Rape Culture In The Media

According to the National Sexual Violence Resource Center (2015), 1 in 5 college women will be sexually assaulted, and 1 in 16 men will be sexually assaulted. Almost anyone you speak to will agree that these numbers are alarming and question why these statistics are so high. Research suggests that rape culture largely contributes to this. Rape culture is defined as certain beliefs and actions in our society that perpetuate rape or sexual assault (Gravelin, Biernat, & Bucher, 2019). In order to limit these figures, it is crucial that people learn about how rape culture in the media is caused and its impacts on society and survivors.

Causes of Rape Culture

Rape culture was not identified as a topic of serious conversation until the 1970s Feminism Movement (PettyJohn, Muzzey, Maas, & McCauley 2018). As a result, the beliefs that contribute to rape culture are well-established and have only begun to be researched within recent years. Although it is believed that rape culture is caused by multiple factors, two of the largest factors that contribute to rape culture are the objectification and hyper-sexualization of women in the media and toxic masculinity (Wright & Tokunaga, 2015). In 2015, Paul J. Wright and Robert S. Tokunaga completed a study that found that men who watched reality tv shows that are known for hyper-sexualizing women, such as Jersey Shore, were more likely to view women as sexual objects than those who did not. In addition, there was an increased chance that these men were to agree with statements such as “Sometimes the only way a man can get a cold woman turned on is to use force” and “A woman who is stuck-up and thinks she is too good to talk to guys on the street deserves to be taught a lesson” (Wright & Tokunaga, 2015). These attitudes have been linked to a higher rate of more sexually aggressive behaviors. In effect, it can be concluded that the hyper-sexualization and objectification of women contributes to rape culture.

In addition to the objectification of women, toxic masculinity can also contribute to rape culture. Toxic masculinity can be difficult to recognize because of how deep-rooted it is in western society, but it largely encompasses negative, traditional gender-roles such as men being over-competitive, being dominant, and possessing an increased desire for sex (PettyJohn et al., 2018). It is important to remember that although these gender roles do not in of themselves cause aggressive sexual behaviors, they do create an imbalance between men and women which creates the increased possibility for violence against women (PettyJohn et al., 2018). Rape is an act of a power differential and is not necessarily guided by a sexual desire (Gravelin et al., 2019). Therefore, a society that supports the characteristics of toxic masculinity in the media often contributes to the concept of rape culture in society.

Effects of Rape Culture

After a sexual assault, a person faces a recovery from one of the most difficult traumatic events. Although this recovery is often difficult enough, rape culture negatively impacts survivors and can make this transition even more difficult. Survivors of sexual assault are more likely to experience victim-blaming compared to other violent crimes (Gravelin et al., 2019). This can include statements such as asking what a survivor was wearing or if they had consumed any alcohol prior to the event. Many survivors of sexual assault may have feelings of self-blame

stating that they had poor judgement, should have been more cautious, and were too trusting (Meyer & Taylor, 1986). Because these emotions following the traumatic event correspond to many of the victim-blaming statements said by society, it can be even more difficult for a survivor to cope and recover from the sexual assault when society is perpetuating the false beliefs that survivors may already hold.

In addition to rape culture negatively impacting survivors of sexual assault, it is believed that rape culture may decrease the amount of rapes that are reported to law enforcement. The National Sexual Violence Resource Center (2015) states that rape is the most under-reported crime in the United States. Approximately 63% of incidents of sexual violence are not reported to law enforcement, and on a college campus, over 90% of sexual assaults go unreported (National Sexual Violence Resource Center, 2015). This may be due to the psychological impact of the trauma on the survivor discussed previously. However, even if a survivor does report the sexual assault, they will often retract their statement due to harassment and not wanting to re-experience the event by continuously telling the story. When this occurs, many people blame this on false reporting; however, only 2-10% of reported rapes are false reports (National Sexual Violence Resource Center, 2015). As a result, it can be concluded that rape culture actually discourages survivors from reporting sexual assault incidents.

The #MeToo Era

As mentioned previously, rape culture was not identified as a topic of serious conversation until the 1970s Feminism Movement (PettyJohn et al., 2018). Although awareness about sexual assault is a relatively recent development, this awareness has increased at a rapid pace within the last decade. In 2017, the #MeToo movement increased in momentum after over a decade of its formation. The #MeToo movement is an international movement to create awareness about the prevalence of sexual assault by survivors sharing their lived experiences of sexual assault through the use of social media (Smith, Holmberg, & Cornish, 2019). Within a year, there were over 19 million posts across 85 countries that included the hashtag #MeToo (Smith et al., 2019).

In addition to the #MeToo movement creating awareness about the prevalence of sexual violence, it also has created awareness about rape culture and victim blaming. In 2018, Christine Blasey Ford testified about her sexual assault by Brett Kavanaugh who was about to be sworn in as a United States Supreme Court Justice. Although Kavanaugh later went on to be sworn in as a Supreme Court Justice, the event brought on a national debate. Blasey Ford was met with disbelief, derogatory statements, and threats (Smith et al., 2019). Because of people’s reactions towards Blasey Ford and how Kavanaugh still holds a powerful position today, many people suggest that this serves as an example of how deep-rooted rape culture is within western society. As a result of the #MeToo movement, there is more education about the impact of sexual assaults on survivors and how rape culture negatively contributes to a survivor’s recovery (Smith et al., 2019).

Methods of Reducing Rape Culture in the Media

With the increased education and research about rape culture, more methods of prevention of rape culture have been researched. Although there are many different actions the ordinary person can take in reducing the prevalence of rape culture, one of these includes boycotting forms of media that contribute to rape culture. Robin Thicke’s “Blurred Lines” serves as an

example of how, often, ordinary people hold the most power in reducing rape culture. In 2013, “Blurred Lines” was released and spent almost twelve weeks on the Billboard Top 100 and earned Robin Thicke millions of dollars (Romano, 2013). However, its music video and lyrics were controversial because many advocates debated that it objectifies women and contributes to toxic masculinity. In the unrated music video, women are almost completely unclothed while the men are fully clothed (Romano, 2013). In effect, this creates a power differential by illustrating male dominance and female vulnerability. Because of the high amount of conversations about the music video alone, the un-rated version of the music video was banned by YouTube the year that it was released (Romano, 2013). Moreover, the lyrics and title of the song itself have caused controversy because they question the meaning of consent. Lyrics of the song include “I know you want it” and “I hate these blurred lines.” These lyrics assume consent and ignore the meaning of consent as “yes means yes, and no means no.” Because of international attention about the controversy surrounding the song, it began being banned by many universities in the U.K. in 2013 (Romano, 2013). As a result of advocates educating people about the potential impact of this song on rape culture, the music video and the song were banned and continues to serve as an example of how boycotting specific forms of media that contribute to rape culture can decrease the prevalence of rape culture in society.

Conclusion

Statistics that illustrate the prevalence of sexual assault in society are alarming to most people. Rape culture is believed to contribute to these statistics. Although rape culture has only become a conversation recently, it not only impacts survivors of sexual assault, but everyone whether or not people realize it. It is in music, movies, the news, and everyday conversations. Often, it is difficult to recognize but the continuation of an increase in research and education provides an increase in people’s ability to recognize the impact of rape culture on survivors and society while also preventing rape culture in the future.