How do we speak about sexual assaults? Analysis of Québec media coverage in the *#MoiAussi* era

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Abstract: This paper analyzes the written French media coverage of four cases of public denunciations of sexual assault that occurred during #MeToo movements and that involve public personalities, namely Julien Lacroix, Maripier Morin, Gilbert Rozon, and Éric Salvail. Using a Critical Discourse Analysis approach (Fairclough, 1995; van Dijk, 1988), we consider linguistic features that have been analyzed previously in a mostly English body of research on media discourse surrounding sexual assault cases (e.g., Clark, 1992; Henley et al., 1995; Tranchese, 2023), such as grammatical voice and lexical choices. We use data from 526 articles retrieved from three influential newspapers in Québec, namely *La Presse*, *Le Devoir*, and *Journal de Montréal*. We observe that these linguistic resources tend to reduce the perceived responsibility of the perpetrators by casting them as victims of the public denunciations.

Keywords: sexual assault; media discourse; Critical Discourse Analysis; #MeToo

1   Introduction

The worldwide #MeToo movement of 2017 and Québec's 2020 denunciation movement (also referred to as *#MoiAussi* movements) have seen public figures in the Québec cultural landscape being accused of sexual assault and harassment by their victims online, through social media platforms or journalistic interviews. Among them, four have garnered considerable media coverage: Gilbert Rozon, a well-known producer; Éric Salvail, a TV show host; Julien Lacroix, a comedian; and Maripier Morin, an actress and TV show host.

The well-known 2017 wave of the #MeToo movement led to public discussions on power dynamics and their abuses in places such as schools and the workplace. It had particular relevance in Québec, which became the Canadian province that received the most denunciations to the police following the movement (Cotter & Rotenberg, 2018). Some institutional actions led by activists were taken, such as the adoption of *An Act to prevent and fight sexual violence in higher education institutions* (SQ 2017, c 32) or the *Act to prevent and fight sexual violence in elementary and high schools* (Ouellette-Vézina, 2023). Following the 2017 movement, a second wave of *#MoiAussi*

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occurred in 2020 in Québec, which started on social media, most notably through a website compiling information about perpetrators appearing in public and anonymous accusations. The movement gained enough traction to reach traditional media over the summer of 2020.

In this paper, we are interested in how the media presents cases of sexual assault in which the victim(s) has come forward during a #MeToo movement and that involve perpetrators who are public personalities in Québec. As such, the fame of the perpetrators in the cases alters the perception of newsworthiness for the media (Tranchese, 2023). Although there is considerable research at the intersection between media discourse and sexual assault, less research has been done on cases involving public figures and, more specifically, how their status interacts with the perceived newsworthiness of their story and, ultimately, the media discourse itself. We investigate this in French written media from Québec, a language and social setting under-researched on the topic of media discourse and sexual violence.

2   Literature review

2.1   Critical Discourse Analysis

In this study, we use a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach, highly influenced by work from Fairclough (1989, 1992). CDA has as its object of study "discourse," which is taken to refer to spoken or written language use as well as other semiotic activities such as visual images and non-verbal communication (Fairclough, 1995, p. 54). Crucially for our purposes, it stipulates that language is not neutral but rather is necessarily embedded in a social context involving power dynamics that enter in a co-constructive relationship with the discourse (van Dijk, 1993). That is, the context and the discourse influence, produce, and reproduce each other and must both be considered in any research endeavour for a clear and precise understanding of the discourse. As Fairclough notes, language and other elements of the social context are in a dialectical relationship, meaning that discourse "is socially shaped, but is also socially shaping" (1995, p. 55). For instance, the way in which the media frames certain events may be influenced by social ideologies, and simultaneously, this framing spreads and reinforces those ideologies in the wider public. Therefore, CDA considers simultaneously language use, power dynamics, and ideologies, i.e., "commonsense" 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).

2.2   Media discourse

As CDA takes social power and ideologies as a critical factor in its approach to language as a social practice (Fairclough, 1989; van Dijk, 1988), it is not surprising that media discourse has been considered by linguists[2] using this approach: "[M]edia discourse should be regarded as the site of complex and often contradictory processes, including ideological processes" (Fairclough, 1995, p. 47). This approach to media discourse holds that discourse in the media and the social context in which it is embedded are closely linked. As such, social movements such as #MeToo, together with the rising awareness of rape culture and the social restructuring it proposes, enter a "dialectical relationship," as Fairclough (1995) puts it, with the structure of the discourse that the media chooses to refer to those types of social movements.

