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# Sexual Assault Gossip: Who Do We Share with and Why?

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## Abstract

Despite its bad reputation, gossip plays an important role in communicating and policing the social norms, morals, and values of a community. People are likely to be particularly attuned to gossip that helps solve recurrent adaptive challenges. Among women, sexual assault is a pervasive threat to reproductive choice that exacts serious costs on women's reproductive fitness. Research has demonstrated that women fear sexual assault and are motivated to engage in behaviors to reduce the threat of being victimized. Here we propose that women may gossip about sexual assault as a means of protecting themselves and others. Participants read a series of vignettes describing instances of sexual assault of a female victim and were asked to indicate how likely they would be to share that information with a variety of recipients, and what factors motivated their sharing intentions. Results indicated that, overall, sexual assault gossip was especially likely to be shared with proximal female family and friends, as well as authority figures. Women were more likely to share sexual assault gossip than men, and this gender effect was strongest when sharing gossip with female family and friends. The strongest motivations for sharing gossip were to warn the recipient, damage the reputation of the perpetrator, and check agreement with the recipient, with women being more motivated to damage the perpetrator's reputation than men were. Women who expressed a greater fear of rape were more likely to share the information with all recipients except proximal male friends, and reported stronger motivations to share in order to damage the perpetrator's reputation and check agreement with the recipient. Results are consistent with the idea that women may use gossip to create a whisper-network of information exchange that helps women protect themselves and others.

**Keywords** Sexual assault · Gossip · Motivations · Sex differences · Rape · Reproductive fitness

## Introduction

Gossip is often viewed negatively by society, but decades of research has documented that the information exchanged via gossip can serve important functions (e.g., Baumeister et al., 2004; Beersma & Van Kleef, 2012; Dunbar, 2004; McAndrew et al., 2007). Gossip can function in similar ways as storytelling has throughout history—to convey important information about the norms and morals of a community, to provide warnings about local threats and dangers, and to provide lessons about how best to survive in a given ecology (Baumeister et al., 2004; Scalise Sugiyama, 2001). The information exchanged in stories and gossip is likely to help people solve recurrent adaptive challenges. For women, one such challenge is avoiding threats to reproductive choice posed by sexual coercion and assault (e.g., Bjorklund & Shackelford, 1999; McDonald et al., 2021). Past research has demonstrated that women are motivated to consume information that they believe will help them prevent their own sexual assault victimization (McDonald et al., 2021; Vicary & Fraley, 2010). Gossip about sexual assault may be a means by which women create an informal network of information exchange that can be used to help women avoid or escape threats to reproductive choice. To that end, the current research asks three broad questions: (1) are people likely to share information about sexual assault events, (2) who is most likely to share this information, and to whom, and (3) what are the motivations for sharing information about sexual assault?

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## Adaptive Information Exchange via Storytelling

Storytelling can convey unique information about the challenges and affordances of the local environment that may otherwise take extended and costly trial-and-error to learn. A review of the storytelling practices in 53 forager societies documented that the stories conveyed generalizable knowledge of value to the listeners and were communicated in ways that indicated the purpose of the tale was to teach the listeners (Scalise Sugiyama, 2021). For instance, stories can communicate best practices for hunting, including the best time of year, locations, and methods (Scalise Sugiyama, 2001, 2021). Whereas first-person learning can pose a variety of risks and costs (Scalise Sugiyama, 2001), indirect social learning that comes from listening to the stories told by others can circumvent these risks (Baumeister, 2004; Henrich, 2016). Indeed, it may be humans' capacity for social learning that differentiates their intelligence from other primates (Herrmann et al., 2007). The way that humans consume and prioritize social information illustrates adaptive design (Henrich, 2016). People tend to focus on and remember the parts of stories that involve success in completing a goal rather than failures, demonstrating that human memory is "goal-oriented" (Black & Bower, 1980; Scalise Sugiyama, 2001). People also show a preference for learning information from people who are similar to themselves, as the best strategies for fitness-promotion may differ across people (Henrich, 2016; McAndrew & Milenkovic, 2002).

## Modern Storytelling: True Crime Consumption as Defensive Vigilance

Although humans are drawn to storytelling in its traditional form, modern storytelling in the form of books, television, podcasts, and social media now compete for our attention as well. The tendency to circle around the TV at night has a striking similarity to the traditional practice of gathering around the fire at the end of the day to hear each other's stories. We are likely to be especially drawn to stories that provide fitness-relevant information that helps us to solve adaptive challenges we face in our local environment. For women, an important and recurrent adaptive challenge is the circumvention of reproductive choice. Women's reproductive fitness is heavily dependent on the selection of high quality mates (Trivers, 1972), but women's reproductive choices have been threatened by rape throughout history (e.g., Brown, 1952; Chagnon, 1988; Kohler & Turner, 2006; Minturn et al., 1969; Palmer, 1989; Rozée, 1993; Sanday, 1981). Prior research has suggested that women may possess a psychological threat management system for rape avoidance (McDonald et al., 2015,

2019, 2021). Such a system is argued to calibrate women's fear of rape in accordance with contextual and individual vulnerabilities, and motivate behaviors that reduces the risk of victimization. A large literature is consistent with this theorizing, documenting that women fear rape more than nearly all other crimes (Ferraro, 1996; Fisher et al., 2003; Hilinski, 2009) and engage in a wide variety of behaviors to reduce their risk of being raped (e.g., McKibbin et al., 2009). One such behavior may be the consumption of true-crime media—a genre that women are particularly drawn to (Vicary & Fraley, 2010), and that women explicitly report consuming for the purpose of learning defensive strategies to prevent their own victimization (McDonald et al., 2021).

