

Challenging Discourses of Sexual Violence on X: The Linguistic Representation of Victims and Perpetrators in Kavanaugh's Confirmation Process

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Date of reception: 12/02/2024

Date of acceptance: 13/03/2024

Citation:

Palomino-Manjón, Patricia. 2024. "Challenging Discourses of Sexual Violence on X: The Linguistic Representation of Victims and Perpetrators in Kavanaugh's Confirmation Process." *Alicante Journal of English Studies* 41: 105-127.
<https://doi.org/10.14198/raei.2024.41.05>

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In September 2018, American Justice Brett Kavanaugh was accused of sexual assault by Dr. Christine Blasey Ford during his nomination to the US Supreme Court. The sexual allegations provoked a crisis in American society concerning the rights of female American citizens and created a heated debate among X (formerly Twitter) users, who commented on the event and expressed their (dis)affiliation. Research has shown that X is one of the most sexist and abusive social media services due to the constant spread and negotiation of different discourses relating to rape culture on the platform (Mendes et al. 2018). Consequently, the objectives of this research are to examine the linguistic patterns and discourses employed by X users to denounce patriarchal oppression and negotiate the identities of the different social actors involved in Kavanaugh's confirmation process. To do so, two datasets of posts (previously known as 'tweets') containing the opposing hashtags #KavanaughConfirmation and #NoKavanaughConfirmation were analyzed and contrasted drawing on Corpus-Assisted Discourse Analysis tools (i.e., keywords and concordances) (Partington et al. 2013) and Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (Lazar 2005). The results revealed a high presence of keywords concerning gender and violence to construct identities of victims and perpetrators. However, not only were such identities related to sexual violence but also political and institutional violence. In addition, the analysis revealed the creation of discursive protests on X to resist patriarchal discourses and practices in American society.

Keywords: sexual violence; digital discourse; victims and perpetrators; Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis; digital feminism

1. Introduction

On July 9, 2018, the then-President of the United States of America Donald Trump nominated former Judge Brett Kavanaugh as Associate Justice (AsJ) to the U.S. Supreme Court (SCOTUS). Not much later, an anonymous letter accused Kavanaugh of sexual assault and attempted rape in 1982. It was not until September 16, 2018, that the accuser Dr. Christine Blasey Ford, a college professor, went public since the press was trying to make her identity public. As a result, the Senate Judiciary Committee scheduled a hearing with AsJ Kavanaugh and Dr. Ford on September 27, 2018.

On the day of the hearing, Dr. Ford explained that AsJ Kavanaugh and his friend forcefully pinned her down to a bed and attempted to gang-rape her at a high school party. However, as the two friends were highly intoxicated, she managed to escape and lock herself in a bathroom. For his part, AsJ Kavanaugh denied the accusation. The Republican Senator Lindsey Graham also drew the attention of viewers as he blamed the Democratic Party for ruining AsJ Kavanaugh's reputation with fabricated allegations. At the end of the hearings, the Republican lawyer Rachel Mitchell stated charges against Kavanaugh would not be pressed as she considered Dr. Ford's testimony to be inconsistent. AsJ Kavanaugh was confirmed to SCOTUS on October 6, 2018, while being depicted as a political victim (House 2023).

During the confirmation process, Dr. Ford was constantly criticized by members of the GOP, who described her as "a liar, mentally unstable, and/or a paid Democratic operative" (Franks 2019, 93), and was mocked by Trump during his political rallies, which led to the (re)appearance of digital feminist activism to support her testimony (see Palomino-Manjón 2022). Moreover, Dr. Ford was threatened, harassed and mocked online. The event was heavily commented on X (formerly Twitter), in which users employed different hashtags to (dis)affiliate with the accuser or the accused.

Over the past few years, the study of language, gender and digital communication has been gaining momentum (see Jones 2023). Scholars have been interested in examining how violence and patriarchal attitudes are spread on digital platforms, as well as the use of these platforms to challenge and (re)negotiate such discourses. Nevertheless, this area of knowledge remains understudied. Therefore, this paper aims to contribute to the growing research on (sexual) violence against women in digital platforms, especially social media, by examining the linguistic construction of victim-perpetrator identities and the spread of patriarchal discourses relating to sexual violence on X during AsJ Kavanaugh's confirmation process.

The present paper is divided into five sections. Section 2 provides an overview of the literature published on digital discourse and (verbal) sexual violence in digital

platforms. It also outlines the use of such platforms to (counter) resist hegemonic patriarchal discourses. Next, section 3 displays the data (3.1) and procedures (3.3) followed to carry out the research. In addition, it also introduces Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA) as a political perspective to the analysis of social media data. Then, section 4 presents and discusses the findings of the analyses performed. Lastly, section 5 rounds up the research and concludes the paper.

2. Gender and Violence in Digital Platforms

Research has shown that the emergence of digital platforms entailed a democratization of discourses (but see Bou-Franch 2013). However, it also gave rise to the spread of inequality among Internet users, especially concerning gender, which reflected social issues already present in the ‘offline’ world. Sexism and aggression against women—although they were not the only social group suffering from this—were widely spread through different platforms since the early days, such as in discussion forums and bulletin boards. With the emergence of newer platforms and social media in the 2000s, cases of digital gendered power dynamics and (sexual) violence against women increased in different forms, such as verbal aggression, doxing and porn revenge (Ging and Siapera 2019; Powell and Henry 2017). Moreover, patriarchal discourses popularized by online misogynist communities began to spread across different social media networks and Internet platforms (see Jaki et al. 2019).

