

The Court of Social Media Opinion: Examining How Twitter Users Respond to the Retrial of Footballer Ched Evans

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Abstract

Media coverage of rape allegations now generates vast attention across social media. This study investigates perceptions towards a high-profile criminal trial concerning an allegation of rape against professional footballer Ched Evans. Using discourse analysis, we investigate ways in which Twitter users invoked or challenged stereotypes following the 2016 re-trial. Sixty-one tweets were analysed, revealing perceptions surrounding defendant and complainant credibility through a sports fandom lens. Discursive strategies involved perpetuation of rape mythology as a mechanism through which football fans constructed the defendant as innocent and the complainant as untrustworthy. Implications surround targeted interventions to debunk stereotypes among British football fans.

Key terms: *Rape trial; Ched Evans; Rape myths; Sports fandom; Football; Twitter; Discourse analysis*

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Introduction

Globally, accurate prevalence rates concerning sexual victimisation remain unknown and are difficult to reliably ascertain (Widanaralalage et al., 2022). Examination of recorded crime figures, from the small proportion of victims that do report, highlight the pervasiveness of the problem (United Nations [UN], 2018). Population-based studies emphasise the scale of this human rights violation – estimating that millions of women, children and men worldwide have experienced sexual and physical violence (Custers & McNallie, 2016; Debowska et al., 2021; Fray et al., 2023; Nyúl et al., 2018; Sharratt et al., 2023; UN, 2018). In fact, despite some variation between regions, social groups and varying types of sexual offences (see Sowersby et al., 2022; Willmott, Boduszek & Robinson, 2018b), global estimates suggest that one in three women and girls (World Health Organisation [WHO], 2013) and between 5-25% of men and boys (Debowska et al, 2018a; WHO, 2002), will be sexually victimised during their lifetime. Despite this, unreported crime survey data indicate that sexual offences remain dramatically underreported, with most victims of sexual assault and abuse never formally reporting their experience to authorities (Boduszek et al., 2017; ONS, 2021; Willmott et al., 2021) (see Daly & Bouhours, 2010 for a multi-country investigation).

In seeking to understand victim-survivor decisions to not report their abuse, studies have identified several recurring reasons. Fear of not being believed by loved ones or the authorities (Lilley et al., 2023a), fear of experiencing further trauma when recounting their victimisation to the police or during court hearings (Murphy et al., 2022; Richardson et al., 2019; Willmott., 2018), and a general lack of faith in the criminal justice system (Hudspith, 2022) are all frequently cited reasons throughout the UK and North America (Johnson, 2017). Another prominent reason given across a diverse range of countries, includes feeling that their experience was not serious or violent enough to warrant reporting, typically based upon

misconceptions and stereotypes surrounding what a 'real rape' typically involves (Cleere & Lynn, 2013; Cohn et al., 2013). Indeed, previous studies have established a clear link between rates of reporting of sexual violence and the proliferation of rape myths within that society (Sable et al., 2006; Flowe et al., 2009). Rape myths can be broadly defined as widely held beliefs and stereotypes which surround rape and other sexual offences, that serve to downplay and trivialise such offences, as well as blaming victims for offences perpetrated against them (see Willmott et al., 2021 for a more detailed account of rape myths). A large body of evidence has established that certain social groups are more likely to endorse these stereotypes and falsehoods including hypermasculine, male-dominated groups often involved in English football (Forbes et al., 2006; McRay, 2015; Navarro and Tewskbury, 2017; Amory, 2018; Lindsay et al., In Review).

Football has a distinguished place within the fabric of British culture (Nurka, 2013). Like many contact sports, football is a traditionally male dominated sport in which masculinity is celebrated and endorsed, where male bonds are strengthened (Flood, 2008). Prior theorising and research indicate that male bonding can reinforce gender principles that serve to fortify hyper-masculine attitudes (Flood, 2008; Schwartz, 2020). Thus, sexual dominance of women is one example by which male bonding within football can become validated (Flood, 2008; Amory, 2018). In an early study by Forbes et al. (2006), men that participated in contact sports whilst at school in secondary education, more frequently engaged in psychological and physical violence against intimate female partners, showed greater tendencies for sexual coercion, and expressed more sexist attitudes and hostility towards women than their non-contact sport playing male counterparts. Importantly, they were also found to be more tolerant and accepting of rape myths. Likewise, McRay (2015) found that male athletes were much more likely to perpetrate sexual assault than men from the general population. It has therefore been proposed that for some men, their engagement with football and crucially the associated male dominated

peer-groups therein, may influence the likelihood that they will endorse hyper-masculine attitudes within the broader culture (Conroy et al., 2023; Schwartz, 2020; Lindsay et al., In Review).

