
The targeted speak: Exploring young women's perceptions of sexual assault using the situational theory of publics

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Abstract

This qualitative study explores how young university-aged women make meaning of sexual assault using the situational theory of publics. Findings reveal that young women consider sexual assault as a non-consensual act that can be verbal, physical or emotional, and that they are more at risk due to the college environment. However, most young women do not feel it is personally relevant to them until they are affected by a personal experience. Elaborating the situational theory of publics, this study offers insight into how women perceive the issue of sexual assault for both public relations practice and scholarship.

Introduction

According to a survey conducted by the United States Department of Justice, 20 to 25 percent of young women in the United States reported experiencing rape during their university career (Fisher, Cullen, & Turner, 2000). As such, effective communication campaigns could potentially spread awareness and encourage young women to take the right precautions in order to prevent being assaulted. Though there have been several studies evaluating the actual effectiveness of sexual assault campaigns (Breitenbecher & Gidycz, 1998; Konradi & DeBruin, 2003), there has been little research on publics' initial perception of sexual assault as an issue.

The situational theory of publics (STP) (Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Grunig, 1997), a public relations audience segmentation theory, allows public relations practitioners to segment publics according to their information-seeking and processing behaviours. The purpose of this study explores how STP can be used to address the issue of sexual assault.

Literature review

STP is a theory that utilises three independent variables of problem recognition, constraint recognition and level of involvement – and two dependent variables of active and passive communication. The first independent variable of problem recognition was taken from Dewey's (1939) notion that publics perceive something lacking in a situation and as a result seek information to try to solve that indeterminate or problematic situation. The second independent variable of constraint recognition deals with how publics perceive barriers that limit control over their behaviours; they could be psychological, such as having feelings of low self-efficacy, or they could be physical, such as having limited access to resources. Finally, the last independent variable, level of involvement, deals with a person's perception of how connected or relevant they feel with an issue (Grunig & Repper, 1992).

The two dependent variables of active and passive communication behaviour can also be understood as information seeking and information processing. Information seeking consists of an individual actively scanning the environment in order to discover messages regarding a certain topic or issue. Information processing, on the other hand, is more passive in that the individual unexpectedly comes across a message and continuously processes it (Clarke & Kline, 1974).

Research questions

Based on STP and the issue at hand, I asked the following research questions:

RQ1: *How do female university students recognise the problem of sexual assault?*

RQ2: *What are the perceived constraints that inhibit female university students from effective anti-sexual assault practice?*

RQ3: *How do female university students perceive their level of involvement with the issue of sexual assault?*

Method

The research questions were explored through a series of in-depth interviews with participants recruited from a purposive sample of female students at a large university located in the Eastern region of the United States. I conducted nine face-to-face interviews, lasting approximately 60 to 90 minutes, with consent given by participants to be audio recorded.

Audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed verbatim, fully retaining the speech style of the moderator and the participants. The interviews were then analysed using Miles and Huberman's (1994) data analysis procedures: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. During data reduction, interview transcripts were coded based on comments that answered the research questions. I then collapsed the codes during the data display step into categories gathered from data reduction and exported the data to Excel spreadsheets, also known as checklist matrices. Finally, during conclusion drawing/verification, the checklist matrices were reviewed to gather the various meanings that emerged from the data, noting similarities as well as gaps that were found along each theme.

Results

Problem recognition

The university environment

Many participants believed that sexual assault is more prevalent on university campuses because their environments are more conducive to it. Janet stated that sexual assault is a big issue due to the habits of university students: "The environment kind of lends itself sometimes, because of the stereotype of what [university] students do

and the environments they're in can lead to that."

Communication channels

Participants discussed an increased awareness of sexual assault through various interpersonal and mediated communication channels. Many of the participants mentioned receiving email alerts sent by campus police about sexual assault cases occurring in their immediate area. According to Erica, "I have no personal experience with it, but you just hear statistics...especially in email whenever we get the alerts, you know, of certain attacks and stuff". She also believed that interpersonal communication with family and friends plays a role as "any time you talk to your parents, or something like that, they're always telling you don't walk home alone, don't stay out, [don't] go to random places...you get more of the information from just your family and friends".

