TITLE: Determining coercion: A qualitative study of online reactions to sexual assault perpetration disclosure

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Introduction: Reddit is an online platform used for sharing, commenting, and participating in anonymous discussions. In 2012, one Redditor dared to ask perpetrators for their stories of possible sexual assault. Sexual assault is a serious public health issue; globally, almost one in five women report being assaulted by their intimate partners. We used these Reddit conversations to investigate how people perceive the presence of consent in different contexts.

Purpose: We aim to understand how the presence of sexual coercion in a situation affects the public perceptions and conversations about consent.

Method: Using grounded theory and thematic analysis, we explored how forms of coercion such as persuasion, luring, manipulation, and persistence altered other Redditors’ perceptions of sexual consent within responses to the post. After familiarizing ourselves with the data, we coded line-by-line, allowing themes to emerge from data.

Results: There were four main types of sexual coercion indicated by the respondents: persuasion, meaning a perpetrator used verbal means to convince a victim to engage in activity when a victim was initially reluctant to participate; persistence, meaning a perpetrator employed unwanted touching, or teasing; manipulation, meaning a perpetrator used emotional instability, weaknesses in self-perception or self-esteem; and luring, meaning a perpetrator convinced a reluctant victim to enter a space where sexual activity could occur. Preliminary analyses indicate that the presence of coercion in a case leads to public discussions regarding behavior as non-consensual.

Conclusion: The public deliberates the case using the clues and details provided, which alters their perception of the story and their judgement of the presence or absence of consent.

Recommendations: These results could help understand how members of a jury and the public determine the presence or absence of consent, to convict or drop charges of sexual assault against a possible perpetrator. Further studies would investigate how different types of coercion are presented and how this has an effect on whether the public dismisses or values these details.

Keywords: consent, sexual violence, sexual assault, coercion, public discussion, persuasion, persistence, manipulation, luring