True crime refers to real-life stories of victimization typically delivered in podcast, documentary, or book form. True crime often focuses on female victims of violent crimes, such as kidnapping, rape, and physical assault. Women consume more true crime media than men (Joyce, 2018; Vicary & Fraley, 2010), even though men tend to consume more violent media than women in general, and tend to enjoy it more (Krcmar & Kean, 2005). It is likely that women's strong interest in true crime media is driven in large part by their greater fear of crime, specifically their fear of rape (e.g., Ferraro, 1996; Fisher et al., 2003; Hilinski, 2009). Indeed, women who explicitly reported that they are motivated to consume true crime media for the purpose of defensive vigilance were also more likely to report a heightened fear of rape and a history of sexual assault victimization (McDonald et al., 2021). This pattern is consistent with the idea that women who feel vulnerable to the types of crimes portrayed in true crime media are more likely to seek out that media for educational purposes. The particular features of true crime media that women are drawn to are consistent with this explanation. Women report preferring true crime media that involves a female victim, contains safety tips, and discusses the perpetrator's motives (Vicary & Fraley, 2010). This implies that women's unique and fervent interest in true crime media may ultimately function as a means of acquiring relevant social information about how to avoid becoming a victim themselves.

True crime, in this sense, is a form of storytelling. However, the recipient of the story is unlikely to know the victim or the perpetrator, may not share similar life circumstances to the victim, and may not live anywhere near where the crimes occurred. Thus, although the information is useful, it lacks specificity. This gap in self-relevant, local information, may be filled by the exchange of gossip about sexual assault. That is, women may be exchanging information about sexual assault experiences in their community to gain knowledge about who is a potential predator, what spaces and contexts present the greatest threat, and how other women are mitigating these risks. This exchange of information can be conceptualized as gossip, when defined as a sender

communicating to a receiver about a target who is absent or unaware of the content (Dores Cruz et al., 2021).

## Sexual Assault Gossip as Defensive Vigilance

Gossip provides functional benefits similar to those of storytelling and true crime consumption and is an important social behavior that takes place with friends, family, work colleagues, and even people we have just met (e.g., Foster, 2004). Prior research has defined four primary motivations for sharing gossip: negative influence, information gathering and validation, social enjoyment, and group protection (Beersma & Van Kleef, 2012). Which of these motivations explains an instance of gossip is dependent on the type of information discussed, and with whom one is gossiping (Lee & Barnes, 2021). For example, gossip in the workplace can function to protect group norms from harmful behavior (Beersma & Van Kleef, 2012) by socially-sanctioning those who do poor work (Loughry & Tosi, 2008) or violate moral norms of the group (e.g., Dunbar, 2004; Fernandes et al., 2017). People may also gossip about their significant other (McAndrew et al., 2007) in order to gather information about their risk of experiencing infidelity. Thus, different types of gossip provide different functional benefits. To our knowledge, research has not yet explored whether people gossip about sexual assault, and if so, what function it serves.

Gossip about sexual assault may be particularly important in protecting people against sexual assault, given the challenges that people face when they report their victimization experiences publicly and to the police. Victims who testify against their perpetrators are often subject to victim blaming and defamation (e.g., Orenstein, 2007; Sable et al., 2006), and their cases can drag on for years through appeals processes (e.g., Miller, 2019), only to ultimately result in an unsatisfactory outcome. Only a small number of reported rapes are prosecuted, and even fewer are criminally convicted (Lievore, 2005; Richards, 2019). Perhaps because of the high costs of reporting and low conviction rate, less than 5% of female college victims reported their experiences to campus police or a police officer (Fisher et al., 2003). In contrast, 86% of female college victims have told at least one person who is not an authority figure (Fisher et al., 2003). Although sharing this information likely serves multiple functions, women may disclose stories of sexual assault to other women with the intent to protect others from potential perpetrators. Outside of the context of sexual assault, research has indeed found that individuals are motivated to share prosocial gossip–that is, gossip that contains negative evaluative content that is shared in order to warn others of someone's antisocial or exploitative behavior (Feinberg et al., 2012).

Sharing gossip about sexual assault may also serve a self-protective function–specifically to create a bond with another person in hopes that they will reciprocate sharing similar information in the future. As a result, women may preferentially share gossip with those they expect would most value the information and who are likely to return the favor. Selectivity in the recipient of gossip is important, as sharing gossip is not without costs. If you share something negative about another person, there is a risk that the recipient may out you to the person being discussed, or label you as a liar or untrustworthy to others. In this way, the communication of gossip is an expression of trust that may facilitate reciprocal trust and bonding with the recipient. Indeed, there is evidence linking gossip with bonding. For example, women who co-ruminate about negative interpersonal issues show a synchronicity in their cortisol responses that may facilitate bonding (Rankin et al., 2018), and the act of gossiping has been associated with an increase in oxytocin (Brondino et al., 2017). People are also better able to recall more shared negative than positive social attitudes with their closest friends, and holding the same negative attitude about a person with a stranger engenders more positive feelings toward the stranger than holding the same positive attitude about the person (Bosson et al., 2006).

## Current Study

In the current research, we add to previous literature that examines the functionality of gossip by exploring the likelihood of, and motivations for, sharing sexual assault gossip. Building on past research that has linked women's fear of rape with defensive behaviors aimed at protecting reproductive choice (McDonald et al., 2015, 2019, 2021), we suggest that women will be more likely to share gossip about sexual assault, relative to men, and will do so in a manner that functions to maximize the protective impact of the gossip, both for self and others. In particular, the gossip is expected to be preferentially shared with those who would benefit most from the information (e.g., women who live near where the assault took place), and with those who would be likely to reciprocate the information-exchange. We also examined the likelihood of sharing information about a sexual assault with an authority figure relevant to the context of the assault and on social media. The inclusion of authorities and social media as recipients of sexual assault was exploratory. Third-parties to an assault may be more likely to report the assault to a relevant authority figure than a victim, because there is not a personal risk in re-traumatization, and the report may result in the initiation of protective actions. Sharing to social media was included given its ability to transmit a warning about an assault to a large group of people (Panagiotopoulos et al., 2016).

A dominant motive for sexual assault gossip is likely to be the desire to protect female kin and friends both by warning them about their risk of assault and directly marring the

reputation of the perpetrator. Warning close friends and family is likely to also reap personal benefits. Both in terms of the inclusive fitness benefits earned as a result of genetic overlap with kin, as well as the potential for reciprocal information exchange (e.g., Alexander, 1987; Axelrod & Hamilton, 1981; Hamilton, 1964; Trivers, 1971). To facilitate that reciprocity, women may be motivated to use gossip as a means of bonding with other women.