The media discourse surrounding cases of sexual assault shows that the coverage of this violent crime has particularities that reveal sexist ideologies. For instance, Clark (1992) looked at the British media coverage of sexually violent crimes committed by men against women and

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[2] Most of the literature on this topic is in English, using English data from anglophone contexts. We will use this literature while keeping in mind that some language-specific differences may arise.

revealed that the naming strategies of perpetrators and victims are motivated by ideologies about rape that are held in British society and that, ultimately, the media reinforces. For instance, she looked at naming strategies in *The Sun*. She found that the gender of the participants was an "overriding factor in the nature of the reporting" (Clark, 1992, p. 209) and that "the naming of the victims clearly reflects a patriarchal viewpoint because women are categorized in terms of possible sexual encounters with men, rather than as autonomous individuals" (1992, p. 223), for example "wife" or "unmarried mother." Clark also discusses the frequent use of "fiend" to describe violent men, which, by characterizing them as "extra-societal" (1992, p. 224), reduces society's responsibility in creating these violent men. Therefore, her analysis of *The Sun*'s coverage of violence committed by men against women reveals that such naming strategies are world-shaping as well, as they "help maintain the status quo" (1992, p. 224).

Tranchese (2019) argues that the media does not cover sexual violence committed by men against women the same as it does other violent crimes. More specifically, the myths and ideologies about rape that are being perpetrated by the media are anchored in patriarchal conceptualizations of gender roles and sexuality. Among those myths is the "cry-rape girl" myth, which is the belief that false accusations of sexual assault happen often. This leads to a tendency for the media to implicitly display disbelief towards the victim, which is sometimes done through language. For example, both passive grammatical voice (see also Ehrlich, 2001 on grammatical voice in rape trials) and nominalization (see also Fairclough, 1992, p. 95) are frequently used and tend to obscure the cause-and-effect relationship between the perpetrator and the victim and the action that the verb depicts. Henley et al. (1995) conducted a psycholinguistic study that uses mock media articles and, among other findings, showed that, in English, the use of a passive voice (e.g., "a woman was raped by a man" or "a woman was raped") reduces the perception of responsibility that the perpetrator has in the event compared to when the active voice is used (e.g., "a man raped a woman"). Thus, it shows that linguistic strategies have the power to affect how the reader perceives the event described.

Another finding by Tranchese (2019, p. 25) is the frequent use of "allegation(s)" instead of "accusation(s)" for sexual assault cases, particularly those involving public personalities. Using a corpus-assisted discourse analysis method, Tranchese presents the collocates of "allegation(s)" found in her data: "denied," "withdraw," "dismissed," "unsubstantiated," "refute," "abandoned," "false," "untrue," "deny" (2019, p. 8). This finding cements the claim that "allegation(s)," as opposed to "accusation(s)," implies lesser credibility or truth. Furthermore, "accusation(s)" does not have "rape" as a collocate, suggesting that the words did not (or rarely) appear together in the data. Therefore, she argues that these lexical choices reinforce the myth that false accusations happen often, especially when targeting public personalities, so they must be treated with caution before blame gets assigned. Although this strategy could be argued as efforts to avoid legal liability for the media, they, along with frequent passivization and nominalization structures, influence the portrayal of the perpetrators' level of responsibility:

> The lack of a conventional expression such as *rape perpetrator* (in stark contrast with the conventional *rape victim*), the absence of an established noun to refer to an unknown or suspect perpetrator (e.g., *attacker*, *rapist*, *offender* or *aggressor*) as collocate of *rape* and *raped*, together with the frequent use of passive voice and nominalization with agent deletion, suggest that perpetrators are often simply invisible and excluded from the story. (Tranchese, 2019, p. 26)

In a corpus-assisted discourse analysis study of the British media coverage of sexual assault cases[3] from 2008 to 2019, Tranchese (2023) observes the collocations of "alleged" between 2008 and 2014 and between 2015 and 2019:[4] in the first time frame, "alleged" only appear alongside "involvement," whereas in the second time frame, "alleged" and "rape" strongly and clearly collocate and "alleged" prominently appeared with terms referring to the perpetrator (e.g., "attacker," "perpetrator," "rapist"). This suggests that "after 2014, *alleged* was used more conspicuously to underline the supposedly unproven nature of sexual violence and the unverified responsibility of a perpetrator" (Tranchese, 2023, p. 217). As such, the media's concern for liability cannot explain this distribution on its own: "Instead, it appears that over time, the association between *alleged* and *rapist* intensified with the result that the insinuation of falseness started to be attributed more commonly to sexual crimes than to other types of crimes" (Tranchese, 2023, p. 218). Therefore, her data seems to show that carefulness with potential legal liability is overrepresented in the media coverage of sexual violence cases in comparison with non-gender-based crimes.

2.3   Grammatical voice in French

As stated above, grammatical voice has been an important topic in the discourse surrounding sexual assault, more specifically regarding how it can shape a person's perception of an event. For instance, Henley et al. (1995) conducted a psycholinguistic experiment for passive structures in English in which they showed the participants mock newspaper articles and measured the level of responsibility attributed to the perpetrator of a crime and of harm done to the victim. They investigated the effect of the syntactic position of two thematic roles: the agent, who is the doer of the action depicted by the verb; and the patient, who is the receiver of the action depicted by the verb (Dowty, 1991). They found that in English, the syntactic position of the noun phrases that are assigned with the thematic roles of agent and patient influences the perceived responsibility of the agent and the level of harm to the patient. More precisely, when the agent is in object position and the patient in subject position (as in (2)) or when the agent is omitted (as in (3)), less responsibility is attributed to the agent and less harm to the patient. However, such study has not yet been done to test the effect of grammatical voice on perception in French. Since our intuition as native French speakers tells us that a similar pattern exists and that passivization is done in a very similar way in English and in French, we assume that it is also the case in French.

