

A person was raped, who is the agent? Media, sexual violence and agency

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Abstract: This paper focuses on media coverage of cases of sexual assault committed by public figures in the Québec cultural landscape who were publicly accused by their victims over the course of two #MeToo movements. We consider the four cases of: Gilbert Rozon, Éric Salvail, Julien Lacroix, and Maripier Morin. While the former two cases have been to court, the latter two have not. We are interested in how the media talk about the sexual assaults committed, specifically the lexical items and patterns of syntactic agency, depending on whether the case was prosecuted or not. Our data consist of the headline and first paragraph of articles published about the cases in three influential francophone newspapers in Québec. We argue that the media coverage of the sexual assault cases analyzed reinforces the ideology that sexual assaults in prosecuted cases are more credible and severe than those that are not prosecuted in court.

Keywords: *ideology; media discourse; sexual assault; #MeToo movement; syntactic agency*

1 Introduction

In recent years, social movements such as Me Too have encouraged survivors of sexual assault or sexual harassment to tell their stories. Initiated by Tarana Burke in 2006 (Leung & Williams, 2019), the phrase “Me Too” started being used on social media and created a movement of social protest against rape culture. In 2017, it has gained traction through social media, specifically with the increasingly popular use of hashtags to draw together topics of discussion, such as #MeToo. The #MeToo movement saw public figures being accused of various forms of sexual misconduct. The 2017 online movement also permeated Québec, and a second wave occurred in the summer of 2020.

While an increasing number of public denunciations are shared through journalistic interviews and social media, people have diverging opinions regarding the validity of the ways the victims’ stories are being made public. In fact, a survey has found that public denunciations of sexual assault are deemed unjustifiable by 52% of Canadians, who believe that sexual assault

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victims should turn to the legal system to get justice (Sondage hebdomadaire de Léger - 5 août 2020, 2020). However, the legal system is not a viable option for many survivors due to the traumatizing nature of the process, which many researchers have described as revictimizing (Conley et al., 2019; Ehrlich, 2001; Matoesian, 2005; Thibault et al., 2022).

This paper is concerned with the media discourse surrounding four cases of sexual assault committed by public personalities in Québec, among which two have had a trial, and two have not undergone any legal procedures as of the time of writing this paper. Comparing these cases to each other provides an opportunity to observe the potential differences in the media discourse about a case of sexual assault depending on whether the case has undergone legal procedures or not. More specifically, this paper argues that the media treat publicly denounced sexual assault and harassment cases that undergo legal procedures differently from those that do not, giving more legitimacy to cases that have been to court. We suggest that this is noticeable through the media's use of linguistic resources such as syntactic agency and lexical choices referring to the denunciations and the sexual acts.

1.1 Ideology

This paper, anchored in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), adopts the premise that language use is not neutral. Indeed, as it has been argued in the CDA literature, (linguistic) discourse and the power dynamics within society are co-constitutive, that is to say, they influence, produce, and reproduce each other (van Dijk, 1993). In his definition of CDA, van Dijk (1993) indicates that such analyses following this framework must take into consideration societal dynamics, and he argues that linguistic components must be analyzed in a situated manner rather than in a detached way. Contextual information surrounding discourse, such as the sociopolitical situation and the power dynamics, need to be accounted for. Indeed, CDA is interested and concerned not only with the social privilege that an individual has (e.g., socioeconomic status, gender, ethnicity) but also with the power dynamics within a society (van Dijk, 1993).

Ideologies are closely linked to power dynamics, as they are “common-sense” assumptions that legitimize existing differences of power through familiar and ordinary ways of behaving, which take for granted the existing power differences (Fairclough, 1989, p. 2). They are ideas and beliefs perceived as being commonsensical, universally true, and naturalized, which serve the interest of a social position of power (Woolard, 1995; Ehrlich, 2001). For example, Fairclough (1989) uses the context of a medical consultation in which the power imbalances between the doctor and the patient (e.g., the doctor knows about the medication as opposed to the patient) are reflected in the interactional imbalances, namely that the doctor leads the conversation, whereas the patient must comply with the conversational agenda that the doctor sets.

Considering the close relationship between ideologies, language use, and power dynamics, the object of study for CDA includes those three components, which are viewed as crucial to any endeavour to analyze discourse critically. In this paper, we argue that the results of the Léger survey (2020) about social opinion regarding public denunciations during the waves of MeToo movements represent an ideology about sexual assault cases that the media sustain and reinforce through their language use. We use Ehrlich's notion of ideological frame, which she defines as the “metamessage that defines the ideological activity of a discourse” (2001, p. 64). More specifically, we argue that the ideological frame surrounding the media discourse in our data is that sexual assault cases that undergo legal procedures are more credible and severe than those that do not.

1.2 Media discourse and agency

In her investigation of British media and their portrayal of violence committed against women, Clark analyzes naming choices—how the media choose to name the attacker and the victim as an ideological tool serving as a “pointer to the ideology of the namer” (1992, p. 209)—and transitivity—how the grammatical voice affects the level of responsibility attributed to the attacker and to the victim. She found that the linguistic strategies of naming and transitivity are used to manipulate blame assignment, more specifically, to minimize the responsibility of the attacker and to blame the woman victim.

Similarly, Henley et al. (1995) conducted an experimental study to explore the effect of grammatical voice in English as used in mock news reports on the perception and interpretation of events of violence against women. Their findings indicate that when the passive voice is used, less agency is attributed to the male perpetrator than when he is placed as the syntactic agent of an active structure. They illustrate this result by providing the examples in (1) (adapted from Henley et al., 1995, p. 61):

- (1)
- (a) Active: In the U.S. a man rapes a woman every 6 minutes.
 - (b) Passive: In the U.S. a woman is raped by a man every 6 minutes.
 - (c) Passive without agent: In the U.S. a woman is raped every 6 minutes.