It is possible that in-group membership within sports such as football may produce bias when an allegation against a prominent footballer is made. Footballers are depicted as national, sometimes international, heroes. As such, the popularity of footballers accused of sexual offences may encourage football fans and the broader football community to seek to excuse their actions to help maintain a positive perception of valued in-group members with whom partial identity is shared (Nurka, 2013; Sowersby et al., 2022). Moreover, Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; 2004) suggests that bias is produced as people are driven to view participants of their in-group more positively (Nyúl et al., 2018; Willmott & Ioannou, 2017). Previous research has demonstrated that in-group perpetrators are much less likely to be attributed blame for problematic behaviours when compared to out-group members. In this case, victims of sexual violence are treated as the responsible or blameworthy party (Deamer et al., 2022; George & Martinez, 2002; Harrison et al., 2008; Murphy, 2022). Consequently, football fans may seek to protect the accused through minimisation or justification strategies which serve to maintain positive regard for the in-group member with whom partial identity is shared (Custers & McNallie, 2017).

Case characteristics surrounding how consistent an allegation of sexual assault is with perceptions of the “real rape” stereotype, can also have an influence on the perception of those involved (Nyúl et al., 2018). Moreover, a rape allegation is perceived as “real rape” if the perpetrator is a stranger, uses a weapon, or physical force (McGregor et al., 2000). The absence of such factors has been found to influence perceptions surrounding whether a sexual assault is likely to be considered a true offence of rape and the amount of blame that is likely to be

attributed to the victim (Sims et al., 2007). Similarly, the perception of what amounts to a ‘real rape’ can also be influenced by a perpetrator’s status. Research identified that characteristics such as social status can influence mock juror perceptions surrounding the veracity of an allegation of sexual assault, guilt ratings, and sentencing decisions (Knight et al., 2001; Parsons, & Mojtahedi, 2022; Pica et al., 2020). Clearly then social constructions and societal misconceptions surrounding who is likely to commit sexual offences can have an important influence upon judgements made concerning perceived guilt, truthfulness and culpability (See Willmott et al., 2018a).

To date, a small number of qualitative studies have explored how public perceptions towards the culpability of an athlete accused of a sexual offence may be influenced by the athlete’s status, notoriety and shared identity as a product of in-group membership, alongside the contributing role that endorsement of rape myths may have (Nurka, 2013; Waterhouse-Watson, 2016; 2019). However, with much of this research being carried out with a North American context where support for sports teams and favoured athletes is akin to a deep-rooted reverence, the need to explore public and fan perceptions towards such a case within an English context remains important. Furthermore, identifying the specific social spheres within which rape culture is maintained and perpetuated, particularly within those spheres within which hyper-masculinity is encouraged and violence against women is more prone; is vital (Amory, 2018; Forbes et al., 2006; Sowersby et al., 2022). This is given further contextual importance given recent efforts to create sexual coercion and assault prevention initiatives (See Conroy et al., 2023; Hudspith et al., 2023). Generally, these male-focused psychoeducational programmes often centre on increasing empathy, improving knowledge of the role of social factors in contributing not only to sexual assault but also bystander and peer supportive behaviours (Wright et al., 2020). Indeed, a range of intervention programmes specifically seek to address

rape-supportive attitudes and cognitions and aim to increase victim empathy (see Boduszek et al., 2019; Debowska et al., 2019; Hudspith et al., 2023).