The microblogging platform X, most known by its former name ‘Twitter’, has been considered the most aggressive and sexist social media platform by scholars from different areas of research (e.g. Hardaker and McGlashan 2016; Mendes et al. 2018) as it has been found to be used to spread patriarchal attitudes, such as victim-blaming and slut-shaming discourses. Additionally, such discourses contribute to promoting anti-feminist discourses which victimize men and antagonize women and feminism (Idoiaga Mondragon et al. 2019; Palomino-Manjón 2022; Stubbs-Richardson et al. 2018).

However, X has also been used as a tool for online networked feminism. This form of digital feminism has been considered the key activity that shaped a fourth wave of feminism (Blevins 2018). X users employ the different affordances offered by the microblog (e.g., hashtags) to spread counterhegemonic discourses and create a collective consciousness. Consequently, the platform has provided researchers with data to examine how victim-survivors¹ share with other users their experiences of sexual violence and to examine how self-narratives are told in

1 This paper considers the terms *victim* and *survivor* as binaries which reinforce victimization (Boyle 2019). As the difference between both terms is blurred, the merged term *victim-survivor* is used to refer to a group of individuals that have suffered any kind of sexual violence.

social media (Jones et al. 2022; Palomino-Manjón 2022). Despite this, as well as the creation of—supposedly—digital safe spaces for victim-survivors, they are also faced with hostility and gendered cyberhate after sharing their stories by users who question their narratives, which might prevent them from further participating in digital spaces in the future (Mendes et al. 2018; Palomino-Manjón 2022).

X has also made it possible to examine how its users construct their own identities during interaction. For example, some scholars have examined how X users construct their identities as empowered women using different linguistic strategies when being (sexually) harassed (Dynel and Poppi 2020). It has also been researched how they negotiate their identities as feminists (Morikawa 2019) and victims, survivors, or both (Palomino-Manjón 2022).

Nonetheless, users not only negotiate their own identities in X interactions but also contribute to how other people's identities are presented and co-constructed, such as the display of men as either victims (Idoiaga Mondragon et al. 2019) or perpetrators/perpetuators of sexual violence and rape culture (Jones et al. 2022). These studies have also contributed to the understanding of how individuals who have been objects of sexual violence are depicted as victims or survivors, thus highlighting the dilemma of the polarity of both terms and how it might present them negatively even when found in feminist discourses (Palomino-Manjón 2022).

All in all, X has been proven to be a platform where different gender ideologies and inequalities can be traced. Nevertheless, there are plenty of nuances concerning online (sexual) violence on X that have yet to be explored. Taking into consideration all that has been discussed, the present paper takes AsJ Kavanaugh's confirmation process as a case study. It has two main aims: a) to examine how the identities of victims and perpetrators were constructed and negotiated during the process, and b) to examine how such identities contributed to the spread and negotiation of patriarchal discourses concerning sexual violence. Therefore, the two research questions which guided this study are the following:

RQ1: How were victim-perpetrator identities linguistically negotiated and constructed during AsJ Kavanaugh's confirmation on X?

RQ2: How did the portrayal of victims and perpetrators reflect and/or contribute to the enactment and spread of discourses of sexual violence?

3. Corpus and Methodology

3.1. Data

The data is comprised of two opposing hashtags that were popularized by X users during the confirmation process, namely *#KavanaughConfirmation*

and *#NoKavanaughConfirmation*. X members used the first hashtag (i.e., *#KavanaughConfirmation*) as a backchannel² to share information and stances on the process. In addition, it can be argued that it was also used to express explicit support for the nominee if compared to its counterpart *#NoKavanaughConfirmation*. The second hashtag (i.e., *#NoKavanaughConfirmation*) presented a negative position toward former Judge Kavanaugh. Celebrities popularized it and it was later adopted by X users who disaffiliated from the nominee.

X posts were collected separately depending on the hashtag they contained in the body of the message. Posts published with *#NoKavanaughConfirmation*–*#NoKC*–were scrapped using the Google Spreadsheets extension ‘Twitter Archiver’ (Agarwal, n.d.). On the other hand, tweets that included *#KavanaughConfirmation*–*#KC*–were manually compiled using Twitter’s application TweetDeck³. Automatic retweets as well as non-English language tweets were filtered out during both processes. Additionally, only tweets published within 23 days were retrieved: from the day Dr. Ford’s identity was made public (September 16th, 2018) until the day after AsJ Kavanaugh was publicly confirmed (October 8th, 2018). Thus, the dataset comprised 112,428 tweets (N = 2,924,498 words).

TABLE 1. Description of the corpora under analysis.