From the active structure in (1a), the passive in (1b) can be derived, which attributes less agency to the man. Furthermore, the sentence in (1b) allows for the deletion of the agent, “a man”, which results in the sentence in (1c). Ehrlich (2001, p. 39) offers an example of a similar phenomenon with nominalization, which also allows the agent to be omitted.

- (2) Nominalization: In the U.S. a woman’s rape occurs every 6 minutes.

The four-way categorization illustrated in (1) and (2) also adequately describes grammatical voice patterns in French (Jones, 1996). In (3), we provide our translation of the sentences in (1) and (2):

- (3)
- (a) Active: *Aux É.-U., un homme viole une femme chaque 6 minutes.*
 - (b) Passive: *Aux É.-U., une femme est violée par un homme chaque 6 minutes.*
 - (c) Passive without agent: *Aux É.-U., une femme est violée chaque 6 minutes.*
 - (d) Nominalization: *Aux É.-U., le viol d’une femme se produit chaque 6 minutes.*

While (3a) and (3b) include the agent in their structure, (3c) and (3d) omit it. While Henley et al. (1995) have argued that (3b) attributes less agency to the agent than (3a), no psycholinguistic experiment has been made to test that claim in French. However, as native speakers of French, we think that (3b) attributes less agency to the agent than (3a), as argued by Henley et al. (1995) for English.

1.3 Cases examined

Four cases involving public personalities will be considered in this paper. We will describe the relevant events and developments in these cases below. The timeline in Table 1 provides an overview of the progression and overlapping of the cases.

Table 1. Timeline of the sexual assault and harassment cases of Julien Lacroix, Maripier Morin, Gilbert Rozon and Éric Salvail from 2017 to early 2023

Year	Event(s)
2017	Accusations against Rozon and Salvail surface during the #MeToo movement Class-action lawsuit filed against Rozon
2019	Salvail is arrested for sexual assault
2020	Rozon’s and Salvail’s criminal trials start In the summer, Morin and Lacroix are publicly accused of sexual assault
December 2020	Rozon and Salvail are acquitted of all charges
2021 to 2023	Lacroix and Morin make several attempts to come back into the public sphere post-accusations

1.3.1 *Julien Lacroix*

Julien Lacroix is a stand-up comedian who initially gained popularity through skits posted on social media, which led him to star in, direct, and write humoristic TV shows and movies. On July 27, the journalist Pineda (2020) published an interview that gave voice to nine women who accused Lacroix of sexual assault,² ranging from non-consensual touching to rape. Lacroix then posted public statements to defend himself on his social media—statements which were heavily criticized—and took a hiatus from his career. After several attempts to re-enter the public sphere following these accusations, Lacroix now hosts a podcast and is back on the stage performing stand-up for small audiences.

1.3.2 *Maripier Morin*

Maripier Morin is a TV show host and actress that gained popularity by participating in a reality TV dating show. In the summer of 2020, Safia Nolin, a popular singer in Québec, recounted on her social media platforms a night when she met Maripier Morin in a bar. After Morin said some sexually inappropriate and racist remarks to Nolin, Morin bit Nolin’s thigh. Nolin posted a picture of the bite mark on Instagram. After the denunciation, other victims spoke up about Morin and she disappeared from the public eye. However, a year later, she was the lead actress in a movie, and she has now made several appearances in TV shows and interviews. She is also the owner of a non-alcoholic beverages company and hosts a podcast about her struggles with addiction.

1.3.3 *Gilbert Rozon*

Gilbert Rozon is a businessman and the founder of the *Juste pour Rire* (Just for Laughs) production company. He was initially accused of sexual assault in 1998 and went to court. He pleaded guilty but was acquitted due to lack of evidence. In 2017, during #MeToo, a group of women accused Rozon of sexual assault and collectively tried to sue him, but the court dismissed the class-action lawsuit. A criminal trial started in 2020 for one victim of this group, but Rozon was acquitted of all the charges, namely indecent assault and rape (*R. c. Rozon*, 2020). Since then,

² We use the term sexual assault as a broad term to include all types of sexually violent acts.

nine survivors, including the complainant in the criminal trial, have filed civil suits against Rozon, which constitute the latest developments in this case.

1.3.4 *Éric Salvail*

Éric Salvail is a TV show host who was accused of sexual misconduct and harassment by male victims and many of his employees. Among his victims, one sued Salvail and a criminal trial started in 2020, in which he was charged with criminal harassment, forcible confinement, and sexual assault (*R. c. Salvail*, 2020). Salvail was acquitted of all three charges.

2 Data

This paper is interested in the media discourse surrounding the cases of Julien Lacroix, Maripier Morin, Gilbert Rozon, and Éric Salvail to explore how linguistic resources used by the media can be revealing of ideologies regarding sexual assault. We are particularly interested in the ideology that cases undergoing legal procedures are perceived as more severe and credible than those that do not. While most sexual assault cases are discussed in the media following the start of legal procedures, social movements encouraging public denunciations, such as #MeToo, provide an opportunity to make a comparison between discourses surrounding cases of sexual assault, since those cases are discussed publicly as soon as the initial accusations are brought forth.

