blame on the victim-survivor while absolving the perpetrator, and consequently presenting a counter-narrative to the "unreliable victim-survivor" rape myth. This use of the vocabulary of disgust can therefore be understood as contributing to the 'wealth of criticism' levelled against rape culture in print and social media in Northern Ireland in response to the Belfast rape trial (McFalone 2021, p.291).

The Language of Disgust vs the Northern Irish Legal System

Family-Friendly Policies and Remote Work: Revisiting the Work-Care Conflict in a Post-Covid Labour Market

In addition, 29 tweets used the vocabulary of disgust to criticise the verdict of the trial and the way the complainant was treated during the proceedings.

Disapproval of the verdict was common, with users choosing to express their dismay through statements such as 'feel physically sick at the thought of the Ulster rugby boys getting acquitted of raping that poor girl 🧎 fucking disgusting' (*Figure 19*).

Figure 19

· Mar 29, 2018

feel physically **sick** at the thought of the Ulster rugby boys getting acquitted of raping that poor girl 😭 fucking **disgusting** #IBelieveHer

♡ 3   ♡ 29

A common critique was expressed by contrasting messages exchanged between the accused and the verdict, with one tweet questioning 'how in any way could anyone call them innocent? disgusting' (*Figure 20*), accompanied with an image of text from the defendants' WhatsApp messages, including 'she was very loose' and 'It was like a merry go round at a carnival' (*Figure 20*).

Figure 20

Mar 28, 2018

how in any way could someone call them innocent? **disgusting**. #IBelieveHer

"she was very very loose."

"Any sluts get fucked?"

"There was a lot of spit roast last night."

"There was a lot of spit"

"It was like a merry go round at the carnival."

"we are all top shaggers"

"Love Belfast Sluts."

"Boys, did you pass spit roast brassers"

"What the fuck was going on. Last night was hilarious."

"Why are we all such legends?" "I know it's ridiculous"

"Mate no jokes she was in hysterics, wasn't going to end well."

"Really, fuck sake, did you calm her, where does she live?"

Twitter users also directed disgust towards the justice system in general: 'What she went through is horrifying but what the justice system put her through is sick' (*Figure 21*) and highlighted that 'The victim was the one on trial. This needs to change. Sick to my stomach' (*Figure 22*).

Figure 21   *Figure 22*
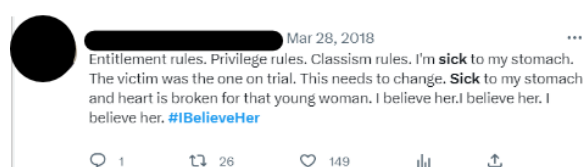
Others identified the Belfast trial as an example of how the justice system fails those who report rape beyond the example of the Belfast rape case, stating that 'our justice system has failed her and continues to fail women every day. It does not protect, it degrades. Disgusting.' (*Figure 23*).

Figure 23

The issues of the Belfast rape trial were contextualised by some Twitter users, levelling criticism against larger flaws of the Northern Irish legal system and how rape cases are conducted. Sullivan (2022) has argued that approaching sex crimes with the sole focus on individuals means that 'the social structures that make possible sexual violence and the myriad systems that are entangled in its logics are not addressed.' (p.91) However, in the case of these tweets, it is not individuals but the structures themselves that are deemed disgusting, and in need of transformation, allowing these tweets to create a political space in which to address the problems that arise when a rape case is brought to a patriarchal justice system.

This carving out of space is reflective of the tactic of 'engaging with' an issue politically. Tweets that criticise patriarchal justice systems through the vocabulary of disgust can be understood as a helpful tool in disrupting hegemonic understandings of institutional violence (García-Mingo and Prieto Blanco 2023), and underline why people choose not to engage with these institutions, a system which one tweet argued 'does not protect, it degrades' (*Figure 23*). Tweets also work to disconnect understandings of the verdict as absolute truth, by highlighting 'Just because you are proven innocent does NOT mean you are innocent' (*Figure 24*).