Corpus	Number of tweets	Number of words
<i>#KavanaughConfirmation</i> (<i>#KC</i>)	88,643	1,753,370
<i>#NoKavanaughConfirmation</i> (<i>#NoKC</i>)	20,912	612,416
Total:	109,555	2,365,786

Due to the nature of the methodological approach adopted for this research (i.e., quantitative corpus linguistics tools), it was deemed necessary to remove Twitter conventions that could alter the frequency analysis results (Baker and McEneary 2015). Consequently, hashtags, mentions and URLs were removed using the software *RStudio*⁴ (R Core Team 2020). The number of tweets and words which constitute the corpora are summarized in Table 1.

2 A backchannel is the commentary that occurs when “[u]sers view some primary form of live media at the same time as engaging with social media on a secondary device” (Zappavigna 2018, 10).

3 These tweets were collected a month later than those under the hashtag *#NoKavanaughConfirmation*. As Twitter Archiver does not retrieve tweets older than seven days, the dataset was collected manually.

4 RStudio allows to run codes written in the programming language R in order to ‘clean’ databases. <https://cran.r-project.org>

3.2. *Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis*

FCDA brings together Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and feminist theory to examine the reproduction, negotiation, and (counter) resistance of gender-based power asymmetries and ideology in discourse (Lazar 2005, 2018). According to Lazar, FCDA “entails mobilizing theory in order to create critical awareness and develop feminist strategies for resistance and change” (2005, 6). Consequently, it is conceptualized as a form of analytical activism and praxis-oriented research.

Additionally, FCDA provides a theoretical framework to examine social practices and social identities that help perpetuate “sexist attitudes and practices against other women” (Lazar 2007, 150) as well as to challenge such attitudes. As already mentioned in Section 2, women face constant (verbal) sexual aggression on digital platforms. Therefore, even if current postfeminist theory claims that feminism is no longer essential as gender equality has been achieved (Blevins 2018), FCDA can still significantly impact social change by examining how digital communication reflects, sustains, and challenges gender ideologies and patriarchal discourses.

3.3. *Procedure*

The present study employs a methodological synergy between Corpus-Assisted Discourse Analysis (CADS) (Partington et al. 2013) and FCDA (Lazar 2005) to identify the frequent linguistic patterns and evaluative resources used to enact discourses concerning sexual assault and violence. The corpora were analyzed separately and then compared to each other to obtain a fine-grained picture of such discourses.

The first step of the analysis involved the analysis of a list of keywords from each corpus to uncover key “topic[s] and the central elements” (Baker et al. 2008, 278) in each dataset. The online program *Sketch Engine*⁵ (Kilgarriff et al. 2014) was used to obtain lists of keywords. The corpora were compared to the reference corpus *English Web Corpus 2018*⁶ (EnTenTen2018), which is made of 36 billion words and contains texts retrieved from different Internet platforms. For the sake of brevity, only those most statistically frequent keywords relating to social actors and gender and violence that occurred in both corpora were further scrutinized.

After examining and comparing the keywords obtained in each corpus, they were carefully analyzed in context through the reading of their concordance lines (Baker and Levon 2015). They were later grouped according to topics and their potential to convey discourses relating to (sexual) violence against women.

⁵ <http://www.sketchengine.eu>.

⁶ <https://www.sketchengine.eu/ententen-english-corpus>.

4. Analysis and results

4.1. Keyword analysis

A keyword analysis was first performed to identify statistically significant words in both corpora. This way it was possible to examine linguistic and identity features specific to each dataset when contrasted to a reference corpus (RQ1, subsections 4.1 and 4.2) and to compare and gain insights into key discourses (RQ2, subsection 4.3). The analysis of the top 50 keywords of each corpus revealed the salience of gendered social actors—frequently, political social actors—as well as the presence of terms relating to the legal field, veracity, behavior, and evaluative lexis (see Table 2 and Appendices 1 and 2). Interestingly, the only reference to Dr. Ford was her maiden name *Blasey* in both lists.

It is also worth noting that both keyword lists featured *boofing* as the most statistically significant term. Moreover, ‘#KC’ also included the past form *boofed*. The word *boof* was used to refer to a phrase written on AsJ Kavanaugh’s senior yearbook page⁷ which, according to him, is an informal term for flatulence. However, some Twitter users discussed the possibility of it being a slang term to refer to having anal sex while drinking alcohol and/or consuming drugs⁸.

TABLE 2. List of keywords in each corpora.

Topic	#NoKC	#KC
Social actors	Kavanaugh, Blasey, Kav, Swetnick, Brett, Murkowski, Merrick, Grassley, Avenatti, Heitkamp, Manchin, Gorsuch, POTUS, Flake, GOP, repubs, rapist, misogynist, rapists, assaulter, abuser	Blasey, Kavanaugh, Swetnick, demoncrats, demonrats, DiFi, demorats, Kav, libtards, Avenatti, Grassley, Hirono, Flake, dems, SCJ, Murkowski, Manchin, Feinstein, Brett, Heitkamp, Mazie, Merrick, RBG, assaulter
Legal field	Assaulter, SCOTUS, accuser, accusers, polygraph	Assaulter, SCOTUS, accuser, polygraphs, accusers, polygraph

⁷ “Have you boofed yet?”

⁸ <https://www.vox.com/culture/2018/9/27/17905818/brett-kavanaughs-yearbook-boof>.