Our data comprises 526 articles (see Table 2) covering the whole timelines of the cases, from the initial denunciations to the start of 2023. We chose three highly influential newspapers in Québec, *Le Devoir*, *La Presse* and *Journal de Montréal* because of their significant readership and their different political stances. That is, while *Le Devoir* is a liberal newspaper, *le Journal de Montréal* is a sensational and conservative newspaper, and *La Presse* stands somewhere in the middle (Cornellier, 2005; Dufour et al., 2019; Myles, 2016). For an article to be included in our data, it had to include the name of the perpetrator and either a reference to the acts of sexual assault or a consequence of the sexual assault. We excluded columns and opinion pieces, as we aim to uncover implicit ideologies about rape in so-called “objective” discourse. For this paper, we also decided to analyze only the headlines and the lead paragraphs since those constitute the information that is the most readily available to potential readers: headlines and lead paragraphs appear on the newspapers’ social media posts even if the reader does not click on the link to access the full article. Additionally, as Bell (1991) notes, information included in headlines and lead paragraphs is typically what is deemed as the most newsworthy.

Figure 2 is an example of an article published by *La Presse* on the Julien Lacroix case. It qualifies for our data collection because it includes the name of the perpetrator, “Julien Lacroix”, some references of his sexual assault, i.e., *agressions et inconduites sexuelles* (“sexual assault and misconduct”), as well as references to a consequence of those actions via *s’est défendu sur ses réseaux sociaux* (“defended himself on his social media platforms”) and *l’agence artistique Groupe Phaneuf ne le représente plus* (“the artist management agency Groupe Phaneuf stopped representing him”).

Julien Lacroix répond aux allégations contre lui et rompt avec son agence



PHOTO OLIVIER JEAN, ARCHIVES LA PRESSE

L'humoriste Julien Lacroix lors du gala Les Olivier en décembre dernier

Face aux allégations d'agressions et d'inconduites sexuelles portées à son égard, l'humoriste Julien Lacroix s'est défendu dans un message publié sur les réseaux sociaux. De son côté, l'agence artistique Groupe Phaneuf ne représente plus l'humoriste.

Mis à jour le 27 juill. 2020



Figure 2. An article from *La Presse* on the case of Julien Lacroix³

The general distribution of our data is found in Table 2, which includes the total number of articles compiled for each case in each newspaper, as well as the time period covered by the articles. For Rozon and Salvail, the articles published are also divided into two time periods corresponding to pre- and post-initiation of the legal procedures. We analyzed a total of 526 articles.

³ Our translations of the headline and lead paragraph are as follows: “Julien Lacroix reacts to the allegations made against him and breaks off with his agent” and “In the face of allegations of sexual assault and misconduct brought up against him, the stand-up comedian Julien Lacroix defended himself in a public statement posted on social media. The artist agency Groupe Phaneuf stopped representing the comedian.”

Table 2. General distribution of the newspaper articles by case and newspaper

Case name and dates of coverage	<i>Journal de Montréal</i>	<i>La Presse</i>	<i>Le Devoir</i>	Total
Lacroix				
Jul. 27, 2020 - Jan. 17, 2023	26	9	13	48
Morin				
Jul. 8, 2020 - Dec. 2, 2022	30	28	15	73
Rozon				
Oct. 18, 2017 - Nov 5, 2017	43	29	10	82
Nov. 28, 2017 - Oct. 22, 2022	74	32	57	163
Salvail				
Oct. 18, 2017 - Dec. 29, 2018	36	17	15	68
Jan. 15, 2019 - Apr. 29, 2021	42	26	24	92
Total	251	141	134	526

3 Analysis

In analyzing the data for this paper, we looked at three linguistic features, which we detail in this section. First, we observed and compared the distribution of the lexical items *allégation* (“allegation”) and *accusation* (“accusation”) as they were used to refer to the claims of sexual assault made in each case. Second, we analyzed the choices of lexical items used to refer to the sexual acts themselves. Third, we considered the grammatical voice of the sentences denoting the sexual assault and how this interacts with blame attribution.

3.1 Talking about the victims’ stories

We compared the words *allégation* (“allegation”) and *accusation* (“accusation”) in cases without legal procedures and within legalized cases, before and after the start of their legal procedures. We provide definitions of these words from the Québec French dictionary Usito:

Table 3. Definitions and translations of *allégation* and *accusation* in French

Word	Definition
<i>allégation</i>	<i>Affirmation donnée comme suspecte ou sujette à caution</i>
Our translation:	Affirmation that is suspect or unreliable
<i>accusation</i>	<i>Attribution d'une action coupable, répréhensible à quelqu'un</i>
Our translation:	Attribution of a guilty, reprehensible action

The denotations in *allégation* and *accusation* differ with regard to the credibility or reliability of what someone is accused of: when using *allégation*, the presupposition is that the affirmation might not be true, whereas *accusation* presupposes that the action is reprehensible and thus gives credibility to the claim that a person has made. Therefore, comparing the overall use of these terms in the cases under study here can help to reveal the attitude displayed in the media discourse towards the stories told by the victims. Our hypotheses are that a) articles about cases that did not undergo legal procedures use *allégation* more than *accusation*, and b) articles about cases that underwent legal procedures will have more instances of *accusation* after the legal procedures than before. We show the distribution of *allégation* and *accusation* in Figure 3.