Rape culture and the perpetuation of rape myths play a significant role in maintaining sexual violence in society and is particularly damaging to victims of sexual violence (Frankiuk et al., 2008). Survivors decision to report the incident can be influenced by societal factors, thus exploring the barriers they face is fundamental (Nyúl et al., 2018). Cases involving a high-profile individual which are consequently widely reported news events, are consequently significant in the conversations about sexual violence and where problematic attitudes can be reinforced or challenged (see Sowersby et al., 2022; Waterhouse-Watson, 2018). This is given further importance when considering the role that social media environments may play in creating and maintaining seemingly anonymous spaces (Jane, 2014) in which peer supportive echo-chambers can emerge, manifesting particularly derogatory and pro-rape discussions. For example, in the case of the Warwick University ‘rape chat scandal’ and the broader, more established context of sexual harassment being trivialised through humour and normalised within the media (Montemurro, 2003), online spaces (Bemiller & Schneider, 2010); and ultimately contributing to a rape-supportive culture (Lockyer & Savigny, 2020; Sowersby et al., 2022).

This exploratory research therefore aims to add to the existing literature by exploring a small number of social media users’ reactions to, and utilisations of, rape myth stereotypes when discussing a sexual assault allegation made against a famous British footballer (the case of Ched Evans). The authors were interested in examining how Twitter users utilised their discourse to justify and make sense of allegations surrounding a high-profile case; how the user positions themselves through their justifications, and how football fandom manifests in a user’s position. The research question in this study was therefore to explore the ways in which sports

fans' views of high-profile footballer rape accusations are reflective of broader sexual violence discourses.

Methodology

Design

A qualitative research design was employed whereby discourse analytical techniques were utilised to make sense of the social context and basis of the written discourse under scrutiny. This method was considered most appropriate for the current study given the emphasis on producing autonomous data. Tweets of reactions, expressed through language, to the 2016 retrial of a well-known British football player accused of rape, were the basis of subsequent analysis.

The Ched Evans case – a brief overview

On the 29th May 2011 footballers Ched Evans and Clayton McDonald had been on a night out in Wales. Both men are known to have been drinking throughout the evening which concluded in a fast-food restaurant (Forster, 2016). CCTV footage showed a 19-year-old woman (the complainant) stumble and subsequently fall onto the floor of the restaurant, with Evans shown to point and then walk past her. McDonald and the complainant are then known to have left the restaurant together, travelling by taxi, booked by Evans, to a local hotel. McDonald is known to have text Evans saying, "got a bird". Hotel staff later gave evidence that upon arrival at the hotel the woman appeared to be very intoxicated. Evans is then known to have also travelled to the hotel where he obtains a key for McDonald's room by deceiving hotel staff, telling them that his friend no longer needed the room. Evans enters the room and sexual intercourse is said to have taken place between the complainant and the two footballers, which the complainant later reports to the police as taking place without her consent (Forster, 2016). Evans left via a

fire exit door, later claiming that this was because he realised and regretted being unfaithful to his partner (Forster, 2016). Ryan Roberts, Evans' younger brother and another friend were known to have been watching through the hotel window and attempted to film the incident (Forster, 2016). At an initial trial Ched Evans was convicted and sentenced to five years in prison for the offence of rape. However, after serving two and half years of his prison sentence, Evans was granted early release in October 2014 to serve the remainder of his sentence in the community on license. After his release, Evans' legal team requested a review of the case. In March 2016, Evans' case was granted an appeal hearing in the Court of Appeal where his conviction was quashed. It was ruled that the conviction against him for rape was unsafe after new evidence emerged, and a subsequent retrial began in October 2016 lasting two weeks (Royal, 2019). During the retrial, new evidence was heard from two men who had previously had sexual relations with the complainant and the woman's sexual history was presented as evidence in defence of Ched Evans. He was subsequently found not guilty (Royal, 2019). Private investigators employed by Evans are reported to have offered a £50,000 reward in exchange for this witness testimony (BBC, 2019). During and after the trial and retrial, the complainant was repeatedly named and publicly criticised across social media – something which is illegal in England and Wales as complainants are afforded the right to remain anonymous. Consequently, she has received multiple relocations and identities in attempts to protect her (Royal, 2019). Evans was re-signed after his acquittal and continues to play professional football at the time of writing (Victor, 2022).