Topic	#NoKC	#KC
(Political) authorities	Kavanaugh, SCOTUS, Kav, Brett, Murkowski, Merrick, Grassley, Avenatti, Heitkamp, Manchin, Gorsuch, POTUS, Flake, GOP, repubs	Kavanaugh, demoncrats, demonrats, DiFi, demorats, Kav, libtards, Avenatti, Grassley, Hirono, Flake, dems, SCJ, Murkowski, Manchin, Feinstein, Brett, Heitkamp, Mazie, Merrick, RBG
Veracity	Perjurer, perjured, horseplay, perjury, liar, sham, lied, corroborating	Shitshow, uncorroborated, perjurer, perjured
Behavior	Belligerent, frat, unhinged, temperament, partisanship, partisan	Unhinged
Evaluation	Horseplay, disqualifying, unfit, disqualifies, disqualify,	Anti-Kavanaugh, demoncrats, demonrats, demorats, libtards, bigly, grandstanding
Alcohol	–	Kegger
Gender and violence	Boofing, assaulter, rapey, rapist, misogynist, misogynistic, rapists, assaulted, abuser, raped	Boofing, boofed, boof, assaulter, rapey, rapist, MeToo
Miscellaneous	Retweet, midterms	GTFOH, mid-terms, midterms, retweet, ICYMI

Among those social actors related to (political) authorities, the analysis revealed a significant emphasis on male Senators in both hashtags. On the other hand, female (political) authorities were more frequently featured in ‘#KC’, as ‘#NoKC’ only included the surnames *Heitkamp* and *Murkowski*. Additionally, the keyword *RBG* was also found to be associated with former AsJ Ruth Bader Ginsburg. These results suggest that most posts were published during the Hearing. Moreover, Senator Grassley was condemned by both corpora for supporting AsJ Kavanaugh’s nomination and for victimizing Dr. Ford—see examples 1 and 2—, whereas Senator Feinstein was accused of using the case as a political tool by Kavanaugh supporters—see example 3. In contrast, Senator Heitkamp was praised in ‘#NoKC’ for supporting Dr. Ford’s testimony, while no other Senator was mentioned in this regard—see example 4.

(1) CHUCK GRASSLEY is a RAPE APOLOGIST⁹ (#NoKC)

⁹ Examples partially reproduce X posts from the corpus to ensure authors’ anonymity and avoid the traceability of the original message. Grammar, spelling and punctuation have not been modified.

- (2) *Grassley* is the perfect example of how a victim gets re-victimized (#KC)
- (3) *DiFi* just needed a vehicle that would allow her to create chaos (#KC)
- (4) Thanking Senator *Heitkamp* for standing up for truth and justice (#NoKC)

Both lists were also comprised of words relating to different attitudes and forms of violence against women. However, as shown in Table 2, '#NoKC' included a higher number of keywords relating to gender and violence than the '#KC' dataset. For the sake of brevity and to focus on the research questions, the following subsections explore those keywords concerning the social actors AsJ Kavanaugh and Dr. Ford and gender and violence in context. Although some Senators did perform verbal violence against Dr. Ford, it is beyond the scope of this paper to examine the identity construction of these social actors. The following subsections discuss the analysis of such keywords and their collocations in context.

4.2. Victim(s) and Perpetrator(s)

4.2.1. Kavanaugh and GOP authorities

The collocate *assault* was found both in posts containing headlines commenting on the last Hearing and which frequently included Brett Kavanaugh as the grammatical actor of the violent sexual act—see example 5. Interestingly, there was only one tweet that only included the proper names *Brett* and *Christine*, with no surnames, and which defined Kavanaugh as a young perpetrator of sexual violence by highlighting the ages of both social actors—see example 6; see subsection 4.3.

- (5) Dr. Ford describing her *assault* by *Brett Kavanaugh* (#KC)
- (6) 1 July 1982: The day *17 yo Brett assaulted 15 yo Christine* (#KC)

Collocates of the keywords *rapist* and *abuser* revealed an explicit characterization of AsJ Kavanaugh as a perpetrator by constructing him as a (serial) sexual abuser of women—see examples 7 and 8. In addition, some users also highlighted AsJ Kavanaugh's race to denounce his social privilege—see example 9. This negative depiction of the Justice as a perpetrator was sometimes aggravated by his behavior and bias when collocating with other keywords such as *liar*, *angry*, and *partisan*, as in examples 10 and 11.

- (7) *Kavanaugh* who is an *abuser* of women (#NoKC)
- (8) *Kavanaugh* is a *serial rapist* (#NoKC)

- (9) *White male rapist* Kavanaugh (#KC)
 (10) Kavanaugh is a *liar*, a *drunk*, a *sexual abuser* and clearly *partisan* (#NoKC)
 (11) *Angry*, entitled, *partisan*, lying *abuser* completely *unfit* (#NoKC)

It was also frequent to find the keyword *rapist* as a collocate of *Supreme*, *Court*, *justice* and *SCOTUS* to express their disaffiliation with the nomination and to explicitly build his identity as that of a perpetrator and not of a legal authority—see example 12. These posts denounced the perpetuation of rape culture in American institutions, especially when discussing the role of the GOP in the confirmation process, such as *confirm* and *want* in example 13. Moreover, the collocates *woman*, *Ford* and *misconduct* built Kavanaugh’s identity as a perpetrator of (sexual) violence. Although *Ford* frequently collocated with terms relating to sexual violence, it was also observed that users commented on the symbolic violence that Kavanaugh exerted on her by ignoring and diminishing her testimony, as in example 14.