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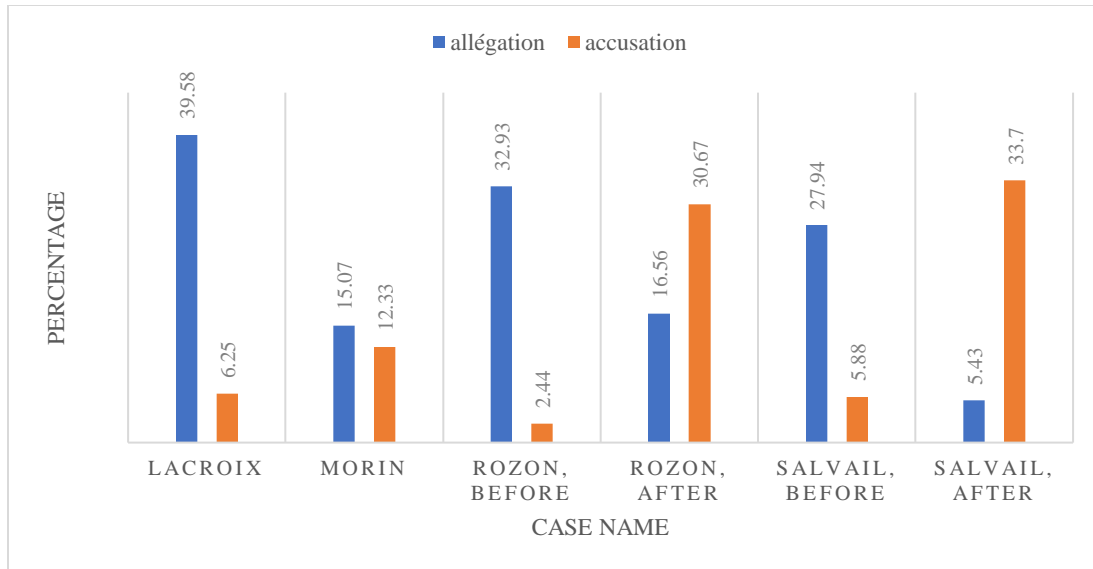


Figure 3. Percentage of articles containing at least one occurrence of *allégation* or *accusation*

Figure 3 shows that the media coverage of Lacroix contains a significantly higher percentage of *allégation* (40%, n=19) than of *accusation* (6%, n=3). Among the nine women, all of whom were victims of various sexual assaults, one woman was the subject of a journalistic investigation which included accusations of rape. Despite this thorough investigation and serious accusation, the media resort to *allégation* far more often than *accusation*.

Morin's coverage includes an almost even percentage of *allégation* and *accusation*, a distribution that does not occur in the other cases analyzed. We believe that to make sense of this result, we must consider several social and political factors surrounding the victim and the perpetrator, for example, the gender and sexual orientation of one of Morin's victims, Safia Nolin, a lesbian woman. Indeed, it has been argued that gender and sexual orientation have an important impact on the media coverage of sexual assault cases (Morrison et al., 2021). Nolin's popularity as a singer in Québec and as a controversial figure in the print media (Dumas, 2022) is also noteworthy. A more detailed discussion of this result will be conducted in upcoming work.

In the Rozon and Salvail cases, we notice a significant decrease in the use of *allégation* after the legal procedures start, from 33% (n=27) to 17% (n=27) for Rozon, and from 28% (n=19) to 5% (n=5) for Salvail. Furthermore, we observe the opposite distribution for *accusation*, which sees a significant increase after the legal procedures start. While in Rozon's case, 2% (n=2) of articles contain *accusation* before the start of legal procedures and 31% (n=50) after, Salvail goes from 6% (n=4) to 34% (n=31). We want to note here that this distribution could also be explained by the fact that *accusation* is a legal term. However, we believe that more needs to be said to explain it, since *accusation* is also used before the legal procedures, and *allégation* also occurs after.

The distributions of the use of *allégation* and *accusation* reveal an interesting pattern regarding the ideology we suggest, i.e., that sexual assault cases that undergo legal procedures are treated as more severe and serious than those that do not. Especially clear in the Rozon and Salvail cases, the use of *accusation*, presupposing the legitimacy of the events, is preferred once the legal procedures start, while *allégation*, which presupposes that the events are to be considered with

caution, is more common before the start of legal procedures. Therefore, the choice of *allégation* or *accusation* tracks with the ideology: the media portray the victim’s stories as more credible when a case is engaged in legal procedures.

It is also important to be reminded of the events that were considered as the first legal procedure in our coding. In fact, the first instance of any legal intervention in Rozon’s case was when a collective of victims attempted to sue Rozon and, in Salvail’s case, when he was arrested by the police for sexual assault. Thus, the distribution that we illustrate in Figure 3 does not represent a shift after the perpetrators were declared guilty; in fact, they were both acquitted. What our analysis reveals, though, is that the mere involvement of the legal system in the sexual assault cases affects the media’s portrayal of the victim’s stories as credible or as suspicious. We argue that the media’s concern for legal liability is not sufficient to explain the results presented in Figure 3. While the concern for avoiding accusations of libel might contribute to the wording choice, the less frequent but nonetheless present use of *accusation* in both Lacroix and Morin’s cases—which did not enter the legal system—suggests that these potentially libelous terms are not entirely off-limits in reporting of cases that are not in the courts. In addition, both perpetrators posted apologies on their social media platforms which admitted to the actions of which they were accused. Thus, while the on-record nature of court cases may contribute to licensing the use of *accusation*, we maintain that ideological factors beyond legal liability are in play.

3.2 Talking about the sexual assault

We now turn to how the media discuss the sexually violent acts committed by the perpetrators in the cases under consideration. We are interested specifically in the lexical choices made by the media, given that these are crucial to the public’s perception of the nature of the cases. We coded every word, listed in Table 4 below, that referred to the acts committed, and counted how many times they were used in each case and, in the Rozon and Salvail cases, compared the distribution before and after the start of the legal procedures.

Table 4. List of terms that refer to the sexual assault coded in the dataset

Term in French	Our translation
<i>acte</i>	act
<i>agissement</i>	act
<i>agression</i>	assault
<i>attentat à la pudeur</i>	indecent behavior
<i>attouchement</i>	non-consensual touching
<i>comportement</i>	behavior
<i>crime</i>	crime
<i>harcèlement</i>	harassment
<i>inconduite</i>	misconduct
<i>manque de respect</i>	lack of respect
<i>propos</i>	comment
<i>racisme</i>	racism
<i>viol</i>	rape
<i>violence</i>	violence

Our observations are that less agentive terms (e.g., “behavior”, “misconduct”, “act”) are preferred for cases that did not undergo legal procedures and, in prosecuted cases, before their respective

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legal procedures start. We argue that such lexical choices are a way to lessen the perpetrator's agency in the events and to render the case less severe. Following Coates and Wade (2004, p. 502), who have argued that less agentive verbs conceal "who did what to whom", we are suggesting that words such as *inconduite* ("misconduct") or *comportement* ("behavior") assign less responsibility to the perpetrator than words such as *agression* ("assault") or *attouchement* ("non-consensual touching/molestation") because they do not imply a victim. Figures 4 to 9 illustrate the overall distribution and the number of occurrences of each term.