Given the potential self-protection function of sexual assault gossip, it is expected that women who feel the most vulnerable to threats against their reproductive choice will be the most motivated to create a sharing network for sexual assault gossip. In the same way that women who are more fearful of rape are more likely to consume true crime media, they may also engage in greater exchange of sexual assault gossip, particularly with those most likely to reciprocate (i.e., female friends and family). They may also be more motivated to share in order to damage the reputation of the perpetrator (as this may reduce the perpetrator's likelihood of re-offending) and to bond with the gossip recipient (to increase the likelihood of reciprocity).

Men are expected to harbor many of the same motivations as women for sharing sexual assault gossip. For example, there is a similar inclusive fitness benefit to be gained by men for sharing information about sexual assault with their female kin. Damaging the reputation of the perpetrator helps protect their friends and family, and reduces the threat posed by an intrasexual rival. Additionally, men may have a direct fitness interest in protecting close female friends from sexual assault to the extent that they have a romantic interest in them. However, creating a network of exchange does not have as large of a direct impact on men's reproductive fitness given the lower risk and reproductive costs associated with sexual assault for men. Therefore, men may not be as motivated to share sexual assault gossip as women.

To test these research questions, we conducted a study in which men and women read a series of vignettes describing the sexual assault of a female victim. After each vignette, participants rated how likely they would be to share the information with a variety of recipients that varied in gender, relationship to the participant, and proximity to the assault that took place. They then indicated to what extent their sharing intentions were driven by each of a set of specified motivations. The hypotheses tested that follow from our theoretical perspective are outlined below:

1. **H1:** Women will be more likely to share sexual assault gossip than men.
2. **H2:** Overall, people will be more likely to share sexual assault gossip with female family members and friends than male family members and friends, and also more likely to share with family and friends who are proximal versus distal to the assault.
3. **H3:** The effect of participant gender will vary as a function of the gossip recipient; specifically, women, more so than men, will be more likely to share sexual assault information with female friends and family, relative to male friends and family.
4. **H4:** Overall, the highest motivations for sharing sexual assault gossip will be to warn the recipient and damage the reputation of the perpetrator, both of which are expected to be stronger among women. Women are also expected to have a stronger motivation to share gossip in order to bond with the recipient relative to men.
5. **H5:** Women's fear of rape will be positively correlated with their likelihood of sharing sexual assault gossip across recipients, but especially with female friends and family.
6. **H6:** Women's fear of rape will be positively correlated with the motivation to damage the reputation of the perpetrator and to bond with the gossip recipient.

## Method

### Participants and Procedure

Participants were recruited via MTurk ($n = 424$) and the subject pool at a midwestern university in the U.S. ($n = 390$). MTurk participation was managed within the Cloud Research MTurk Toolkit (Litman et al., 2017). The toolkit allows researchers to advertise the study only to MTurk workers who have passed a set of screening assessments to improve data quality by filtering out bots and participants with low attention, engagement, or for whom comprehension of the English language is poor enough to invalidate their data. The items were identical regardless of the platform participants were recruited from. Participants provided informed consent and completed the study online via Qualtrics. Participants provided consent and then filled out demographic information (e.g., race, gender, sexual orientation) and a series of assessments in the order described in the measures section below. Once completed, university students were given course credit for their participation and MTurk participants were paid $2.50.

In total, 162 participants were dropped for one or more of the following reasons: taking fewer than 300 s to complete the survey ($n = 98$), failing to complete at least 95% of the survey ($n = 36$), failing the attention check ($n = 43$), failing to report their gender ($n = 15$), reporting their gender as something other than cis-gender male or female ($n = 18$), reporting that they were not honest in their responses ($n = 4$), and/or reporting that they paid very little attention ($n = 6$). The final sample was 652 participants (289 cis men, 363 cis women), though sample sizes vary across analyses due to missing data.

The racial and ethnic identity of the MTurk sample ($n = 381$) was as follows (selecting all that apply): 78% White ($n = 297$), 9.7% Black or African American ($n = 37$), 8.4% Asian ($n = 32$), 0.8% Middle Eastern or North African Origin ($n = 3$), 5.5% Hispanic or Latino ($n = 21$), 1% American Indian ($n = 4$), and 1% Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander ($n = 4$). Of MTurk participants, 165 were women, and 216 were men. The average age of MTurk participants was 39.34 years ($SD = 11.54$), ranging from 20 to 76.

University students ($n = 271$) identified as follows: 66.8% White ($n = 181$), 13.7% Black or African American ($n = 37$), 6.3% Asian ($n = 17$), 13.3% Middle Eastern or North African Origin ($n = 36$), 5.5% Hispanic or Latino ($n = 15$), 0.4% American Indian ($n = 1$), and 1.1% of university participants reported that their race was not listed ($n = 3$). Of university students, 198 were women, and 73 were men. University students' average age was 20.65 ($SD = 4.07$), ranging from 18 to 51.

## Measures

The data collected for this paper were part of a larger survey that included assessments to test multiple research questions. Only the measures relevant to the current research are described below. The other measures were intended to test questions about the impacts of true-crime media consumption on the attributions people make about real-life crime. The order of measures was constant: demographics, the Fear of Rape Scale (Senn & Dzinas, 1996), two sections assessing predictors variables relevant to the true-crime impact study, the gossip vignettes and associated measures described below, and then another section assessing outcomes for the true-crime impact study.

### Fear of Rape

The 30-item Fear of Rape Scale (Senn & Dzinas, 1996) includes items that measure defensive behaviors (e.g., "I avoid going out alone at night"), fearfulness (e.g., "I am afraid of being sexually assaulted"), and one's sense of safety (e.g., "In general, how safe do you feel at night?"—reverse scored). All items are assessed on a 1–7 response scale, with anchors that either range from "never" to "always" or from "very unsafe" to "very safe." All items were averaged to create a single composite score with higher scores indicating greater fear of rape. Men's fear of rape was not examined, as the measure has only been validated in women.