- (12) The American People don’t want a *Rapist* as *SCOTUS Justice* (#NoKC)
 (13) Now they want a *rapist* as their *supreme court justice* (#KC)
 (14) *Brett didn’t watch* Ford’s testimony (#NoKC)

It is worth mentioning that the analysis of the most statistically significant keywords *boofing*, *boofed* as well as the keyword *boof* in context revealed that they were used in both corpora to disaffiliate from Kavanaugh and to construct his identity as that of a perpetrator and a liar—see example 15. However, these keywords did not suggest that AsJ Kavanaugh committed that kind of sexual intercourse but focused on the fact that he did not mention what X users considered to be its real meaning, which questioned the validity of his testimony, usually concerning the sexual assault allegations, as in example 16.

- (15) He *lied* about ‘*boofing*’, ‘*devil’s triangle*’, and ‘*ralphing*¹⁰’ (#NoKC)
 (16) If you *lie* about the meanings of slang words (*boof*, *Devil’s Triangle*) under oath, is that perjury? (#KC)

Nevertheless, there was a group of users who supported Kavanaugh’s innocence and, consequently, constructed him as the actual victim. Users in ‘#KC’ denounced the lack of evidence presented by Dr. Ford’s legal team—see example 17—and questioned the credibility of the claims—see example

10 In this context, ralphing means vomiting after drinking too much alcohol. See <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=meet%20Ralph>.

18. Additionally, the 3-gram *Roe v. Wade*¹¹ was found to be used to celebrate Kavanaugh's confirmation concerning his views on abortion and the potential situation of repealing the rule (see example 19).

(17) I don't believe there is *evidence* to show *Kav* guilt (#KC)

(18) Dr. Ford is as *believable* as Judge *Kavanaugh* (#KC)

(19) Bye bye *Roe v. Wade* spare no one *Kav* (#KC)

As a result, and as shown in examples 17 and 18 above, this group of supporters displayed Dr. Ford as a perpetrator—or a tool—of political violence. This portrayal of Dr. Ford is further developed in the following section.

Interestingly, '#KC' established a contrast between the identities of Donald Trump and AsJ Kavanaugh as perpetrators. AsJ Kavanaugh's identity was negotiated vis-à-vis Trump, as in example 20 with the use of the keyword *misogynist*, whose identity was also negotiated as a perpetrator and a chauvinist—see example 21. However, whereas Trump was constructed as a self-acknowledged and well-known sexual assaulter with the adjective *confessed*—see example 22, some users, even if opposing to his nomination, mitigated the claims on AsJ Kavanaugh and, thus, used the adjective *alleged* considering the principle of presumption of innocence—see example 23.

(20) It takes one *misogynist* to love another *misogynist* (#NoKC)

(21) His hateful, *misogynist*, racist leadership leads me to tears (#NoKC)

(22) Complicit to a *confessed sexual assaulter* (#NoKC)

(23) *Alleged sexual assaulter* will now be judging the rest of us (#KC)

(24) *Disgusting, racist, misogynist, old white* male Republicans (#NoKC)

(25) The Legislative Branch is *misogynist* (#NoKC)

Similarly, members of the GOP were also constructed as misogynists, especially when collocating with social identities and racist and sexist ideologies—see example 24. In addition, some tweeters also denounced the misogynistic views of the members who compose the Senate and the U.S. Government, as in example 25. Therefore, X users expressed their repulsion—*disgusting* in example 25—and voiced their concerns about the presence of sexual predators and socially privileged men with misogynist and sexist ideologies in American higher institutions.

11 *Roe v. Wade* refers to the 1973 law that protected women's freedom to have an abortion. It was overturned with AsJ Kavanaugh's support in 2023.

4.2.2. Dr. Ford

Analysis of keywords in context revealed two different stances in both corpora. Whereas '#NoKC' expectedly only included tweets supporting Dr. Ford, X users expressed mixed opinions in '#KC'. It is undeniable that, in this case study, the identities of the victim and the perpetrator were negotiated *vis-à-vis* each other. Therefore, the previous section not only displayed the identity construction of Kavanaugh and GOP authorities as perpetrators or victims but, consequently, also depicted Dr. Ford as either a victim or perpetrator of violence—see examples 5, 6 and 14 for the victim identity; examples 17 and 18 for the perpetrator identity.

Additionally, Dr. Ford was also displayed as a victim of verbal and symbolic violence, as briefly mentioned in the previous section. The adjective *sexual*, together with the collocate *Trump*, mentioned Donald Trump's mocking attitude towards Dr. Ford when collocating with *Ford*—see example 26. Moreover, the verb *listen* was used to highlight the fact that male Senators were not paying attention and interrupted Dr. Ford's testimony during the hearing, as in example 27.