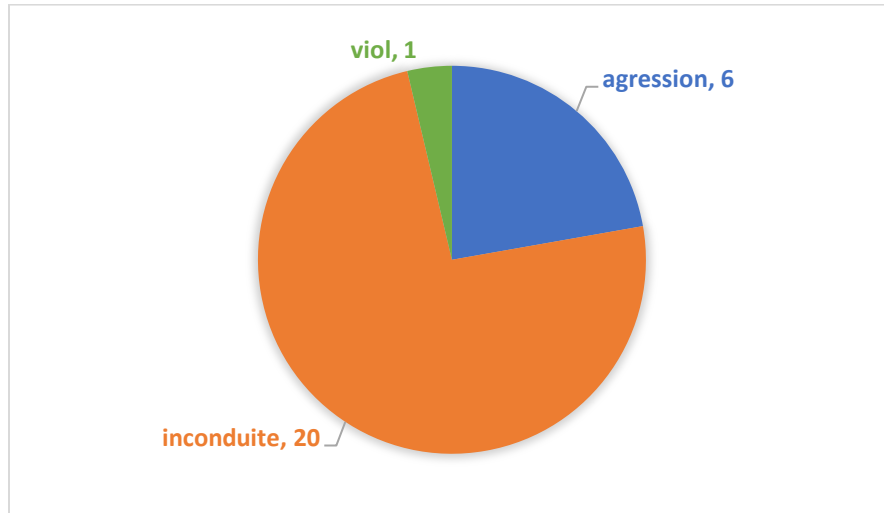


Figure 4. Distribution of terms referring to the sexual assault in the Lacroix case (n=27)

Figure 4 shows that the preferred term to refer to Lacroix's sexual assault is *inconduite* ("misconduct") (n=20). In addition to being a vague term, it does not involve a patient: one can display misconduct without someone being affected by it. The lexical items *agression* ("assault") (n=6) and *viol* ("rape") (n=1), which are highly agentive terms because they imply a victim, appear more rarely. Therefore, despite the serious nature of the accusations in the case, the media coverage favors the use of *inconduite* ("misconduct") to refer to the sexual assault.

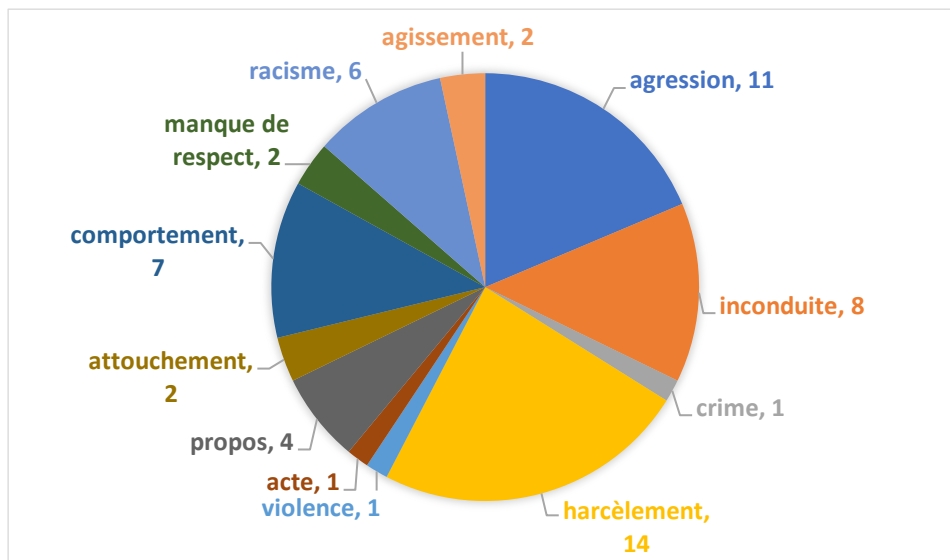


Figure 5. Distribution of terms referring to the sexual assault in the Morin case (n=59)

Figure 5 shows the distribution of terms used to refer to Morin’s sexual assault. It contrasts with Lacroix’s distribution, illustrated in Figure 4, in the variety of terms used. This significant variety of terms, we believe, helps to obscure the sexual assault committed by Morin and ultimately to reduce her agency. Indeed, the newspaper articles’ use of drastically different terms regarding agency such as *agissement* (“act”) and *agression* (“assault”) interchangeably might render the victim’s stories unclear.