The general pattern for passive constructions in French is to invert the agent and patient in relation to the verb, with the auxiliary *être* added to indicate the passive voice. In the passive voice, the agent can either be present in a "by"-phrase (or in French, *complément en "par"*) as in (2), or omitted from the sentence, as in (3) (Jones, 1996, p. 99).

(1) Pierre a frappé un voisin.
   Pierre hit a neighbor.

(2) Un voisin a été frappé par Pierre.
   A neighbor was hit by Pierre.

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[3] Note that Tranchese (2023) did not keep track of whether the cases were litigated. It would be interesting to see if the litigation of a case has any explanation value in the data.

[4] Note that a buffer period was inserted in 2014 for the collocation analysis to determine if words (dis)appeared (Tranchese, 2023, p. 67).

(3) Un voisin a été frappé.
   A neighbor was hit.

Following Henley et al. (1995), we would assume that in (2) and (3), *Pierre* would be attributed less responsibility than in (1), and that *un voisin* is attributed less harm in (2) and (3) than in (1). Furthermore, Clark (1992) discusses grammatical voice in the context of *The Sun*'s media coverage of violence committed against women and argues that the use of passive constructions without an explicit agent renders the violent act a qualifier of the victim: "With no explicit agency given, the rape becomes a quality of the woman rather than an act upon her" (Clark, 1992, p. 216). Therefore, grammatical voice in media coverage of sexually violent acts matters in the readers' perception of the events discussed.

3   The cases

We selected four cases of sexual assault denunciations that occurred in two different #MeToo movements, two of them during the 2020 iteration in Québec—Julien Lacroix and Maripier Morin—and two of them during the 2017 worldwide movement—Gilbert Rozon and Éric Salvail. The cases overlap in many ways (e.g., they involved celebrities as the perpetrators, the stories came out during denunciation movements), which is reflected through emerging patterns and similarities.

Our data was collected from the media coverage in three different newspapers: *Le Devoir, La Presse* and *Journal de Montréal*. These newspapers are the three most read francophone newspapers in Québec (Centre d'étude sur les médias, 2022) and their political stances differ significantly. While *Le Devoir* is be considered the most serious newspapers among them, *Journal de Montréal* is the most sensationalist while *La Presse* stands in the middle (Cornellier, 2005).

3.1   Julien Lacroix

Julien Lacroix is a standup comedian from Québec who originally gained popularity by posting comedy skits on social media. In 2019, he released his first one-man show and went on tour around the province. The accusations of sexual assault involving him arose during the 2020 iteration of the #MoiAussi movement, which was restricted to Québec. During it, many public personalities were accused of sexual assault and harassment and put their careers on pause after for the most part, posting formal apologies on their social media platforms. A list inventorying every person that was accused circulated online, which also details the types of violent acts committed, the number of victims that came forward (whether anonymously or publicly), the city the attacker was based in, and the professional milieu in which they were evolving. The list (commonly known as *La liste* in Québec) was posted on a website that has been taken down since then, as official complaints have been made against the administrators of the website for defamation. The circulation and popularity of this list incited many discussions regarding the validity of denunciations made through public venues as opposed to those being formally made, that is, through the justice system (e.g., suing the attacker, making a complaint to the police, etc.). In fact, according to a survey in Léger ("Sondage hebdomadaire de Léger," 2020), 52% of Canadians think that public accusations are unjustifiable and that victims should direct the accusations to the legal system.

It was within this social context that Lacroix was accused of sexual assault by nine women, including his ex-partner. He was the subject of a journalistic investigation published in *Le Devoir*

on July 27, 2020 (Pineda, 2020). In it, victims were given the opportunity to tell how the stand-up comedian assaulted them. It is noteworthy to mention that the accusations range from unwanted kissing and touching to rape.

3.1.1 Victim of the denunciations

Often in the media coverage, Lacroix is the grammatical patient of the accusations made against him by the victims. It is an interesting editorial choice made by the media, as it puts Lacroix in a position of a passive receiver of the accusations rather than as an active participant in the violent acts that are reported by the accusations. This is done by the three newspapers we used for our data.

(4) *Le Devoir*, July 27, 2020

Julien Lacroix visé par des allégations d'agressions et d'inconduites sexuelles
Julien Lacroix targeted by allegations of sexual assault and misconduct

(5) *La Presse*, January 13, 2023

Deux ans et demi après avoir été la cible d'allégations d'inconduites sexuelles, Julien Lacroix s'est confié à l'animateur Stéphan Bureau à l'émission Le monde à l'envers, à TVA.
Two years and a half after being the target of allegations of sexual misconduct, Julien Lacroix confided in the TV host Stéphan Bureau during the TV show "Le monde à l'envers" on TVA.