- (26) *Trump mocked Christine Blasey Ford's sexual assault testimony (#NoKC)*
 (27) Shut up and *listen* to what Dr. *Blasey Ford* has to say (#NoKC)

Further solidarity with Dr. Ford was expressed with the collocate *truth* to positively evaluate the veracity of her testimony—see examples 28 and 29. This result contrasts with those observed with the collocate *Trump*, which denounced the former President's negative behavior and victimization of Dr. Ford, as seen in the previous examples.

- (28) Dr. Christine *Blasey Ford* is telling the *truth* (#KC)
 (29) Proud of Christine *Blasey Ford* for speaking her *truth* (#KC)

The depiction of Dr. Ford as a victim-survivor of sexual assault also sheds some light on the different discourses concerning sexual violence in American society, as well as on the use of the microblogging platform to perform online feminism. The following section discusses the enactment of such discourses in both corpora.

4.3. Sexual Violence and (Anti)Feminist Activism

It is no surprise that some keywords contributed not only to the depiction of victim-perpetrator identities but also to the emergence and enactment of discourses of sexual violence. Although some keywords relating to gender and violence were employed to construct AsJ Kavanaugh and Dr. Ford as the

perpetrator and the victim respectively, the main focus of others, such as the verbs *assaulted* and *raped*, was to share first-person and third-person stories of sexual violence.

Most of the examined concordance lines that included the keywords *assaulted* and *raped* started with the phrases “*I was sexually assaulted*” or “*I was raped*” to share personal experiences of abuse, in which victim-survivors presented themselves as narrators of their own experiences. Some users would also include the collocate and adverb *brutally* in their narrative to stress cruelty and physical pain—see example 30. In other cases, users would employ *#NoKavanaughConfirmation* to share stories of sexual violence from people close to them—see example 31. However, collocations concerned with close relatives—*friend* and *boyfriend*—were also found to be the agent of the sentence containing keywords concerning sexually violent acts, thus accentuating that sexual violence was exerted in contexts of familiarity or intimate relationships—see examples 32 and 33.

(30) *I was brutally raped (#NoKC)*

(31) *I know someone who has been sexually assaulted (#NoKC)*

(32) *I was sexually assaulted/raped by two friends (#NoKC)*

(33) *I was raped by my boyfriend (#NoKC)*

These findings corroborate those of Palomino-Manjón (2022), who argues most personal narratives of sexual violence published in social media do not omit the presence of the perpetrator, as opposed to narratives of abuse in traditional media, to highlight the presence of close perpetrators and the different (social) contexts in which sexual violence can occur.

Moreover, generic (male) identities—*person*, *men*, *man*, and *boys*—also emphasized that men were the perpetrators of sexual violence—see example 34. Sometimes, these experiences would also be used to construct AsJ Kavanaugh as a perpetrator of sexual violence—*him* in example 35. In contrast, women were described as the victims of such abuse, most frequently by sharing statistics on sexual violence, such as in example 36.

(34) *I still remember the boy who assaulted me (#NoKC)*

(35) *I was sexually assaulted by men like him (#NoKC)*

(36) *1 in every 6 women has been sexually assaulted, raped or suffered uncompleted rape (#NoKC)*

In addition, collocates of sexual acts regarding age and time, as well as nouns concerning education—*high* and *school*—, illustrate that most of these victim-survivors suffered sexual violence at a young age—see examples 37, 38 and 39.

The collocate *drugged* revealed that some Tweeters denounced their incapacity to consent to sexual acts as they were under the influence of drugs—see example 39—as well as to raise awareness of sexual violence in American party culture—see example 40.

- (37) I was sexually *assaulted/raped* from ages 6-12 (#NoKC)
- (38) I was *assaulted* twice in high school (#NoKC)
- (39) Grown men planned, *drugged*, and gang *raped* me at 17 (#NoKC)
- (40) Parties where girls were *drugged* and *raped* (#NoKC)

Tweeters in ‘#NoKC’ strongly denounced and condemned the presence of rape culture in American institutions and the lack of action towards sexual perpetrators—see example 41. Interestingly, some users used *#NoKavanaughConfirmation* to discuss the meaning of the saying “boys will be boys”¹², which should not be used to shield and justify sexual violence exerted by young men, as in example 42.

- (41) No more protection for *rapists* and *predators* (#NoKC)
- (42) *Boys can be boys*..just not attempted *rapists*.. (#NoKC)

Moreover, the corpora frequently included posts expressing solidarity with Dr. Ford. The collocates *we*, *woman* and *support* of *Blasey* revealed an in-group of X users who disclosed collective support for the accuser and gave credibility to her accusation with the use of the verbs *believe* and *support*—see examples 43 and 44; see subsection 4.2.2. The verb *stand* and the noun *solidarity* were part of the same 3-gram *stand in solidarity*, which occurred 38 times in the corpus with posts such as in example 45. In addition, *stand* also appeared in 21 instances on its own to express solidarity and support—see example 46.

- (43) We *believe* Dr. Christine *Blasey* Ford (#NoKC)
- (44) *Women support* Christine *Blasey* Ford (#NoKC)
- (45) I *stand in solidarity* with Christine *Blasey* Ford
- (46) I *stand* with Christine *Blasey* Ford (#NoKC)

Moreover, the opposition to Kavanaugh’s nomination also created out-groups of women and users in ‘#NoKC’. The plural pronoun *we* was used to create in-groups of users who opposed AsJ Kavanaugh’s nomination—see example 47. Additionally, there was also an in-group of women who disaffiliated from those

12 Traditionally accepted aggressive and noisy male behavior.

who supported Kavanaugh. As can be seen in example 48, the user employed the adjective *real* to emphasize the fact that being a woman implies the support of victim-survivors in opposition to predators.