### Sexual Threat Vignettes

Subjects were presented with five vignettes that asked them to imagine that they had received information about a sexual assault or attempted assault, for example:

Imagine that as you are entering your dorm you stop to talk with your hallmate. She tells you that a man she had never seen before followed her into the dorm at night, grabbed her, and tried to force his way into her room. As she struggled against him and yelled for help, another hallmate came out of their room to see what was going on, and the man fled.

After each vignette, participants were asked a series of questions about how likely they were to share that information with a variety of people, and their motivations for doing so (full text of vignettes and questions are provided in the Appendix). Vignettes varied in terms of the geographical distance the assault occurred from participants, with some occurring in close proximity to their home and others occurring further away (see the Appendix for the full-text of all five vignettes).

### Information Sharing Intentions

Following each vignette, participants were asked how likely they would be to share the information with eight recipients: a young adult female family member who lives near the site of the assault, a young adult male family member who lives near the site of the assault, a female friend who lives near the site of the assault, a male friend who lives near the site of the assault, a female friend who lives far away from the site of the assault, a male friend who lives far away from the site of the assault, a person of authority relevant to the context of the assault (e.g., the RA from the dorm where the assault occurred), and on their personal social media. Participants indicated their likelihood of sharing on a 4-point scale ranging from 1 = "very unlikely" to 4 = "very likely." Participants filled out this scale for each of the eight recipients following each of the five vignettes. To simplify presentation of results, responses were collapsed (averaged) for each recipient across vignettes.

### Motivations for Sharing

After participants rated their likelihood of sharing the information from the vignette with all recipients, they reported their motivations for sharing. They were only asked to report their motivations once per vignette, as opposed to reporting their motivations for sharing with each recipient to which they indicated a likelihood of sharing the information. This was done to reduce participant fatigue. Although assessing motivations for each recipient would have added greater specificity in connecting sharing motives to recipients, it would have resulted in a total of 200 items (versus 25). Participants rated their motivations for sharing on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 = "strongly disagree" to 5 = "strongly agree." Motivations for sharing were adapted

from Beersma and VanKleef (2012), and included: to bond with the person I was talking with, to damage the reputation of the man we talked about, to damage the reputation of the woman we talked about, to check whether the person I talked to had the same ideas about the people we talked about, to warn the person I was talking with about the behavior of the person we talked about. Responses were averaged across each of the vignettes to create a composite measure for each motive.

# Results

## Likelihood of Sharing: Friends and Family

To examine who was more likely to share sexual assault gossip, and with whom it would be most likely to be shared, two cross-classified, multi-level models (MLMs) were fit (e.g., Dunn et al., 2015) using the package lme4 (Bates et al., 2015) in R (Posit team, 2023). Results from both models are summarized in Table 1. The first model assesses the likelihood of sharing with proximal female family, proximal male family, proximal female friends, proximal male friends, distal female friends, and distal male friends. These recipients varied in characteristics relevant to testing hypotheses 1–3, specifically recipient gender, proximity to the assault, and relationship to the participant. Cross-classified models are appropriate for non-hierarchical clustered data and can accommodate the unique and interacting effects of two factors (participant and vignette) in which likelihood judgments are clustered

(Raudenbush & Byrk, 2002). Recipients were nested within vignettes, and sharing likelihood judgements for each recipient were crossed with participants and vignettes.

## Null Model

The null model took the following form:

$$\text{Likelihood}_{i(jk)} = B_{0jk} + e_{i(jk)}$$

$$B_{0jk} = y_{00j} + b_{00j} + c_{00k} + d_{0jk}$$

$$\text{Likelihood}_{i(jk)} = y_{00j} + b_{00j} + c_{00k} + d_{0jk} + e_{i(jk)}$$

The null model assesses which factors are contributing to variance in the likelihood of sharing across individual recipients. Here, the random effects parameters $b_{00j}$, $c_{00k}$, $d_{0jk}$, and $e_{i(jk)}$ indicate variance in the outcome attributable to participants ($b_{00j} = 0.44$), vignettes ($c_{00k} = 0.84$), and any unique joint effects of participants and vignettes ($d_{0jk} = 0.16$), with the remaining source of variance due to random error ($e_{i(jk)} = 0.66$). The intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC) indicates the proportion of variance due to each cluster factor. The participant-factor ICC (i.e., $0.44/(0.44 + 0.84 + 0.16 + 0.66)$) indicated that 21% of the variance in likelihood of sharing was due to participant. The vignette-factor ICC (i.e., $0.84/(0.44 + 0.84 + 0.16 + 0.66)$) indicated that 40% of the variance in likelihood of sharing was due to differences in vignette. The participant-vignette ICC (i.e., $0.16/(0.44 + 0.84 + 0.16 + 0.66)$) indicated that

**Table 1** Coefficients, standard error, and 95% confidence intervals for multi-level models

| Fixed effect estimates | Model 1 | | Model 2 | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| | Friend and family recipients | | Authority and social media recipients | |
| | b(SE) | [95% CI] | b(SE) | [95% CI] |
| Intercept (SE) | 3.17 (0.11) | [2.95, 3.39] | 2.41 (0.09) | [2.23, 2.59] |
| *Recipient-level* | | | | |
| Proximity | −0.69 (0.02) | [−0.74, −0.65] | | |
| Relationship | −0.08 (0.01) | [−0.10, −0.05] | | |
| Recipient gender | −0.71 (0.03) | [−0.78, −0.65] | | |
| Recipient gender* proximity | 0.18 (0.02) | [0.14, 0.22] | | |
| Social media | | | −0.56 (0.02) | [−0.59, −0.52] |
| Authority | | | 0.37 (0.02) | [0.34, 0.41] |
| *Participant-level* | | | | |
| Gender | −0.35 (0.06) | [−0.46, −0.24] | −0.24 (0.05) | [−0.34, −0.15] |
| *Recipient*participant* | | | | |
| Recipient gender* participant gender | 0.20 (0.05) | [0.10, 0.30] | | |

All fixed effects are significant

Model 1 compared likelihood of sharing with proximal female family, proximal male family, proximal female friends, proximal male friends, distal female friends, and distal male friends

Model 2 compared authority and social media individually against all other recipients

8% of the variance in likelihood of sharing was due to the interaction between participants and vignette. Although 8% of variance is accounted for in the null model by the interaction of participants and vignette, the participant by vignette random effect was not retained in subsequent models due to convergence issues.