Constraint recognition

Alcohol

Participants believed that alcohol could play a role in whether females can engage in protective and safe behaviours. Lauren felt very strongly about this issue:

I mean if you were drinking a lot and were around all those people, it could be really confusing, and you might not realize someone is slipping something into your drink, you know, and I feel like that type of scene is where a lot of people are taken advantage of, and that's definitely an obstacle because you can't really control those surroundings...

The people around you

Participants mentioned how the people around you can become an obstacle to being safe. As Erica put it: "if you don't want to do what other people want to do, if you want to go home and you would have to walk home alone, sometimes people would do that instead of staying." Janeise described another perspective by stating how some people you know, such as family members, do not think of your experience as so bad, in terms of an abusive relationship: "[They say a] woman has got to

take the bitter with the sweet...the ignorance of the people you know, the people around you. Other people can also be a hindrance.”

Fear of disclosure

If they were affected by sexual assault, either personally or through the experience of a friend, participants stated that the fear of telling people would serve as a barrier to getting help. As Lauren stated:

...personally if it happened to me, I would want justice, you know? But I think some women feel embarrassed or they don't know what to do. Or maybe for that person it happened to someone they know, in most cases, that's what happens, it's someone that you know.

Level of Involvement

Personal relevance

Participants thought that sexual assault was a relevant issue for them, especially as young women. As Janet stated: “In terms of safety and surroundings, it's not as a big of an issue for men.” Lauren also agreed and said:

I personally feel at times, for my own safety, and I think about that because being a young girl in [university], it's kind of like a target for things to happen like that. And I've had experiences with my friends, you know, and it kind of makes you wonder, okay this happened to my friend, and I don't want it to happen to me, and you know, if I'm going out to party, I want to have fun, but at the same time I really need to be thinking about you know, my safety. I definitely think it's relevant to me. I think it's relevant to most women on campus.

Personal stories

For participants who may have experienced sexual assault through a friend or personal experience, their stories have greatly increased their perceived level of involvement with the issue. For Serena, the lack of a personal experience has made the issue seem less real: “To an extent, because I'm a girl,

but I would be more emotionally involved if it happened to me or someone I know. So I feel like I haven't been exposed to the realness of it. Then I would be able to relate to it more.”

Discussion

This study extends the situational theory of publics (Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Grunig, 1997) by determining how female university students perceive the three independent variables of problem recognition, constraint recognition, and involvement in the context of sexual assault. In terms of problem recognition, both interpersonal and mediated communication channels played a role in how these female university students perceived sexual assault as a problem. To address this, practitioners can locate ‘local champions’ of the cause who would be willing to speak to young women about the risks of sexual assault. Additionally, interactive websites and online interventions could be created that would tailor specific messages to women about how they can stay informed and protected. Thus, the channels through which these women recognise a problem plays a mitigating role in how they would perceive that problem.

For constraint recognition, alcohol was perceived as a barrier that supports extant research, as alcohol use has been identified as a definite risk factor for sexual assault (Abbey, 2002). Perpetrators see females who drink as more sexual, sexually available, and more willing to engage in sexual activity (George et al., 1997), thus putting women who drink excessive amounts of alcohol more at risk. Therefore, public relations practitioners can create alcohol education programmes that work in tandem with sexual assault interventions to establish the connection between excessive drinking and rape, as opposed to just briefly mentioning the issue.

Level of involvement is defined by Grunig and Hunt (1984) as “the extent to which [people] connect themselves with the situation” (p. 152). This study found that female university students do not connect themselves with the issue of sexual assault unless they or someone they knew were personally affected – it is not until a personal case hits home that

young women even consciously think about sexual assault, in spite of its relevance in their lives. Thus, public relations practitioners can work alongside universities to educate and inform young women using channels that are most appropriate and relevant to them. Universities can also hold open forums where students can voice their concerns, misperceptions, and questions about sexual assault. By informing these women in an engaging way, public relations professionals can work towards the cause of protecting students from sexual assault.

By applying theory to practice, public relations practitioners can create more awareness about sexual assault on university campuses. With the sexual assault risk for young women being unacceptably high, this issue is more salient now than ever before, making it imperative that students are educated about sexual assault and its serious effects on victims. By understanding their point of view, we may be able to protect young women and reduce the number of cases that continue to occur, both at universities and in the surrounding community.

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