(47) *We do not support Kavanaugh (#KC)*

(48) *Real women don't empower attempted rapists (#NoKC)*

However, the qualitative analysis also unveiled that a considerable number of users expressed their affiliation with Kavanaugh in '#KC', especially with the collocate *support*. Although some users also expressed their disaffiliation from the nominee, such as in examples 47 and 48, the verb *support* was frequently found in tweets that advocated for Kavanaugh's confirmation, while X users explicitly mentioned their gender as women or the fact that many women were siding with him—see examples 49 and 50. This way, this group of female users expressed disaffiliation from an out-group of women and allies who supported Dr. Ford's testimony and, therefore, from feminists.

(49) *I am a woman. And I support Brett Kavanaugh (#KC)*

(50) *Women rally in support of Brett Kavanaugh (#KC)*

Contrarily, some X users used *#KavanaughConfirmation* to demonize and disaffiliate from the feminist movement. Thus, some posts named the MeToo Movement as a political tool against the GOP—see example 51—and claimed it was being used against men. Therefore, users spread anti-feminist discourses and denied the testimony of Dr. Ford—see example 52—, which resulted in the keyword *MeToo* being used to disaffiliate from Dr. Ford and the Democratic Party.

(51) *Stop Democrats they are using the MeToo movement (#KC)*

(52) *The Metoo movement and false allegations (#KC)*

Overall, these results illustrate that *#NoKavanaughConfirmation* was used to oppose AsJ Kavanaugh's confirmation as well as to denounce American rape culture and affiliate with Dr. Ford by sharing experiences of sexual violence. On the other hand, the analysis also reveals the multifunctionality of *#KavanaughConfirmation* and its use to spread both feminist and antifeminist discourses.

5. Conclusion

The present research aimed to examine how victim-perpetrator identities were negotiated during AsJ Kavanaugh's confirmation on X, as well as to identify

discourses concerning sexual violence in the microblogging platform. To do so, a methodological synergy of CADS and FCDA was carried out to identify key linguistic patterns in two corpora of X posts which included *#KavanaughConfirmation* and *#NoKavanaughConfirmation*.

As expected, due to the nature of the event, AsJ Kavanaugh was depicted as the main perpetrator of sexual aggression as he was described as a sexual assaulter and a (potential) rapist. X users expressed their disaffiliation from the nominee and denounced corruption and the lack of investigation by the GOP. In addition, users expressed their repulsion and voiced their concerns regarding the presence of sexual predators and misogynists in American higher institutions, and denounced that rape culture, together with social privilege, helps them avoid being punished to the detriment of their victims. However, *#KC* showed more frequent instances of support for AsJ Kavanaugh than the *#NoKC* dataset due to the nature of the hashtag. Moreover, AsJ Kavanaugh's supporters accused the Democratic Party of using Dr. Ford's allegations and the MeToo Movement as political tools. This depiction of the Democratic Party as a perpetrator is linked to those discourses of male victimization spread by far-right politics which constructed AsJ Kavanaugh and men as victims of feminism (Boyle 2019; House 2023). Thus, *#KavanaughConfirmation* also constructed Kavanaugh as a victim.

Contrarily, both corpora, especially *#NoKC*, featured tweets that supported Dr. Ford's testimony. Dr. Ford was not only described as a victim of sexual assault but also as a victim of symbolic violence due to the re-victimization and the lack of concern in her testimony. However, as previously mentioned, she was also portrayed as a perpetrator and a liar by Kavanaugh's supporters. These results might be limited by the fact that only the keyword *Blasey* explicitly referred to Dr. Ford and it was expected that not all users mentioned her using her maiden surname.

One of the significant findings of the study was the presence of a safe space within *#NoKC* for Dr. Ford and victim-survivors of sexual violence. Dr. Ford's testimony was given credibility by users who expressed their support for Dr. Ford and solidarity with her experience. The collective display of support for her experience serves as a positive reflection of American society's inclination to stand with victim-survivors. Moreover, the corpus also included personal narratives of sexual violence. Victim-survivors used *#NoKavanaughConfirmation* to share their experiences of sexual violence with other users to justify the many reasons why women do not report sexual violence. In these narratives, men were constructed as perpetrators and sometimes were compared to AsJ Kavanaugh to denounce social male privilege.

The data analysis also underlines the multifunctionality of both hashtags. On the one hand, *#NoKavanaughConfirmation* was not only used to voice

opposition against the nomination but also to report on a discursive protest aimed at resisting patriarchal discourses that tried to invalidate Dr. Ford's testimony of sexual assault (Jones et al. 2022; Loney-Howes 2018; Palomino-Manjón 2022). Hence, it can be argued that *#NoKavanaughConfirmation* played a role as a form of online networked feminism during the confirmation process to express solidarity with Dr. Ford with other hashtags such as *#WhyIDidntReport* (Palomino-Manjón 2022) and *#WeBelieveChristine* (Deal et al. 2020). On the other hand, *#KavanaughConfirmation* featured a wider variety of discourses, as opposed to its counterpart. Among such discourses, it was possible to identify feminist discourses, which supported Dr. Ford, as well as discourses of male victimization and antifeminist spread by Kavanaugh's supporters.