In (4), Lacroix is portrayed as the target of the allegations of sexual assault. This headline is of the article containing the initial investigation published about his case, in which the journalist interviewed many of the victims. In other words, it marks the moment when Lacroix withdrew from the public sphere. The headline refers to the newspaper article itself: in it, Lacroix is being targeted by allegations.

In (5), the predicate *être la cible de* ("being the target of") is used. In French, this predicate rarely collocates with a positive noun phrase. The online dictionary Antidote, which provides a dictionary of word combinations taken from a large French database providing over 900,000 combinations, shows that the five most popular objects for *être la cible de* are *attaques* ("attacks"), *critiques* ("criticism"), *choix* ("choices"), *attentat* ("attack"), and *tirs* ("shooting") (Antidote, 2022a). In short, the complement of *être la cible de* is most often something negative and harmful[5] to the targeted person or entity. Thus, in the headline in (4), Lacroix is a passive receiver of something harmful, i.e., allegations of sexual misconduct. In addition, *cibler* as a verb has an alternative meaning evoking weapons, which implies that violence was directed towards Lacroix. In other words, he is portrayed as a passive participant, as a mere receiver of the accusatory words that victims use while telling their story.

In (5), like (4), Lacroix is the target of allegations of sexual assault, as he is portrayed as a passive receiver of the allegations rather than an active participant in the events relayed by the victims. In addition, as the topic of the headline relates to Lacroix's interview in a late-night show,

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[5] The five most frequent collocates of *être la cible* de ("being the target of") are negative and harmful, with the exception of *choix* ("choices").

the choice made by the media to foreground the time that has passed since the accusations (two years and a half) gives the impression of the allegations being a distant event from which the public can move on by welcoming Lacroix back on the screens. Also consider the definitions of the verb *s'est confié* ("confided") in (6) and of the noun *confidence* ("confidence") in (7) from the French dictionary Usito:

    (6) Faire des confidences à quelqu'un (Usito, n.d.-b)
       Exchanging confidences with someone

    (7) Communication que l'on donne ou que l'on reçoit sous le sceau du secret (Usito, n.d.-a)
       Communication given or received behind a wall of secrecy

We believe the use of the verb phrase *s'est confié* is peculiar, as the confiding was done on television, making the confiding public, not done in secrecy as the definitions in (6) and (7) denote. In our view, the use of *s'est confié* implies a certain vulnerability from Lacroix, as it frames his interview as something private.

In (8), the media chooses to use the expression *marqué au fer rouge* ("branded with a red-hot iron"). In addition to Lacroix being the grammatical patient of the predicated *marqué*, thus portraying him as a passive participant, the expression is a powerful metaphor that places Lacroix as a physically marked victim.

    (8) *Journal de Montréal*, November 16, 2022
       Marqué au fer rouge depuis la publication d'une enquête en 2020 qui rapportait plusieurs inconduites sexuelles, l'humoriste Julien Lacroix pourra peut-être retrouver une vie «normale» à la suite d'un reportage dans lequel certaines des victimes reviennent sur leurs témoignages et disent regretter de l'avoir dénoncé.
       Branded with a red-hot iron since the publication of an investigation in 2020 that reported sexual misconduct, the comedian Julien Lacroix might be able to return to a "normal" life after a report in which the victims revise their testimonies and say that they regret having accused him.

The allegations are portrayed in (8) as a stain or a scar on his body that he and the public are always aware of. Therefore, it shifts the assault from the body of the victim to the body of the aggressor, making Lacroix a victim as well. Moreover, he is not branded by the allegations of sexual assault but by the publication of the investigation reporting the allegations. This further distances Lacroix from the sexually violent acts he committed, thus diminishing his responsibility. Furthermore, it implies a moral argument that publicly accusing a celebrity can harm them. Indeed, Lacroix has partly admitted to his actions, so it is not the case that the linguistic choices can only be explained by the media's desire to be cautious in case the accusations are false. In Lacroix's case, the linguistic strategies used to diminish his responsibility in the sexually violent acts he has admitted to committing foregrounds the harm that the accusations have done to him rather than the violence he committed against the victims who came forward.

3.1.2   Forgiveness and redemption

After Lacroix's public hiatus, during which he went to rehab for a few days and became a father, he attempted a comeback in the public sphere by posting on his social media platforms, giving interviews and returning on stage for small audiences. Despite some pushback from activists, Lacroix has, at the time of writing this paper, regained some popularity: he hosts a podcast, is sponsored by brands, and is back on tour with a comedy show. All things considered, his reinsertion into the public sphere (e.g., speaking publicly, posting on his social media, or making public appearances) has been successful. In this section, we will consider how the media reported on and treated his professional comeback. More specifically, we argue that the media drew upon religious and Christian understandings of forgiveness and redemption, despite Québec's complicated relationship with religion since the *Révolution Tranquille* (Gauvreau, 2008).