Sample and procedures

Publicly available discursive data were obtained from the online social media platform, Twitter. This platform was selected as it offers unrestricted access to unsolicited and thus naturally occurring data, known as tweets. These tweets are thought to represent individual socio-cultural

attitudes and beliefs towards specific social phenomena (McCauley et al., 2018). Examination of such naturally occurring data is growing in popularity and is now a powerful mechanism by which public perceptions towards sensitive issues can be investigated. Especially, views concerning sexual violence (see D'Avanzato et al., 2022; Sowersby et al., 2022). The retrial presented a unique opportunity to explore unsolicited, self-selected public reactions to the case and jury verdict. Specifically, the main focus in this study was to explore public reaction to the retrial and therefore the threshold criterion for the inclusion of tweets was one month in total - October 2016 (when the defendant was acquitted that was widely publicised).

The collection of tweets analysed started with a twitter search utilising search terms including 'Ched Evans', AND 're-trial', OR 'acquittal'. Tweets were either collected as a singular tweet or as a response to a thread (i.e., a series of related tweets within a group discussion about the case). Resulting tweets were assessed for relevance, ambiguity, vagueness, and those which lacked clarity, were peripheral or tangential to the context of the case or the area of study were excluded. Importantly, given the complainants right to remain anonymous, a large number of tweets were excluded that included her name within the twitter chat 'thread'. The resulting sixty-one unique users' tweets therefore constitute the dataset examined. Twitter users whose tweets were included in the data set were represented with acronyms, utilising 'U1' for User 1 and so forth. Alternatively, to represent users whose accounts were overtly self-declaring football supporters, 'FU1' were used to express 'Football User 1' and so forth. As suggested by Waterhouse-Watson (2019) football fan status can be established from a user's profile description through the mention of a football club's name or nickname; a photo featuring a club logo or player, or the use of a hashtag indicating support for a particular club (Waterhouse-Watson, 2019). This was the standardised means by which football fan status was attributed or not.

Data Analysis

Discursive psychology, a popular version of discourse analysis, informed the analytical approach undertaken in that this approach allows the researchers to generate psychological meaning from the participants individual discursive perspective (Dlamini et al., 2017; Willig, 2013). This approach focuses upon how individuals utilise language and text to achieve social or interpersonal objectives (Meredith et al., 2022; Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Willig, 2013). In the current study, this concerned individual constructions of truth based upon rape mythology and widely held stereotypes, as well as how fandom influences a user's position. Prior to data analysis, tweets were recorded and stored in a Microsoft Word document. Data were subsequently coded with particular attention paid to any perpetuation of rape mythology, how the tweet positioned the writer, as well as how the position of the writer differed if they were considered a football fan. Quotations used to support the analysis are cited exactly; all punctuations and spellings are original.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was granted by the Psychology Department Research Ethics Committee at the host institution. The University Academic Research Governance Framework and British Psychological Society [BPS] (2017) ethical guidelines were consulted and adhered to for this research project. As the research was concerned with examining publicly visible internet microblogs, there was no attempt made to directly interact with the users. Consequently, it was not necessary to seek consent from the users as the data were publicly accessible. In the interest of affording anonymity as general good practice, pseudonyms were assigned to each user to maintain their anonymity. Though the project did not involve direct physical risk; psychological risks including secondary victimisation and vicarious trauma were considered and managed among the research team. Sexual violence and the assessment of public

perceptions surrounding such, can be an emotionally challenging topic. To ensure the mental well-being of the researchers and reduce the risk of emotional exhaustion, the researchers scheduled regular breaks and debriefs with one another through the process of data collection and analysis.

Results and Discussion

Data analysis identified the following discursive strategies: *Rape myths and stereotypes*; *Outrage*, and *Career*. The tweets do not necessarily precisely fit into one of the discursive categories identified.

Rape myths and stereotypes

The adoption of rape myths as a discursive strategy to shift blame, was constantly identified throughout the data set. Predominantly, rape myths were utilised by users to construct a narrative of innocence on behalf of the accused. Throughout Western society, pervasive rape myths are prominent among varied groups (Debowska et al., 2018; Warehouse-Watson, 2019; Willmott et al., 2018) and prove somewhat resistant to interventions designed to challenge them (Hudspith et al., 2021). Perhaps most prominent are the myths that are utilised to cast doubt on the authenticity of allegations or attribute blame for victimisation towards a victim of assault, such as the claim is false; the woman lied; a woman scorned, and particularly when the accused is famous; the woman is doing it for the money (Smith & Skinner, 2017; Smith, 2019).