## Final Model

The final model took the following form:

$$\text{Likelihood}_{i(jk)} = B_{0jk} + B_{1jk}\text{Distal}_{ijk} + B_{2jk}\text{Relat}_{ijk} + B_{3jk}\text{RGend}_{ijk} + B_{4jk}\text{RGend*Distal} + e_{i(jk)}$$

$$B_{0jk} = y_{00} + y_{01}\text{Gender}_j + b_{00j} + c_{00k}$$
$$B_{1jk} = y_{10} + y_{11}\text{Gender}_j + b_{10j}$$
$$B_{2jk} = y_{20} + b_{20j}$$
$$B_{3jk} = y_{30} + y_{31}\text{Gender}_j + b_{30j}$$
$$B_{4jk} = y_{40} + b_{40j}$$

This model tests the effects of specific predictors consistent with our hypotheses on the likelihood of sharing sexual assault information across individual recipients. This model includes within-vignette fixed effects for recipient proximity (whether the assault took place in close versus distal proximity to the recipient), recipient relationship (whether the recipient was a family member or friend), recipient gender (whether the recipient was male or female), and the interaction between recipient gender and proximity. It also includes a participants-level fixed effect for participant gender, as well as interactions between participant gender, recipient proximity, and recipient gender. Random effects for recipient proximity, recipient relationship, and recipient gender were also included to account for variation in responses across participants. A fixed effect was added for sample origin (i.e., whether the participant came from the university sample or MTurk), but it was not significant and was excluded from the final model. See Table 2 and Fig. 1 for pairwise comparisons of recipients' sharing likelihood.

**Hypothesis 1** As predicted in hypothesis 1, the effect of participant gender was significant, $b = -0.35$, $SE = 0.06$, $t = -6.11$, 95% CI $[-0.46, -0.24]$. That is, women were more likely to share sexual assault gossip than men.

**Hypothesis 2** Hypothesis 2 predicted that people would be most likely to share sexual assault gossip with women, and more specifically, with women who are proximal to where the assault took place. Consistent with the first part of this hypothesis, there was a significant main effect of recipient gender, $b = -0.71$, $SE = 0.03$, $t = -20.94$, 95% CI $[-0.78, -0.65]$, indicating that sexual assault gossip was more likely to be shared with female than male recipients. Additionally, there was an effect of the recipients' proximity to the assault, $b = -0.69$, $SE = 0.02$, $t = -29.92$, 95% CI $[-0.74, -0.65]$, suggesting that assault information was more likely to be shared with those proximal to where the assault took place than those further away. The interaction between proximity and gender of the recipient was also

**Table 2** Likelihood of sharing sexual assault gossip by gender

| Recipient | Total | Participant gender | | Gender difference | | |
| | | Women | Men | | | |
| | *M (SE)* | *M (SE)* | *M (SE)* | *M_{diff}(SE)* | *p* | *d* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Proximal female friend | 3.01 (0.03)_a | 3.20 (0.04)_g | 2.81 (0.05)_k | 0.39 (0.06) | <0.001* | 0.49 |
| Proximal female family | 3.00 (0.03)_a | 3.17 (0.04)_g | 2.83 (0.05)_k | 0.34 (0.06) | <0.001* | 0.42 |
| Authority | 2.66 (0.03)_b | 2.78 (0.04)_h | 2.55 (0.05)_l | 0.23 (0.06) | <0.001* | 0.29 |
| Proximal male family | 2.37 (0.03)_c | 2.46 (0.05)_i | 2.28 (0.05)_m | 0.18 (0.07) | 0.009* | 0.21 |
| Proximal male friend | 2.35 (0.03)_{c,d} | 2.43 (0.05)_i | 2.26 (0.05)_m | 0.17 (0.07) | 0.013* | 0.20 |
| Distal female friend | 2.27 (0.03)_d | 2.43 (0.04)_i | 2.10 (0.05)_n | 0.33 (0.07) | <0.001* | 0.38 |
| Distal male friend | 1.85 (0.03)_e | 1.90 (0.04)_j | 1.81 (0.05)_o | 0.10 (0.06) | 0.122 | 0.11 |
| Social media | 1.74 (0.03)_f | 1.86 (0.05)_j | 1.62 (0.05)_p | 0.24 (0.07) | <0.001* | 0.28 |

Participants with the same subscript letter did not differ significantly in likelihood of sharing