We first consider the use of the word *déchu*, which occurs five times in Lacroix's media coverage (see examples (11)–(13) below). *Déchu* can be translated to "fallen" or "disgraced" and is defined as such (Usito, n.d.-c):

(9) Qui est tombé dans un état inférieur au précédent; qui a été privé d'un privilège, d'un avantage
Who has fallen in a state inferior to the precedent one; who has been deprived of a privilege or of an advantage

(10)   Qui a perdu l'état de grâce (originelle)
Who has lost the original state of grace

The first definition refers to the loss of a certain status. In Lacroix's case, we can think of his social reputation, his dignity, his professional opportunities, or even his socioeconomic class. The second definition refers to the religious meaning. Like the English words "fallen" or "disgraced," *déchu* has religious undertones as it refers to a lost state of grace. Indeed, *ange* ("angel") is the strongest collocate of *déchu* in the dictionary of combinations Antidote (Antidote, 2022b).

Tranchese (2023) discusses the words "fallen*"* and "disgraced" and their patterning in the British media coverage of sexual assault cases involving celebrities. She details two ways in which these words are used in her corpus. Firstly, they collocate with terms that describe men who have been proven guilty, who are deceased, or who are no longer at the height of their careers or their prime in age. Secondly, it is used to defend other men, for instance those whose reputation is affected by their friend's sexual assault cases. In our data, the word *déchu* starts being used as the comedian attempts to reenter the public sphere. Even though Lacroix is not at the prime of his career, which tracks with Tranchese's (2023) findings, it is interesting to note that the appearance of *déchu* does not predate his comeback (e.g., when he was on a hiatus and silent on all public platforms).

Indeed, *déchu* appears for the first time on November 18, 2022, more than two years after the accusations surfaced. More specifically, it starts being used after the publication of a news article in which some of the victims stated their regret for publicly accusing Lacroix (Hachey & Tremblay, 2022). This article marks the real restart of Lacroix's career because the emphasis is

put on the victim's forgiveness for Lacroix. Afterwards, *déchu* appears in articles describing Lacroix's interviews and attempts to go back on stage.

(11) *Journal de Montréal*, December 15, 2022

L'humoriste déchu Julien Lacroix tentera un autre retour sur les planches juste avant Noël.

The fallen/disgraced comedian Julien Lacroix will attempt another return on stage before Christmas.

(12) *Journal de Montréal*, January 9, 2023

L'humoriste déchu Julien Lacroix accordera, vendredi soir, sa première entrevue télévisuelle depuis que des allégations d'inconduite sexuelle pèsent contre lui.

The fallen/disgraced comedian Julien Lacroix will give his first TV interview since allegations of sexual misconduct have been made against him.

(13) *Journal de Montréal*, January 14, 2023

L'humoriste déchu Julien Lacroix a fait la promesse de revenir sur scène hier soir lors d'une entrevue qu'il a accordée à l'émission Le monde à l'envers.

The fallen/disgraced comedian Julien Lacroix has made the promise to go back on stage last night during an interview given to the show Le monde à l'envers.

In the examples above, *déchu* appears in the noun phrase *l'humoriste déchu Julien Lacroix* ("the fallen/disgraced comedian Julien Lacroix"). As Clark (1992, p. 209) points out, naming is a powerful tool that reveals the ideology of the namer. Depicting Lacroix as "fallen," using the adjectival form to qualify him alongside his social role (i.e., his occupation as a standup comedian), it not only places him as a member of society, making it harder to be painted as a mere fiend (Clark, 1992, p. 220), but it also identifies him as someone who has lost his social function. Moreover, in (12), it is implied that this loss was caused by the allegations of sexual misconduct rather than by the sexual misconduct itself. As the media focuses on his attempted return, using *déchu* in this specific period activates a Christian understanding of forgiveness and redemption that, rather than explicitly deflecting or reducing his level of responsibility in the sexual assaults, portrays him as an individual deserving of forgiveness.

Following Fairclough's (1995) definition of discourse, we consider that images are a relevant feature in constructing meaning. Thus, it is interesting to note that during the same time period as when *déchu* makes its appearance, the following article was published:

(14) *Journal de Montréal*, December 15, 2022

Rare sortie publique : Julien Lacroix rend hommage à Jean Lapointe

Julien Lacroix a tenu à se présenter à la chapelle ardente de Jean Lapointe jeudi soir à l'église Saint-Viateur d'Outremont. Accompagné de sa conjointe, la réalisatrice Maude Sabbagh, l'humoriste est venu saluer le fondateur de la Maison Jean Lapointe, centre où il a fait un séjour de 21 jours en 2020.

Rare public outing: Julien Lacroix pays homage to Jean Lapointe. Julien Lacroix made it a point to attend the wake of Jean Lapointe on Thursday evening at the Saint-Viateur

Church in Outremont. With his partner, the director Maude Sabbagh, the comedian came to pay homage to the founder of Maison Jean Lapointe, where he stayed for 21 days in 2020.

In this article, Lacroix is photographed and interviewed during his visit to a church, which hits home the religious undertones of the coverage during that time period. It is also interesting to note that the word *déchu* as well as the pictures in church occur only in the *Journal de Montréal*, which is the most sensationalist newspaper in our data.