Out of the sixty-one tweets analysed, thirty-five of the posts conjured rape myths and stereotypes. These included the ubiquitous myth that women lie about sexual assault; and the stereotypes that women are to blame by “putting themselves in that position”; that the woman “wanted it”, and that the woman was regretful thus making the complaint. These rape myths and stereotypes were usually written directly, however some users evoked a myth or stereotype

by covertly blaming the victim, including six users who proclaimed that as the accused was acquitted, the claim is thus false and that the woman should be prosecuted herself:

@FU7 – “So true but neither is what the girl did she at least deserves same jail time he had”

This tweet is in reply to a thread attached to a sports reporter’s original tweet which stated: *‘I pray Ched Evans acquittal does not send the wrong message to other footballers. He may not be a rapist but what he did was not okay’*. Despite the user acknowledging that they felt that Ched Evans’ actions were wrong, the user appears to disregard any blame ascribed to the accused and goes on to imply that the complainant should be punished for making the claim of rape. While the user does not directly accuse the complainant of lying, the user presents that what the complainant did was not “okay” as the acquittal must mean that the only explanation can be that the complainant was lying.

The following user rationalised that the case was simply one of regret;

@FU11 – “what did he do that was wrong except cheating? The girl has ruined his life by being a slag and regretting it”.

Here the user presents that despite the infidelity of the accused, the complainant is the one to blame. The user claims that the complainant, by bringing the assault to light “has ruined his life”, and the only possible explanation is that the woman was regretful about her encounter with the accused as she was “being a slag”. This stereotype is common within rape culture and has been a tactic among various contexts in attempt to explain away and deny sexual assault accusations (Lilley et al., 2023; Willmott et al., 2021). This shows similarity to the woman scorned cliché identified in the analysis of commentary against Julian Assange (Harrington, 2016). In the context of an alleged rape, the user here infers that the complaint is in response

to feeling regretful and used rather than the complainant actually having been raped. Thus, an act of a woman scorned (Smith, 2018).

The following user claims that the woman “wanted it”:

@FU12 – “fuck off mate he tag teamed some slag who wanted it, nothing wrong with that”.

Comparably to @U1, the user does not directly accuse the complainant of lying. Instead, the user protests that the accused did nothing wrong, asserting that the claimant “wanted it”. In the context of an alleged rape involving a beloved athlete, the user infers it is impossible that the perpetrator committed rape, as the accused is a beloved football star and thus the claimant must have lusted after the accused. This is a common myth utilised to justify sexually violent behaviour. By proclaiming that the woman “wanted it” reinforces the belief that the perpetrator was simply responding to the victim’s sexual invitations (Frankiuk et al., 2008). The attribution of moral blame to the complainant is integrated throughout the discourse (Nurka, 2013). Moreover, this discourse of blame is intertwined with denial. This outlook rejects the possibility that an actual crime took place at all, and while the claimant may have committed morally repugnant acts such as having sex with several men or even having sex at all; the accused cannot be legally liable or even shamed, as one user pointed out the accused himself was a “victim of natural temptation”. These examples of subtle stereotypes went unchallenged. According to feminist literature, victim-blaming attitudes in combination with a favourable view of sexually active men yet a deploring outlook of sexually active women is the sexual double standard (del Carmen Gómez Berrocal et al., 2019) where heterosexual women are judged differently to heterosexual men for the same sexual behaviour (Zaikman and Marks, 2017).

Outrage

Conversely, there were exchanges between several users who either challenged rape culture or condemned the outcome of the retrial. Though not directly challenging rape culture or even condemning the accused, eleven users challenged the outcome of the case, and a further five acknowledged the unfairness of the power dynamic between the rich, powerful, and popular accused, and the claimant:

@U27 – “I’m not for wading in, it’s a waste of time. But I’ve found the Ched Evans trial, appeal, and reaction to both, genuinely frightening.”

Users @FU3 and @U23 below are the only individuals of all sixty-one whose tweets were examined who demonstrate outward compassion for the complainant, and outwardly recognise a perceived power imbalance between the claimant and the accused.

@FU3 – “it funny you put out a £50k reward out and all of a sudden people “seem’ to remember stuff. My sympathy is with the girl”

@U23 – “my opinion; the Ched Evans rape acquittal verdict is a victory for evil scumbags. For everyone else, it’s a dark day.”