Subscripts refer to differences within column groupings

*M*s are estimated marginal means. *d* refers to Cohen's *d*—calculated by subtracting the means of the two groups and dividing by the pooled *SD*
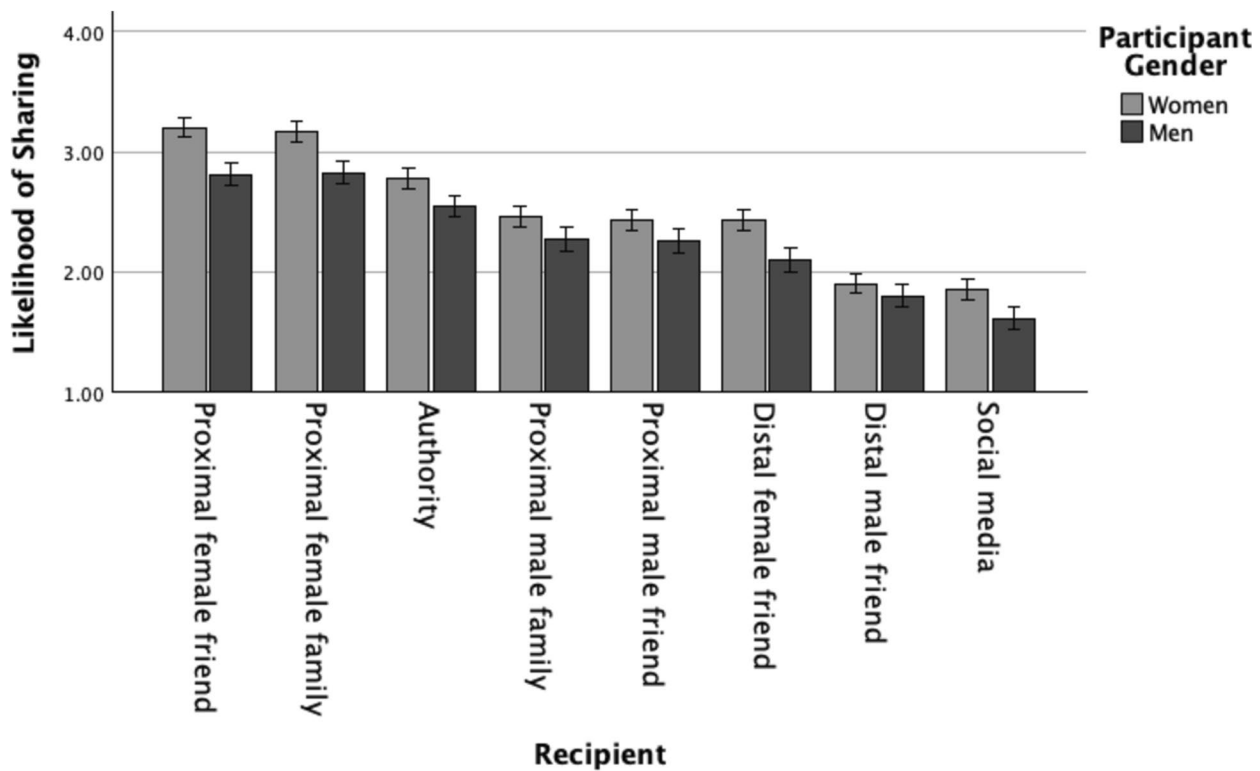
*$^*p < 0.05$

**Fig. 1** Comparing likelihood of sharing sexual assault gossip between men and women. *Note* Error bars indicate 95% confidence intervals

significant, $b = 0.18$, $SE = 0.02$, $t = 7.91$, 95% CI [0.14, 0.22]. The pattern of the interaction indicates that the tendency to share sexual assault gossip with women more than men is stronger for proximal recipients than distal.

***Hypothesis 3*** Hypothesis 3 predicted that women, more so than men, would be more likely to share with female friends and family relative to male friends and family. Consistent with this hypothesis, a significant interaction between recipient gender and participant gender was observed, $b = 0.20$, $SE = 0.05$, $t = 3.95$, 95% CI [0.10, 0.30]. As predicted, women were more likely than men to share with female friends and family relative to male friends and family.

## Likelihood of Sharing: Authority and Social Media

The second cross-classified multi-level model assesses likelihood of sharing with authority and on social media as compared to all other recipients. Social media and authority recipients were excluded from Model 1 because they did not vary as a function of the central predictors in that model (i.e., gender, proximity, relationship).

### Null Model

$$\text{Likelihood}_{i(jk)} = B_{0jk} + e_{i(jk)}$$

$$B_{0jk} = y_{00j} + b_{001} + c_{00k} + d_{0jk}$$

$$\text{Likelihood}_{i(jk)} = y_{00j} + b_{001} + c_{00k} + d_{0jk} + e_{i(jk)}$$

The null model assesses which factors are contributing to variance in the likelihood of sharing with all recipients. In this model, the random effects terms $b_{00j}$, $c_{00k}$, $d_{0jk}$, and $e_{i(jk)}$ indicate variance in the outcome that can be attributed to participants ($b_{00j} = 0.39$), vignettes ($c_{00k} = 0.04$), and the interaction between participants and vignettes ($d_{0jk} = 0.12$), with our remaining term referring to any random error ($e_{i(jk)} = 0.80$). The participant-factor ICC (i.e., $0.39/(0.12 + 0.39 + 0.04 + 0.80)$) indicated that 29% of the variance in the null model for likelihood of sharing was due to participant. The vignette-factor ICC (i.e., $0.04/(0.12 + 0.39 + 0.04 + 0.80)$) indicated that 3% of the variance in likelihood of sharing was due to differences in vignette. The participant-vignette ICC (i.e., $0.12/(0.12 + 0.39 + 0.04 + 0.80)$) indicated that 9% of the variance in sharing was due to the interaction between participants and vignette. Despite the interaction between participants and vignette accounting for 9% of the variance in the null model, it was not retained in subsequent models due to convergence issues.

### Final Model

$$\text{Likelihood}_{i(jk)} = B_{0jk} + B_{1jk}\text{Authority}_{ijk} + B_{2jk}\text{SocMed}_{ijk} + e_{i(jk)}$$

$$B_{0jk} = y_{00} + y_{01}\text{Gender}_j + b_{00j} + c_{00k}$$
$$B_{1jk} = y_{10} + b_{10j}$$
$$B_{2jk} = y_{20} + b_{20j}$$

The final model adds fixed effects for participant gender, whether the recipient is an authority figure, and whether the recipient is social media. Random effects for authority and social media were also included to account for variation in responses across participants. Originally, a fixed-effect was included for origin (i.e., whether the participant came from a university or MTurk), but it was excluded from the final model because it was not significant. See Table 2 and Fig. 1 for pairwise comparisons of recipients' sharing likelihood.

**Hypothesis 1** The first hypothesis predicted that women would be more likely to share sexual assault information than men, and the term for gender is significant, $b = -0.24$, $SE = 0.05$, $t = -4.90$, 95% CI [$-0.34$, $-0.15$]. This indicates that women were more likely than men to share sexual assault information to an authority figure and on social media, providing support for the hypothesis.

### Motivations for Sharing

We refrained from a multi-level regression model for examining motivations given the number of pairwise comparisons we sought for the different motivations examined. A repeated measures ANOVA offered a well-accepted framework to examine within-participant (e.g., different motivations) and between-participant (i.e., individual differences) effects on the outcomes. Thus, to examine the relative strengths of each motivation for sharing sexual assault gossip, and how

the motivations vary by participant gender, a mixed-model ANOVA was conducted with participant gender entered as a between-subjects variable (men, women) and motivations for sharing entered as a within-subjects variable (to bond, to damage the reputation of the man, to damage the reputation of the woman, to check agreement, to warn). A between-person effect of sample origin was originally included (i.e., university or MTurk sample); however, it was not significant and was excluded.