Crucially, we see the use of lexical items such as "fallen," "disgraced," or *déchu* as a way to enhance public sympathy towards Lacroix. As Tranchese points out, "[celebrities] are often also considered easy targets of false accusations and, thus, generate a sense of sympathy among the public who tends to love them" (2023, p. 226). By steering away from the violent acts committed and focusing on Lacroix's demise, consequently implying that he is deserving of forgiveness, the media effectively portrays him as a victim of the accusations. Without explicitly stating it, the media coverage reinforces the idea that the victims may have lied because it feeds into the ideology that women often lie about having been sexually assaulted (or the "cry-rape girl" myth), especially when these accusations target celebrities or public figures.

3.2   Maripier Morin

Maripier Morin is an actress and public figure in Québec, who became known after her participation in a popular dating reality TV show. She has been in the public eye for her participation in different late-night TV shows, her relationship with a NHL hockey player, and, more recently, as an actress on TV productions and in movies. In 2020, Safia Nolin, a famous singer in Québec who already had a troubled relationship with the media (Dumas, 2022), recounted a story from 2018 through her social media platforms in which she said Morin sexually assaulted and verbally harassed her by making racist comments. After these accusations, as well as others, came out, Morin posted a public apology on her social media platforms and stepped back from the public sphere. A year later, Morin restarted making public appearances in late-night talk shows. In 2022, a movie production in which she was the lead actress came out in theatres. Since then, Morin has been getting professional opportunities that, despite being sparser than before 2020, anchor her back in the public domain.

3.2.1   *Admission and attribution of guilt*

A pattern found in the Morin media coverage is a contrast between what Morin has admitted to doing, usually referred to through euphemized phrases, and what Nolin has accused her of doing (e.g., sexual harassment and physical assault). For example, in (15), the headline starts by stating that Morin admitted to some of her wrongs, which they refer to as "reprehensible behavior."[6] This phrase is juxtaposed with more severe actions when they bring up how Nolin portrayed the events by using the phrase "sexual harassment and physical assault." Thus, this difference in linguistic representations implies that there is a mismatch between the actions that Morin has admitted to doing and the actions she was accused of by the victim. We suggest that this is done to accentuate Nolin's agency in the events following the accusation. Morin has indeed

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[6] This phrase is in quotation marks because it has been taken from Morin's apology on Instagram and reinserted in the headline. Although this is beyond the scope of this paper, it would be interesting to investigate further the ways in which the public apologies are entextualized (Briggs & Bauman, 1992) in the media coverage of those cases and their text trajectories (Blommaert, 2005).

retracted from the public space and lost many professional and business opportunities. As exemplified in (16), the victim is at the forefront by being the agent in subject position (Clark, 1992) of the accusations in the phrase "Safia Nolin provoked a shockwave by accusing […] Maripier Morin […]."

(15)   *Journal de Montréal*, July 8, 2020

Maripier Morin reconnaît avoir eu « un comportement répréhensible » et s'excuse envers la chanteuse Safia Nolin, qui l'accuse de harcèlement sexuel et d'agression physique lors d'une soirée, en 2018.

Maripier Morin admits to having "a reprehensible behavior" and apologizes to the singer Safia Nolin, who accused her of sexual harassment and physical assault during a night out in 2018.

(16)   *La Presse*, July 9, 2020

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 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 shockwave by accusing Maripier Morin of engaging in sexual harassment, of committing a physical assault, and of having uttered racist comments during an evening in a bar two years ago. Allegations that were in part admitted to by the actress, who apologized the next day.

An ideology that we think is at play in (15) is the one of the "cry-rape girl," which relates to the false belief that women often lie about sexual assault. Because the framing of the events that occurred in the accusations from Nolin contrasts with those of the admission from Morin, it suggests that the accusation may be false or exaggerated as Morin accepted some of the responsibility. Tranchese argues that victims who come forward about having been assaulted by celebrities are more easily subject to this ideology: "That elite members of society are at risk of being (unjustly) accused of rape is a common misconception, which relates to the rape myth of the 'cry-rape girl'" (Tranchese, 2023, p. 163). This is also highlighted by the media coverage following the wide circulation of Nolin's story online. Indeed, the mass media heavily focused on Morin's loss of professional and business opportunities, as we illustrate with the following headlines:

(17)   *Journal de Montréal*, July 9, 2020
L'empire de Maripier Morin s'écroule
Maripier Morin's empire crumbles

(18)   *Journal de Montréal*, July 9, 2020
Maripier Morin larguée par BonLook
Maripier Morin dropped by BonLook

(19)   *Le Devoir*, July 10, 2020
        Maripier Morin prend une pause
        Maripier Morin takes a break

(20)   *Journal de Montréal*, July 13, 2020
        Maripier Morin retirée des ondes
        Maripier Morin pulled off the air

(21)   *La Presse*, July 15, 2020
        Maripier Morin exclue du Gala Artis
        Maripier Morin excluded from Gala Artis

(22)   *Journal de Montréal*, July 15, 2020
        Maripier Morin exclue des galas
        Maripier Morin excluded from award shows

In the span of a week, all three newspapers in our data published articles with headlines referring to Morin's loss of professional opportunities. Notably, four of them are from *Journal de Montréal*. Thus, the focus on Nolin at the beginning of the media coverage asserts her agency from the get-go and then puts responsibility on her for the following coverage of Morin's demise.