These users, as well as four others, implicitly acknowledge the issues within the criminal justice system such as the inequality that allows the rich and powerful the resources to keep arguing their cases and increase the chances that the outcome will be more favourable to them.

Career

Unexpectedly, the smallest majority of the tweets fell into the “football career” discursive strategy. Empathetic discussion of allegations against athletes is often a feature of media coverage, particularly when discussing the accused’s career (Waterhouse-Watson, 2019). This appears to transcend into the discussion of fans, who emerge to consider the damage ‘done’ to

the player and the game; far more substantial than the damage experienced by the complainant. Although they represent a small number of the tweets overall, it is significant that five users post directly about the accused's career without mention of the complainant's well-being. This user claimed that the accused career had been slaughtered:

@FU13 "Not worthy of 5 years prison and name and career slaughtered"

The user presents that as a result of the previous conviction, despite the acquittal; has ruined the prospect of future employment within football. However, as previous cases have established, this is not necessarily the case (Nyúl et al., 2018). Moreover, though not put directly and without denying the rape, the user implies that the complaint itself is "*not worthy of 5 years prison*". In the context of a rape case, this infers that even if the complaint is true, the damage done to the woman is not comparable or even worthy of ending the accused's career, aligned with previous research which indicated endorsement of the myth that acquaintance and date rape is less serious and traumatising than sexual offences perpetrated by strangers (Lilley et al., 2023a,b).

@FU14 – "very poised and calm he's behaved impeccably throughout his hellish ordeal. Closure and an immediate signing up I hope 4 him"

@FU15 – "footballer Ched Evans found NOT GUILTY of rape after re-trial, hopefully he can now begin rebuilding his football career!"

Comparably, the above users praise the accused, even describing the case as his "hellish ordeal" and referring to his ability and the perceived need for him to rebuild his football career. The users appear to disregard the notion that there are any other parties involved that may have had a negative experience as a consequence of the trial, rejecting the idea that there could be damage caused to someone other than the accused. Moreover, the users appear hopeful for the accused, expressing outward optimism for the future career prospects of the footballer. This is

consistent with many celebrities that were in their cases convicted or found liable for rape in trial proceedings, who remain widely admired and celebrated despite their sexual offence convictions (Nyúl et al., 2018). Though it is impossible to know what the users truly believed about the case against Ched Evans or what facts of the case users were aware of; respectively few that were identified as football fans seemed to recognise the seriousness of the complaint, and very few appear to believe that a beloved football player could be have been involved in amoral, degrading or criminal sexual acts. Importantly, this is similar to findings obtained by Waterhouse-Watson (2019) concerning elite athletes where the sports fandom and reverence appeared to trump all social, legal or moral responsibilities.

Conclusion

This study provides insight into how one high-profile rape trial was perceived among a sample of football fan and non-football fan users on twitter. Central to this discussion and study findings were the perpetuation of rape myth stereotypes particularly from fans. There was considerable evidence of denigrating attitudes towards accusers and protective, minimising attitudes towards suspects, reflective of rape myth acceptance, hostility towards women, and real rape stereotypes, particularly among those who participate within spheres that promote masculinity. Despite several methodological limitations, discussed below, the present study has demonstrated that rape myths and stereotypes continue to be a dominant discourse in public discussions of sexual violence, especially as they relate to highly publicised, sport celebrity cases. As such, there remains a clear need and indeed opportunity to enhance our understanding of the extent and nature of these attitudes, and the roles they may play within the football fan community. Moreover, for those open to engage in meaningful discourse and interaction through individual football club fan groups and national football fan supporter's associations, targeted psychoeducational interventions should target the most common rape stereotypes

among British football fans. This would help to offer some means by which problematic rape myth supportive believe systems can be challenged among those in-groups, especially among those motivated to change (see Hudspith et al., 2023).