The main effect of participant gender was not significant, $F(1, 637) = 3.42$, $MSE = 2.64$, $p = 0.065$, indicating that men ($M = 2.58$, $SE = 0.04$) and women ($M = 2.69$, $SE = 0.04$) did not differ significantly in their overall motivation to share sexual assault gossip. The main effect of motivation was examined next. A Mauchley's test indicated that the assumption of sphericity was violated [$\chi^2(9) = 247.64$, $p < 0.001$], thus the Greenhouse–Geisser correction was used. The effect of motivation was significant, $F(3.41, 2172.11) = 694.39$, $MSE = 1.04$, $p < 0.001$, indicating that participants were more likely to share because of some motivations relative to others. Examination of post-hoc pairwise comparisons, using a Bonferroni correction, revealed that participants were most likely to be motivated to warn the recipient, consistent with H4. Participants were next most likely to be motivated to share with intent to damage the reputation of the man, but it did not differ significantly from the motivation to check agreement with the recipient, providing partial support for H4. The weakest motivation across participants was to damage the reputation of the woman. A full reporting of the pairwise comparisons is provided in Table 3, and visually represented in Fig. 2.

A significant interaction between gender and motivation was also observed, $F(3.41, 2172.11) = 4.74$, $MSE = 1.04$, $p = 0.002$, indicating that the magnitude of the effect of gender on the motivations for sharing sexual assault gossip varied across motivations. Consistent with H4, examination of

**Table 3** Motivations for sharing sexual assault gossip by gender

| Motivations | Total M (SE) | Participant gender | | Gender difference | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Women M (SE) | Men M (SE) | $M_{diff}$(SE) | p | d |
| To bond | 2.17 (0.05)$_a$ | 2.21 (0.06)$_e$ | 2.13 (0.07)$_j$ | 0.08 (0.09) | 0.366 | 0.07 |
| To damage the reputation of the man | 2.69 (0.05)$_b$ | 2.87 (0.07)$_f$ | 2.51 (0.08)$_k$ | 0.36 (0.11) | <0.001 | 0.26 |
| To damage the reputation of the woman | 1.51 (0.04)$_c$ | 1.47 (0.05)$_g$ | 1.56 (0.05)$_l$ | −0.10 (0.07) | 0.167 | −0.11 |
| To check agreement with recipient | 2.61 (0.05)$_b$ | 2.65 (0.06)$_h$ | 2.57 (0.07)$_k$ | 0.08 (0.10) | 0.430 | 0.07 |
| To warn recipient | 4.20 (0.04)$_d$ | 4.26 (0.05)$_i$ | 4.14 (0.06)$_m$ | 0.12 (0.08) | 0.123 | 0.13 |

Participants with the same subscript letter did not differ significantly in likelihood of sharing. Subscripts refer to differences within column groupings

$M$s are estimated marginal means. $d$ refers to Cohen's $d$—calculated by subtracting the means of the two groups and dividing by the pooled $SD$
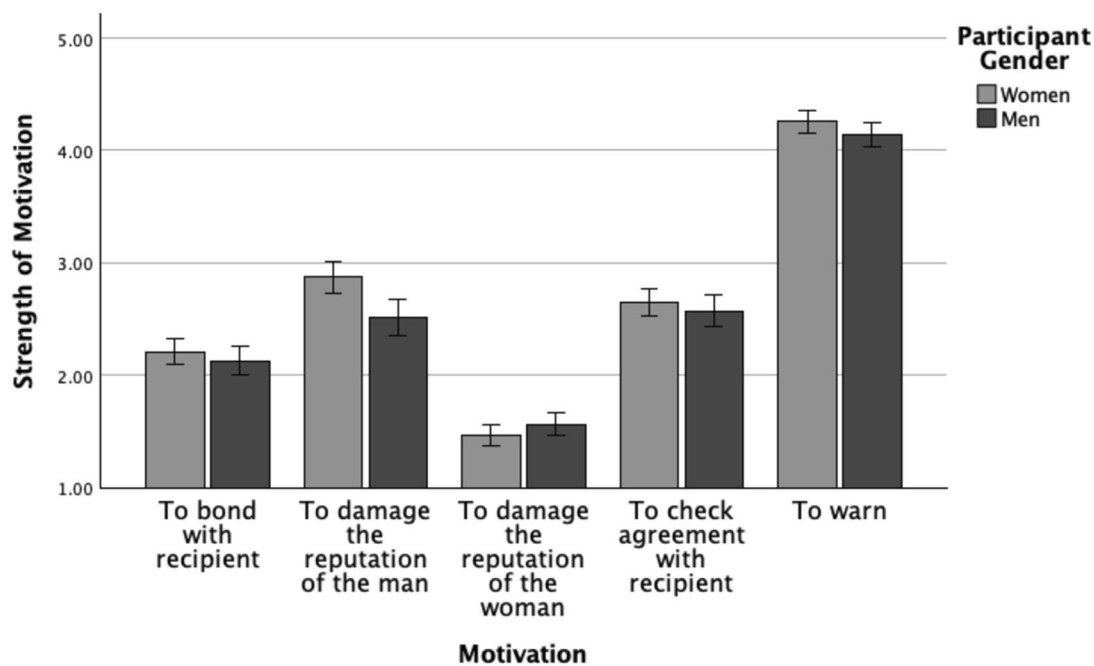
**Fig. 2** Comparing motivations for sharing sexual assault gossip between men and women. *Note* Error bars indicate 95% confidence intervals

the effect of gender for each motivation revealed that gender was associated with the motivation to damage the reputation of the man, with women reporting a stronger motivation than men ($d = 0.26$), however, inconsistent with H4, the motivations to warn and bond with the recipient did not differ significantly between men and women.