It is also important to note the social context of these accusations in Québec: the 2020 movement, during which Morin was denounced, stirred up many discussions in Québec regarding the "popular court," which is heavily regarded as a non-legitimate and possibly damaging system. By depicting the severity of the accusations made by the victim in parallel to the euphemized accusations admitted to by Morin, in addition to the social context in which this case is embedded, the media coverage contributes to the misconception that publicly accusing of sexual assault is harmful to the perpetrator.

3.3   Prosecuted cases

In this section, we will discuss two prosecuted cases, namely Gilbert Rozon (*R. c. Rozon*, 2020) and Éric Salvail (*R. c. Salvail*, 2020). Respectively, the cases underwent legal proceedings in November 2017, when a class action was filed, and in 2019, when a police arrest was made. We will focus on their similarities, overlaps, and, importantly, the ways in which they contrast with the non-prosecuted cases we have discussed above.[7] Gilbert Rozon and Éric Salvail are two well-known public personalities in Québec. They both have been denounced during the 2017 #MeToo movement and both have been defendants in court, which resulted in acquittals.

(23) to (25) come from the media coverage of Rozon's case. We notice that Rozon is portrayed as the target of the accusations of sexual assault in (23), which is frequent in our data for all perpetrators. However, we see a shift happening once the case enters the legal system,

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[7] In a previous research project conducted on the same data, we analyzed the choice of lexical items that refer to the denunciations and to the sexually violent acts in the four cases. We argue that the media show an ideology that cases that are prosecuted are more credible than those that are not (Laplante et al., 2023).

namely that this pattern stops occurring. Nonetheless, the media seems hesitant to place him as an agent of the sexual acts; rather, Rozon appears as the object of a prepositional phrase in passive structures, which minimizes his responsibility (Clark, 1992; Henley et al., 1995). This type of structure is present in (24) with "nine women said […] they were victims of sexual harassment and assault from the founder of Just for Laughs, Gilbert Rozon" and in (25) with "A group of women who state they were assaulted by Gilbert Rozon."

(23)   *La Presse*, October 18, 2017

Visé par des allégations d'agressions sexuelles et de harcèlement de la part de neuf femmes, dont l'animatrice Pénélope McQuade, Gilbert Rozon a annoncé hier soir qu'il quittait ses fonctions […]

Targeted by allegations of sexual assault and harassment from nine women, including the TV show host Pénélope McQuade, Gilbert Rozon announced last night that he was resigning.

(24)   *Le Devoir*, October 19, 2017

Neuf femmes racontent au Devoir ainsi qu'au 98,5 FM avoir été victimes de harcèlement et d'agressions sexuelles de la part du fondateur de Juste pour rire, Gilbert Rozon, et ce, dans la foulée du mouvement #MeToo.

Nine women related to Le Devoir and to 98.5 FM that they were victims of sexual harassment and assault from the founder of Juste pour rire, Gilbert Rozon, during the #MeToo movement.

(25)   *Journal de Montréal*, November 27, 2017

Un regroupement de femmes qui affirment avoir été agressées par Gilbert Rozon veulent intenter une action collective contre l'homme d'affaires.

A group of women who state they were assaulted by Gilbert Rozon want to take a collective action against the businessman.

We want to point out example (23), which contains the name of a victim who is also a public figure in Québec, Pénélope McQuade. It is interesting to compare her media treatment to Nolin's in Morin's case (see section 3.2.1): whereas the media coverage of Morin's case portrayed Nolin as a participant in the case and highlighted her agentive role in the accusations made, Pénélope McQuade is never a grammatical agent nor the focus in a headline. Rather, she is mentioned in passing in a complement phrase. This notable difference between the two media coverages indicates that both women were not treated the same way and that an investigation on the motivations for this choice is warranted.

The examples (26) to (28) below are from the media coverage of Salvail's case. General observations from this case's media coverage are that Salvail is portrayed as the target of the accusations of sexual assault. For instance, in (26), the phrase "allegations of sexual misconduct targeting […] Salvail" portrays him as a passive receiver of the allegations made towards him. Furthermore, Salvail's loss of professional opportunities occurs because of the allegations rather than the actions he committed. In (27), the reason for him losing the shows he was involved in is "because of allegations of sexual misconduct." However, we see a shift happening after the start

of the legal procedures, as illustrated in (28), in which Salvail is the agent of the sexual assault acts, in object position (Clark, 1992). He is not portrayed as the target of the allegations, but as an agent of the acts he was accused of. Even though the media remains hesitant to place him as a subject and agent of the predicate depicting his sexually violent acts, which would give him more agency (Clark, 1992; Henley et al., 1995), the involvement of the legal system in his case encourages the media to place him as the person responsible for the acts.

(26)   *La Presse*, October 18, 2017

Les allégations d'inconduites sexuelles visant l'animateur Éric Salvail font vivement réagir les parlementaires mercredi matin à l'Assemblée nationale, alors que le chef du Parti québécois, Jean-François Lisée, estime que «le statu quo n'est pas tenable».