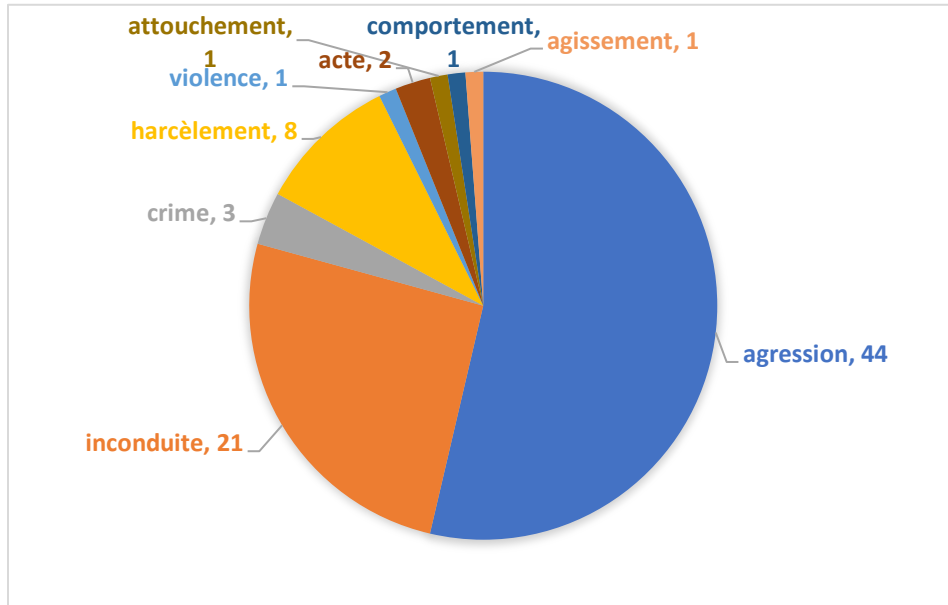


Figure 6. Distribution of terms referring to the sexual assault in the Rozon case before legal procedures (n=82)

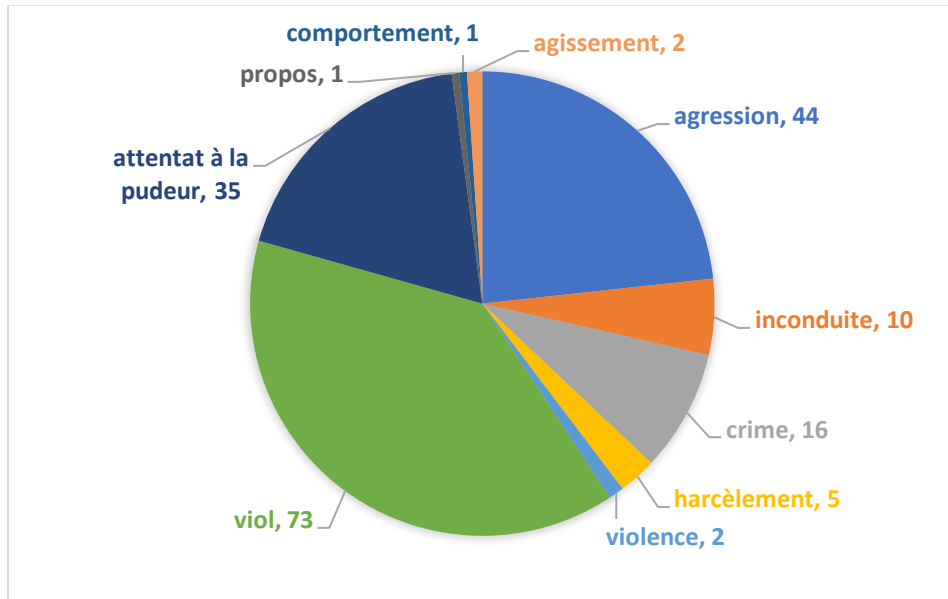


Figure 7. Distribution of terms referring to the sexual assault in the Rozon case after the start of legal procedures (n=189)

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Figures 6 and 7 illustrate the terms used in Rozon’s case before and after legal procedures were initiated. Before the legal procedures, *agression* (“assault”) (n=44) is the most frequent term, representing more than half of the occurrences when sexual assault is referred to. The term *viol* (“rape”) is absent before the legal procedures of 2017 (n=0). Afterwards, however, *viol* (“rape”) becomes the most frequently used item (n=73), followed by *agression* (“assault”) (n=44) and *attentat à la pudeur* (“indecent behavior”) (n=35). As previously mentioned, the effect of the legal terms is undeniable: one of the counts in Rozon’s trial is rape, which explains why it appears often after the legal procedures. However, Rozon went to trial in 1998 for rape. He pleaded guilty but was given an absolute discharge (*Rozon c. La Reine*, 1999). Despite this very well-known fact in Québec, *viol* is not used to discuss the new accusations. It is also worth mentioning that the media’s concern for legal liability cannot explain the absence of the word *viol* in the data, as Rozon was previously found guilty of this crime by the court.

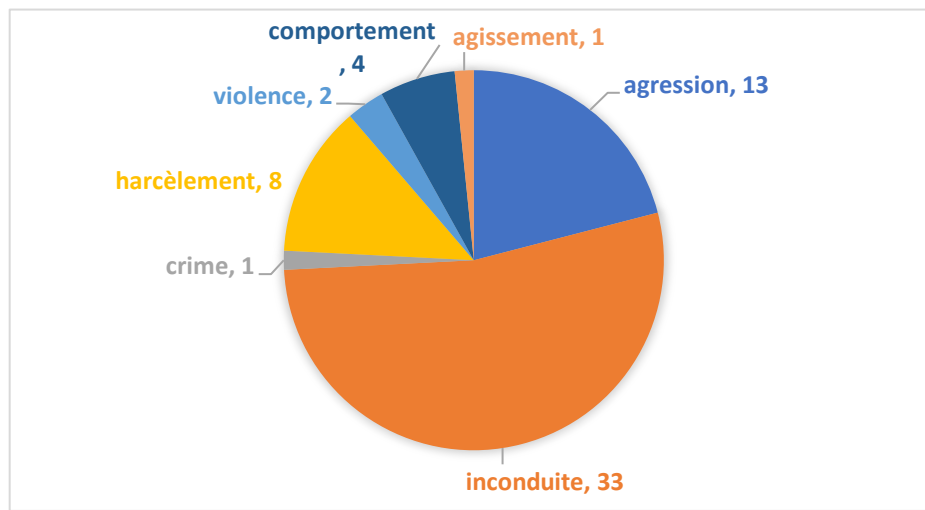


Figure 8. Distribution of terms referring to sexual assault in the Salvail case before legal procedures (n=62)

