

Twitter users spreading sexual violence prevention strategies

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In the wake of #MeToo, the hashtag #HowIWillChange asked men to come forward on Twitter to discuss ways in which they would change their own behavior to prevent sexual violence and mitigate harm for victims.

"#HowIWillChange: Acknowledge that if all women I know have been sexually harassed, abused or assaulted, then I know perpetrators. Or am one," tweeted Australian journalist Benjamin Law, who started the [hashtag](#) used by thousands of other Twitter users since.

But how helpful has the hashtag actually been? According to a new study by Boston University School of Public Health (BUSPH) researchers, Twitter users have proposed many potentially effective [sexual violence prevention strategies](#), although there are also gaps in the strategies being discussed, and even some misinformation and myths being perpetuated.

The study was published in the *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*.

"Right now, this is how people are engaging in sexual violence [prevention](#), through these online movements," says lead author Alyssa Harlow, a doctoral student in the Department of Epidemiology at BUSPH. "It can be very revealing, and can help us see where there may be opportunities for more targeted interventions."

Harlow and her colleagues used a sample of 1 percent of all tweets with the hashtag #HowIWillChange, then eliminated all retweets, non-English language tweets, spam tweets, and tweets that included pictures, video, or links to news articles. They also eliminated tweets that did not mention specific actions. They then analyzed the remaining 1,493 tweets.

They found that 52.7 percent of the tweets discussed proactive prevention strategies, including teaching children about respect and relationships, changing language related to sexual violence, and introspection and self-accountability. The researchers also found 34.2 percent of the tweets discussed reactive prevention strategies, including challenging jokes or misogynic and sexist statements, reporting sexual violence perpetrators, and mitigating harm after an assault. Many tweets

proposed concrete steps, including reporting perpetrators and expressing belief in victims and helping them access specific resources.

However, while many Twitter users discussed confronting peers about harassment, most scenarios involving assault and rape were vaguer, suggesting that these Twitter users did not believe their peers engage in this behavior or realize that most sexual assault and rape is committed by acquaintances and partners of victims.

"Our results suggest that although well meaning, the Twitter discourse generated by #HowIWillChange may perpetuate this 'stranger rape' fallacy," the authors wrote.

The researchers also found that 22.4 percent of the tweets expressed negative sentiments about the hashtag, including denying responsibility, expressing doubt or blame toward victims, and claiming that rape culture is a myth.

"As sexual violence continues to gain more attention in the media and on social media, we may see more public pushback against sexual [violence](#) prevention," Harlow says. "It's frustrating, but it's important to understand if we want to make change and develop effective public health programs."

More information: Alyssa F. Harlow et al, Bystander Prevention for Sexual Violence: #HowIWillChange and Gaps in Twitter Discourse, *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* (2018). [DOI: 10.1177/0886260518808854](#)

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