The allegations of sexual misconduct targeting the TV host Éric Salvail incited reactions from the parliamentarians on Wednesday morning at the National Assembly, while the leader of the Parti Québécois, Jean-François Lisée, stated that "the status quo is untenable."

(27)   *Journal de Montréal*, October 19, 2017

Éric Salvail a perdu ces 24 dernières heures toutes les émissions qu'il pilotait en raison d'allégations d'inconduites sexuelles.

Éric Salvail lost in the last 24 hours all TV shows he was involved in because of allegations of sexual misconduct.

(28)   *Journal de Montréal*, February 15, 2019

Une autre victime présumée d'Éric Salvail a décidé de raconter son histoire. Après des mois de harcèlement, il aurait été agressé par l'ex-animateur et producteur.

Another alleged victim of Éric Salvail decided to tell his story. After months of harassment, he was allegedly assaulted by the ex-TV host and producer.

4   Conclusion

Some patterns that we find in the language used by the media to cover cases involving public personalities are that it 1. places the famous perpetrator as the patient of the accusations of sexual assault or harassment through passivization and lexical choices such as *déchu* or the verb phrases *visé par* and *ciblé par*, as well as 2. implicitly feeds into the "cry-rape girl" myth by noticeably focusing on the perpetrator's loss of professional opportunities or deserving of forgiveness and by making references to Christian understandings of forgiveness. In the two unprosecuted cases, Julien Lacroix and Maripier Morin, we notice similar patterns to what Tranchese (2023) has found relating to the "cry-rape girl" myth even though both perpetrators have partly admitted to their actions. Indeed, instead of trying to deny them, both published public apologies on their social media, accepting some accountability and blaming their behavior on substance addiction. Although the topic of the public apologies would deserve further investigation, we follow Tranchese (2023) by concluding that the media coverage of sexual assault cases involving public figures comes with its own ideologies and with different social dynamics of power, including the perceived newsworthiness because of their "eliteness" (Bednarek & Caple, 2014).

The importance and influence of the media coverage of sexual violence on societal conceptions of this type of crime cannot be understated. Indeed, media discourse holds the power to prevent social change: "By emphasising the dialectical relationship between the discourse surrounding sexist violence and the social structures that determine it, it is possible to challenge said discourses and structures, starting from the language we use to talk about survivors and perpetrators" (Tranchese, 2019, p. 26). A concrete example of the repercussions that media discourse can have is that it has been found that in Québec, the increase of coverage of sexual assault cases has led to an increase in official complaints to the police (Boudreau & Ouimet, 2010). Although more could be said about the prosecution of this crime, this trend clearly shows the amount of power that the media exerts, translating into concrete changes in societal behavior. Recent statistics have shown that the number of official complaints for sexual assault has consistently remained higher in 2020 than in 2019 after July 2020, when the #MoiAussi movement was at its peak (Ministère de la Sécurité publique, 2022). A report of statistics from 2017 notes that the important media coverage of cases involving public personalities might be the cause of the important increase that followed the international movement, which was higher in Québec than in the other provinces of Canada (Ministère de la Sécurité publique, 2021). These trends and statistics highlight the relevance of paying closer attention to the media discourse surrounding cases involving public figures.

The #MoiAussi movements in Québec have sparked important discussions about the weight of media coverage of sexual assault cases. The *Institut national de la santé public du Québec* (INSPQ) published a media kit on sexual assault outlining guidelines for journalists to follow in order to inform the public while avoiding reiterating misconceptions about sexual assault. This resource is the only instance of suggestions that journalists may turn to when reporting on sexual assault cases. They include general norms and recommendations (e.g., that the journalists should be aware of myths to remain objective) that aim to diminish the reiteration of myths and preconceived ideas about sexual violence, but no specific guidance regarding which words or syntactic structures to use. As such, the linguistic choices are not fully explainable by a set of specific conventions (e.g., to use "alleged" rather than "accused" to avoid legal liability) that journalists follow. The INSPQ also acknowledges the power that the media holds, especially as the main source of information available to the public (Institut national de santé publique du Québec, n.d.). The topic of media guidelines for sexual assault has been investigated by Royal (2019) in an analysis of the media coverage of the UK footballer Ched Evans which found, using media guidelines, that the discourse was victim-blaming. More recently, a complaint was filed to the *Conseil de Presse du Québec* against the authors of an article we mentioned above, Hachey and Tremblay (2022). In this news article, it is reported that the victims of Lacroix stated their regrets for publicly accusing Lacroix of sexual assault. The complainant blamed the journalists and *La Presse* for providing incomplete information, a lack of balance, and conflict of interest, which the Council upheld ("D2022 -11-220 / D2023-01-004," n.d.). In short, the ways in which the stories of sexual assault involving public personalities hit the news cycle can result in concrete and important advancement for the fight against misconceptions about sexual assault and seem to be increasingly scrutinized, which is not only warranted but necessary given the power they can exert.

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