Figure 24

Just because you're proven innocent does NOT mean you are innocent, Fucking **sick** misogynistic country we're still living in #IBelieveHer

Therefore, it can be argued that this sample of tweets also mobilised the language of disgust to create what García-Mingo and Prieto Blanco (2023) have described as a space in which to 'negotiate meanings of sexual violence', or to use Mouffe's (2013) words, the tweets seek to engage with larger systems, in this case judicial, that impact the perception of rape in society (p.6). Although these examples lack explicit attempts at rearticulation of patriarchal justice, the vocabulary of disgust is nevertheless used to carve out space within which this rearticulation may take place in the future.

Conclusion

This research paper analysed how the language of disgust behaved when used in tweets responding to the Belfast rape trial. What the analysis demonstrates is that the language of disgust is malleable, as noted by Pedwell (2014), who argued that instead of being inherently 'good' or 'bad', the same affective language can result in contrasting outcomes, depending on *how* it is used.

These conflicting outcomes were conceptualised using Mouffe's (2013) understandings of attempts to 'engage with' or 'withdraw from' addressing the systemic and social issues

Family-Friendly Policies and Remote Work: Revisiting the Work-Care Conflict in a Post-Covid Labour Market

underpinning rape. While examining tweets for these two overarching themes, subthemes were generated relating to both. The subthemes generated in tweets that withdrew from political engagement were personal dialogues of disgust; individuals as disgusting; lad culture as disgusting; and scandalous disgust. Subthemes understood as 'engaging with' the cultural scaffolding of rape were the language of disgust vs rape myths, and the language of disgust vs the Northern Irish legal system.

Notably, tweets using the language of disgust to 'withdraw' from engaging in structural issues that support rape made up the *minority* of the dataset, with the majority challenging assertions that saw disgust as apolitical (Sullivan 2022) or unhelpful in response to injustice as proposed by Nussbaum (2004).

Therefore, it appears that the tweets examined relating to the Belfast rape case complicate Sullivan's (2022) argument that 'Disgust is flaccid because it only disavows, and it only disavows at the individual level', in reference to the #MeToo movement (p.82). It is true that some of the tweets examined were interpreted as drawing a boundary between the tweeter and the accused through personal declarations of disgust, framing the accused as aberrations of the normal, declaring lad culture as a disgusting community to be expelled, or placing the case outside of the norm by framing it as a scandal. However, these were a notable minority. Interestingly, the analysis of tweets containing the language of disgust largely challenged the assertions that disgust is apolitical (Sullivan 2022) or unhelpful in response to injustice (Nussbaum 2004). Although Nussbaum (2004) has argued that disgust and reflexivity cannot coexist, the disgust vocabulary evident in the majority of the tweets in response to the Belfast rape trial was arguably reflexive, seen in the tweets that took common rape myths and rearticulated them, questioned Northern Ireland's judicial system and its ability to deal with rape cases, and problematised the shows of support for the accused after acquittal and its impact on social understandings of consent. It is conceivable that the tweets 'engaging with' the scaffolding behind the Belfast rape trial are attempting to go beyond the disavowal of the accused individuals, and instead articulate disgust at injustices evident in wider societal norms and systems, an outcome of tweeted disgust also identified in a study by Pantti (2016).

The lanugage of disgust in response to the Belfast rape trial can therefore be understood as an agonistic arena (Mouffe 2013), meaning that it is yet another sphere of human society in which consensus and uniformitivity are out of reach. Understood as an agonistic arena then, the language of disgust is deeply political. In other words, as a way of engaging with the issue of sexual violence and rape culture, the register of disgust can be used in different ways, whether as a performative mode of virtue-signalling on the part of individuals, or as a potentially transformative way of engaging critically with the cultural scaffolding of rape. In short, and as the analysis of the Belfast rape trial presented in this research paper demonstrates, the social effects of disgust as a mode of expression are contingent on the play of agonistic forces as these exist in a given conjuncture. This research challenges previous assertions regarding the usefeulness of disgust of bystanders in response to public discussions of sexual violence and rape (Sullivan 2022), and offers another lens with which to look at the narratives

Family-Friendly Policies and Remote Work: Revisiting the Work-Care Conflict in a Post-Covid Labour Market

that we construct around sexual violence in our society and the individuals who perpetrate it. It may be interesting to apply to other trials and/or movements to see if this is true for cases outside of the Belfast rape trial of 2018.

Acknowledgements

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Family-Friendly Policies and Remote Work: Revisiting the Work-Care Conflict in a Post-Covid Labour Market

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