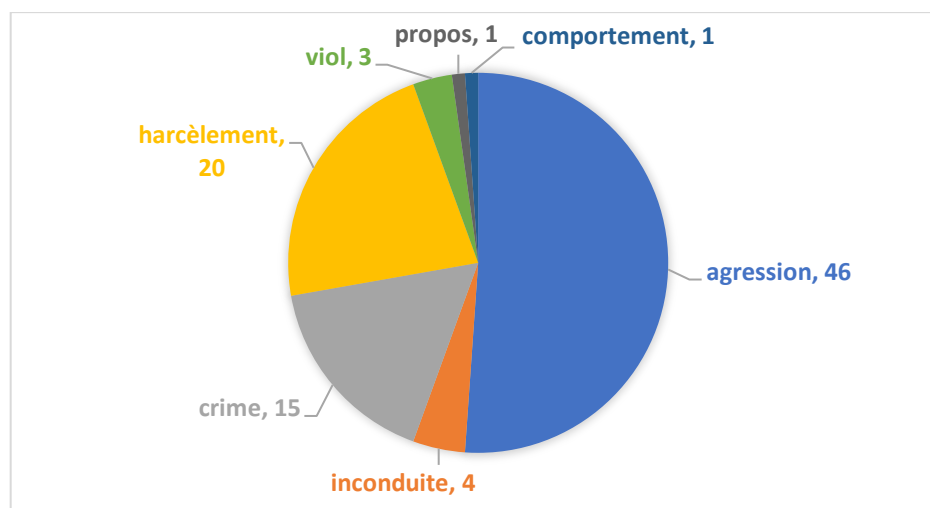


Figure 9. Distribution of terms referring to the sexual assault in the Salvail case after the start of legal procedures (n=90)

In Salvail's case, before the legal procedures, *inconduite* ("misconduct") is the most frequent term (n=33), which attributes less agency to Salvail. However, after the legal procedures, *inconduite* decreases to four occurrences and *agression* ("assault") becomes the most frequent term (n=46). Again, even when taking into consideration the effect of the criminal charges in the trials of Rozon and Salvail (i.e., *viol*, *attentat à la pudeur*, *harcèlement* and *agression*) on the distribution, we believe that the media attenuated Salvail's responsibility before his arrest by completely shifting how they refer to his actions after the start of the legal procedures.

3.3 Syntactic agency

We are interested in syntactic agency in this analysis because, as argued by Henley et al. (1995), the positions of the agent and the patient impact a reader's perception of responsibility. More specifically, when the agent is in the subject position (e.g., in the sentence *A man rapes a woman*), it is perceived as having more responsibility than when it is in the object position of the *by*-phrase (e.g., *A woman is raped by a man*).

In our data, we found an overall tendency for the perpetrator acting as the agent to almost never be the subject of the acts he is accused of. We present in this section some examples from our data that show syntactic patterns which put the perpetrator in a non-agentive position. We underline the extracts that are relevant to the syntactic agency pattern and provide translation for them.

(4) July 27, 2020, *La Presse*, Lead paragraph

Face aux allégations d'agressions et d'inconduites sexuelles portées à son égard, l'humoriste Julien Lacroix s'est défendu dans un message publié sur les réseaux sociaux. De son côté, l'agence artistique Groupe Phaneuf ne représente plus l'humoriste.

In the face of allegations of sexual assault and misconduct brought up against him, the stand-up comedian Julien Lacroix defended himself in a public statement posted on social media. The artist agency Groupe Phaneuf stopped representing the comedian.

In example (4), Lacroix is not the subject of the nominalized *agressions et inconduites sexuelles* ("sexual assault and misconduct"). When the sexually violent acts are nominalized and inserted in a passive structure, it allows the deletion of both the agent and the patient, which is what we see in *Face aux allégations d'agressions et d'inconduites sexuelles portées à son égard* ("In the face of allegations of sexual assault and misconduct brought up against him"), in which neither the victims nor the perpetrator of the sexual assault are explicitly named. Rather, Julien Lacroix is the subject of the next predicate, *s'est défendu* ("defended himself"), which does not refer to the acts he committed but to the actions he has taken after the denunciations were made public.

(5)

(a) July 7, 2020, *La Presse*, Headline

Safia Nolin accuse, Maripier Morin s'excuse

Safia Nolin accuses, Maripier Morin apologizes

(b) July 7, 2020, *La Presse*, Lead paragraph

L'auteure-compositrice-interprète Safia Nolin a provoqué une onde de choc en accusant mardi Maripier Morin de s'être livrée à du harcèlement sexuel, d'avoir commis une agression physique et d'avoir proféré des propos racistes lors d'une soirée dans un bar

A PERSON WAS RAPED, WHO IS THE AGENT?

il y a deux ans. Des allégations en partie admises par l'animatrice télé, qui a présenté ses excuses le lendemain.

The singer-songwriter Safia Nolin provoked a shock wave by accusing Maripier Morin of engaging in sexual harassment, of having committed a physical assault and of having uttered racist comments during an evening at a bar two years ago. Allegations partially admitted by the TV host that presented her excuses the day after.

In example (5a), the headline contrasts the accusations from Nolin with the apology from Morin by using juxtaposition of rhyming clauses, creating a double paralleled structure. It highlights not only the agentive role that Nolin had in the denunciation but also the fact that Morin has apologized in response to those accusations. In addition, we want to draw attention to the date of the publication of this article, as it is the very first one published by *La Presse* about the case. Thus, the choice to mention Morin's apology in the headline is an interesting one because it gives the impression that the apology was the conclusion to the story, and that it stopped being newsworthy at that moment.