Limitations and future research

As feminist researchers, the authors recognise that they may introduce their own prejudices in researching rape culture within football. All three researchers were previously aware of the Ched Evans case and have been exposed to varying media coverage surrounding the case over recent years. However, as there was no direct interaction between the researchers and participants, any unconscious bias or preconceptions are unlikely to have impacted the data selected or subsequent analysis. Substantial efforts were made to gather a representative sample; however, it became evident that sourcing the data would be a challenge. As the analysis was concerned with archival data, it was highly probable that some of the data was no longer available having been removed by platform administrators for breaching platform rules or deleted by users after the initial post. It is also likely tweets that met the inclusion criteria were simply not accessible due to the privacy settings on different user accounts. Perhaps most importantly, many tweets which named the complainant in this case and the associated threads responding to them had to be excluded in line with English law and could not be included in the data set. Consequently, only a small number of tweets (sixty-one in total) were available for analysis. Future research examining discourse among football or sports fans should seek to draw upon a more recent high-profile case to ensure access to larger more diverse and complete data set. Future research may also benefit from exploring how different types of influential figures, from varied sports and public settings, may influence public perceptions differentially. It is expected, given the persistent and pervasive nature of rape myths, that the existence of rape-supportive attitudes is detrimental to the fairness of the criminal justice system and

impartiality mantra preached in the context of trial juries. Indeed, a wealth of existing research indicates that justice professionals, police practitioners, and legal decision makers endorse problematic misconceptions pertaining to intimate partner violence (Hester and Lilley 2016; Leverick, 2020; Lilley et al., 2023b; Maddox et al. 2011; Nielson, Hansen & Ingemann-Hansen 2018). The possible consequences of these myths are therefore important to consider.

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Reviewer 1 – Accept pending Minor Revisions

Dr Nathan Dawkins

Lecturer in Sport and Exercise Science, Leeds Trinity University (UK).

I would firstly like to thank the authors for their efforts in putting together this manuscript. The topic of the manuscript is of interest and provides useful and valued insight into the role of social media surrounding rape trials within the public domain. Overall, I feel the manuscript is very well written and presents a clear narrative which in the main is easy to follow. The manuscript presents a substantial introduction which sets the article up well with themes identified that I feel are of genuine interest to the general population and the research community. However, at times the wording of some sections is open to a level of interpretation and would benefit from increased clarity. There are some clarity issues at times within the document (detailed below). Once addressed I would support the publication of this manuscript.

Page/Line	Suggested Additional Amendment
2/ 41-45	Clarify whether the data here is reported cases or estimated including under-reporting.
5/ 30	Check the wording of this sentence for grammatical clarity.
10/ 56	Elaborate on this sentence, Whilst the sentence is logical in nature it opens up potential questions around how the data is handled. This information maybe captured in the methodology if this makes more intuitive sense.
12/ 102	Comparison is made to @U1, however no information from @U1 has been presented thus far, making it challenging to follow the comparison from a reader perspective. Include information presented by @U1 or clarify what they stated.
12/ 104	'beloved athlete' - Clarity needed, here as based on this quoted text from @FU12 this has not been supported. Please confirm where this statement has come from within the data collected.
13/ 113	Please clarify who the quote presented here is attributed to. Based on the theme of comparing comments based on person type (football / non-football) it would be beneficial for this quote to be attributed accordingly.
Referencing	Check consistency of reference format.
General	Proof-read for minor spelling/ grammar.

Author response: Thank you for your review of this manuscript. All revisions recommended that can be addresses, have been amended prior to publication.

Reviewer 2 – Accept pending Minor Revisions

Professor Danielle McDermott

Professor of Custodial Practice, Programme Director for MSc Applied Custodial Leadership,
Leeds Trinity University (UK)

In general, this is an interesting paper, offering some new insight into the effects of social media on perceptions of rape myths and stereotypes, specifically to the case of Ched Evans. Throughout, the quality and standard of writing is good, with an extensive range of literature reviewed.

Overall, the method and results sections provide a clear and sufficiently detailed description of the procedure implemented and analysis conducted. The discussion also offers a concise interpretation of the present findings, situated well alongside relevant past research. In conclusion, following minor revisions which I detail below, I would support publication of the paper in the *Internet Journal of Criminology*.

Revisions: Whilst this paper is an excellent summary of the theoretical underpinnings, one recommendation would be for the authors to consider and report more thoroughly on the utilisation of such work. In addition, the reference list needs amending e.g. all book/journal titles should be in italics. Finally, a thorough proof-read is required to check for minor errors in spelling/grammar.

Author response: Thank you for your review of this manuscript. All revisions recommended have been made prior to publication.