The study of gender in social media has been gaining momentum, garnering the attention of critical discourse analysts. This paper provided a deeper understanding of how X is used to rally around topics of social relevance, such as those of sexual violence and aggression. Moreover, it contributed to our understanding of how users employ X to (re)negotiate and reproduce hegemonic patriarchal discourses. However, it also uncovered instances where X users employed the platform to challenge these dominant narratives and promote feminist discourses.

It can be contended that this type of digital activism is not enough to effect real change (Chiluwa and Ifukor 2015) since AsJ Kavanaugh was confirmed. In addition to this, it can be argued that the data sample may not be fully representative of all online communities or the wider American society. Consequently, it may be necessary to consider alternative sources to gain more insights into the topic at hand.

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APPENDIX I: List of keywords in '#NoKC'

Keyword	Frequency (focus)	Relative frequency (focus)	Score
boofing	15	30.29599	5,161.308
kavanaugh	3240	6,543.934	4,737.115
assaulter	62	125.2234	4,494.299
blasey	259	523.1108	3,812.63
rapey	31	62.61172	2,920.873
scotus	685	1,383.517	2,426.691
kav	57	115.1248	2,089.248
perjurer	31	62.61172	1,814.232
swetnick	23	46.45385	1,677.976
perjured	58	117.1445	980.813
horseplay	23	46.45385	530.214
rapist	217	438.282	440.763
murkowski	65	131.2826	431.463
disqualifying	58	117.1445	382.649
merrick	110	222.1706	347.895
retweet	57	115.1248	343.605
grassley	112	226.2101	316.152
avenatti	20	40.39466	303.468
heitkamp	17	34.33546	298.143
perjury	153	309.0191	283.165
accuser	100	201.9733	276.201
unfit	255	515.0319	251.603
misogynist	48	96.94717	250.239
liar	371	749.3209	243.303

Keyword	Frequency (focus)	Relative frequency (focus)	Score
midterms	48	96.94717	237.649
brett	571	1,153.267	233.909
accusers	67	135.3221	232.159
manchin	29	58.57225	223.636
sham	213	430.2031	219.739
belligerent	89	179.7562	214.269
misogynistic	46	92.90771	205.026
frat	47	94.92744	204.643
unhinged	59	119.1642	203.608
disqualifies	16	32.31572	202.347
gorsuch	35	70.69065	201.902
rapists	75	151.48	198.183
potus	47	94.92744	197.531
polygraph	57	115.1248	195.554
lied	448	904.8403	194.619
flake	136	274.6837	190.793
temperament	247	498.874	185.432
corroborating	32	64.63145	179.19
assaulted	290	585.7225	179.064
gop	718	1,450.168	172.16
repubs	17	34.33546	168.476
disqualify	63	127.2432	167.965
abuser	86	173.697	160.374
partisanship	51	103.0064	158.978
raped	309	624.0974	153.682
partisan	321	648.3342	145.281

APPENDIX 2: List of keywords in '#KC'

Keyword	Frequency (focus)	Frequency (reference)	Score
boofing	58	219	5716.511
boofed	25	99	4517.978
blasey	937	6,125	3950.94
anti-kavanaugh	37	203	3882.108
kavanaugh	8917	62,076	3734.425
swetnick	127	1,200	2653.959
gtfoh	16	197	1720.482
assaulter	66	1,208	1370.434
rapey	48	919	1295.498
demoncrats	20	415	1131.311
demonrats	25	534	1123.46
difi	26	559	1120.033
demorats	19	457	984.825
kav	88	2,433	923.929
scotus	800	25,593	811.803
accuser	850	32,839	672.479
libtards	42	1,685	631.643
kegger	27	1,096	615.688
avenatti	128	5,941	556.32
boof	40	1,932	526.407
mid-terms	50	2471	517.038
grassley	633	32,131	511.819
assaulters	15	786	469.677
hirono	78	4329	463.95
midterms	282	18,300	399.924
flake	958	64,697	384.967
bigly	19	1300	367.556
dems	1586	115,727	356.405
scj	22	1,572	353.996
murkowski	182	136,38	346.05
polygraphs	25	1,860	341.448
shitshow	23	1,715	340.015

Keyword	Frequency (focus)	Frequency (reference)	Score
accusers	326	26,167	323.566
uncorroborated	51	4,216	311.401
manchin	136	11,733	300.412
feinstein	473	42,127	291.798
perjurer	17	1,507	285.005
polygraph	289	26,429	284.004
brett	2413	221,671	283.142
rapist	435	44,671	253.088
retweet	144	15,022	248.648
heitekamp	46	5,134	231.086
metoo	23	2,583	227.711
mazie	31	3,604	221.034
icymi	30	3,496	220.428
grandstanding	93	11,193	215.301
perjured	42	5,326	203.45
merrick	221	28,673	200.21
unhinged	183	26,274	180.896
rbg	47	6,724	180.648