In (5b), the acts denounced—*s'être livrée à du harcèlement sexuel, avoir commis une agression physique, avoir proféré des propos racistes* ("engaging in sexual harassment, committing a physical assault, uttering racist comments") are put in a structure in which Maripier Morin is both the agent and subject, but in which the subject is implicit because of the infinitive structures. The lead paragraph also excludes Nolin as the patient of those acts. Rather, the structures portray these actions as having been "victimless". Furthermore, Morin is attributed the semantic role of patient, portraying her as the recipient and the victim of the denunciations for which Nolin is responsible, rather than portraying Nolin as the patient of Morin's non-consensual sexual behaviour towards her.

In the following examples, the focus is put on the victims rather than the perpetrator in the Rozon and Salvail cases by putting their names in the object position of the verbs that refer to the sexual assault. This type of structure—passive structures with the perpetrator as the object—reduces the responsibility put on the attacker (Henley et al., 1995).

(6)

(a) October 18, 2017, *La Presse*, Headline

Inconduites sexuelles reprochées à Éric Salvail

Sexual misconduct reproached to Éric Salvail

(b) October 18, 2017, *La Presse*, Lead paragraph

Avances sexuelles en string, parties intimes exhibées ou empoignées, tentatives de séduction insistantes dans des salles de montage: 11 personnes ont raconté à La Presse avoir subi des inconduites, ou en avoir été témoins, de la part du producteur et animateur Éric Salvail, la plupart du temps dans un contexte professionnel.

Sexual advances in a thong, private parts exhibited or grabbed, insistent attempts of seduction in editing rooms: 11 persons told La Presse that they have suffered or witnessed sexual misconduct from the producer and TV host Éric Salvail, in most cases in a professional context.

In (6a) and (6b), the perpetrator, Éric Salvail, is the agent of the passive structures of *avoir subi* (“have suffered”) and of *été témoins* (“have witnessed”) but he is put in the object position of a *by*-phrase, thus reducing the responsibility placed on him for these acts.

While examples (6a) and (6b) are from Salvail’s media coverage before legal procedures, example (7) shows that passive structures with an agent can also be found after the legal procedures start, as illustrated by an article published after Rozon’s class-action lawsuit.

(7) November 28, 2017, *Journal de Montréal*, Lead paragraph

Un regroupement de femmes qui affirment avoir été agressées par Gilbert Rozon veulent intenter une action collective contre l’homme d’affaires et lui réclament plus de 10 millions \$, uniquement en dommages punitifs.

A group of women who assert having been assaulted by Gilbert Rozon want to bring a class action against the businessman and are demanding more than \$10 million, solely in punitive damages.

The name of Rozon is in the *by*-phrase as the object of the verb *agresser* (“assaulted”). In addition, the victims are referred to as *un regroupement de femmes* (“a group of women”) and are being foregrounded by being placed in the subject position of the predicate of which they act as the patient. Therefore, it seems that even after legal procedures, the media shows a continued resistance to attributing blame to the perpetrator.

4 Conclusion

Our findings show that the distributions of terms referring to the denunciations and to the acts committed by the perpetrators discussed in this article are in part explained by the ideological frame we suggested, which is that sexual assault cases that undergo legal procedures are more credible and severe than those that do not. In general, the grammatical voice patterns do not portray the perpetrators as agentive in the media coverage of their sexual assault cases. Indeed, passive structures are prominently used, the words referring to sexual assault are often nominalized, and the sentence structures omit a syntactic agent. However, in the two prosecuted cases, once the legal procedures have started, we see a shift: the perpetrators appear as the agent in the object of *by*-phrases after the legal procedures. In addition, we want to reiterate that the shift we describe from before to after legal procedures does not happen when the verdict has been delivered, which would “confirm” the guilt or innocence of the perpetrator.⁴ Rather, it seems that the media portray the cases as more credible as soon as the victim(s) takes legal action against the perpetrators. Therefore, even if the media are liable for their statements, which they might try to mitigate to avoid legal repercussions (e.g., defamation or libel lawsuits), more agency is still attributed to the perpetrators once the case enters the legal sphere. That is, the media do not wait until the justice system has decided the guilt or innocence of the accused to portray them as more responsible for the sexually violent actions they were denounced for. Thus, we argue that the credibility and severity of a case of sexual assault denounced through traditional or social media as depicted by the print media depends greatly on a specific ideology: a denunciation of sexual assault is more credible and serious when legal actions are taken by the survivors. This ideology echoes the results of the survey

⁴ In *R. c. Rozon*, 2020 QCCQ, the judge Mélanie Hébert noted in the acquittal this important point: “The Court notes that the verdict of acquittal does not mean that the alleged incidents did not happen. Rather, it signifies that there remains, in the Court’s view, a reasonable doubt with respect to Mr. Rozon’s guilt because the Crown did not discharge its burden.” In this statement, the contrast between an acquittal in court and innocence is exacerbated.

we discussed in the introduction (*Sondage hebdomadaire de Léger - 5 août 2020*, 2020) that showed that a majority of Canadians believe that public denunciations are unjustifiable and that survivors must always engage with the justice system to seek reparations and justice. As such, the media shifting their discourse once the victims have done so promotes the involvement of the justice system in sexual assault cases as opposed to leaving it in the hands of the court of public opinion. The ideological frame we suggest states that getting a case prosecuted is the only socially accepted path for victims to take in Québec despite the revictimizing nature of sexual assault trials (Conley et al., 2019; Ehrlich, 2001; Matoesian, 2005; Thibault et al., 2022) and the fact that only 5 to 6% of sexual assaults are reported in Québec (Institut national de santé publique du Québec, 2022).

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