### Correlations between Women's Fear of Rape and Likelihood of Sharing

To test whether women's fear of rape is positively associated with their likelihood of sharing sexual assault gossip, we examined the bivariate associations between women's fear of rape and their likelihood of sharing with each recipient (see Table 4 for a full reporting of study correlations and descriptive statistics). Largely consistent with H5, women's fear of rape was positively correlated with their likelihood of sharing with all recipients, except proximal male friends. To statistically determine whether the correlations were stronger when the recipient was a female as compared to a male, we tested for differences in the strength of the correlation within each recipient type (proximal family, proximal friend, distal friend) by conducting a z-test for dependent samples (Lenhard & Lenhard, 2014) following an *r* to *z* transformation. To control for the multiple comparisons, a Bonferroni correction was applied, dividing the traditional significance level (0.05) by the number of hypotheses tested (3), resulting in an alpha significance level of 0.017. Consistent with H5, the results indicated that the correlation between women's fear of rape

and their likelihood of sharing was significantly stronger for female versus male recipients when comparing proximal family ($z = 3.79$, $p < 0.001$), proximal friends ($z = 4.36$, $p < 0.001$), and distal friends ($z = 4.82$, $p < 0.001$).

### Correlations between Women's Fear of Rape and Motivations for Sharing

To test whether women's fear of rape is positively associated with their motivations for sharing sexual assault gossip, we examined the bivariate associations between women's fear of rape and motivations for sharing (see Table 4). Providing partial support for H6, women's fear of rape was significantly positively associated with the motivation to damage the reputation of the man, $r(363) = 0.23$, $p < 0.001$, but not to bond with the recipient, $r(363) = 0.10$, $p = 0.054$. Additionally, women's fear of rape was positively associated with the motivation to check agreement with recipient, $r(363) = 0.19$, $p < 0.001$.

## Discussion

The results of the current study are broadly consistent with the idea that women are motivated to share information about sexual assault as a means of creating an information network that functions to protect themselves and other women. With respect to the protection of others, the results are quite straightforward. Women are more likely to share

**Table 4** Correlations, means, and standard deviations for all study variables

|  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 | 13 | 14 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Fear of rape | 0.95 | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 2. Prox. female family | **0.33** | 0.84 | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 3. Prox. male family | **0.15** | **0.62** | 0.87 | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 4. Prox. female friend | **0.31** | **0.92** | **0.58** | 0.83 | | | | | | | | | | |
| 5. Prox. male friend | 0.10 | **0.57** | **0.92** | **0.59** | 0.87 | | | | | | | | | |
| 6. Dist. female friend | **0.32** | **0.66** | **0.55** | **0.68** | **0.55** | 0.88 | | | | | | | | |
| 7. Dist. male friend | **0.11** | **0.40** | **0.74** | **0.42** | **0.79** | **0.71** | 0.90 | | | | | | | |
| 8. Social media | **0.23** | **0.37** | **0.45** | **0.38** | **0.47** | **0.54** | **0.57** | 0.91 | | | | | | |
| 9. Authority | **0.25** | **0.50** | **0.47** | **0.52** | **0.47** | **0.42** | **0.38** | **0.44** | 0.77 | | | | | |
| 10. Bond | 0.10 | **0.22** | **0.30** | **0.21** | **0.30** | **0.37** | **0.40** | **0.41** | **0.17** | 0.96 | | | | |
| 11. Damage man's rep | **0.23** | **0.27** | **0.28** | **0.30** | **0.27** | **0.34** | **0.28** | **0.33** | **0.35** | **0.44** | 0.96 | | | |
| 12. Damage woman's rep | 0.04 | 0.02 | **0.25** | 0.01 | **0.27** | **0.23** | **0.41** | **0.36** | **0.18** | **0.52** | **0.24** | 0.95 | | |
| 13. Check agreement | **0.19** | **0.24** | **0.30** | **0.24** | **0.32** | **0.33** | **0.33** | **0.33** | **0.22** | **0.62** | **0.46** | **0.42** | 0.95 | |
| 14. Warn recipient | 0.08 | **0.20** | 0.04 | **0.24** | 0.06 | 0.04 | −0.05 | −0.02 | **0.16** | −0.08 | **0.13** | **−0.16** | 0.07 | 0.91 |
| Mean | 4.78 | 3.02 | 2.38 | 3.03 | 2.36 | 2.29 | 1.86 | 1.75 | 2.68 | 2.18 | 2.72 | 1.51 | 2.61 | 4.21 |
| SD | 1.05 | 0.82 | 0.88 | 0.80 | 0.86 | 0.86 | 0.81 | 0.87 | 0.80 | 1.13 | 1.36 | 0.88 | 1.20 | 0.94 |

Variables 2–9 represent likelihood of sharing intentions. Variables 10–14 represent motivations for sharing. Cronbach's alpha reliability estimates are reported along the diagonal

*Prox* proximal, *Dist* distal, *Rep* reputation

Gender is coded 0 = women, 1 = men. Correlations for fear of rape are restricted to women only

Bolded values are significant at $p < 0.05$ or less

sexual assault gossip than are men, and although both men and women are more likely to share such gossip with female family members and friends who are proximal to where the assault took place, the effect is stronger among women. These findings highlight that women are unique in the strength of their desire to share sexual assault gossip with other women, particularly women who stand to benefit the most from receiving the information.

Notably, sexual assault gossip was equally as likely to be shared with proximal female family and female friends, by both men and women. This may seem surprising given the inclusive fitness benefits to be gained by protecting female kin. One explanation for the absence of a difference is that the large benefit of the information to both proximal female family and friends is sufficiently high that it masks the additional benefits to be gained via inclusive fitness. Additionally, although we may expect the benefits of sharing with kin to be higher (due to inclusive fitness benefits and reciprocation benefits) than sharing with friends (reciprocation benefits only), women many not feel it necessary to share information with kin to foster reciprocity if sharing is already sufficiently motivated by kinship. If true, although the underlying motivation to share with family and friends differs, each may be a sufficiently large motivation to produce indistinguishable sharing intentions.

Similarly consistent with an other-protecting function for gossip exchange, the strongest motivation for sharing sexual assault gossip, for both men and women, was to warn the recipient. As would be expected, this motivation was only correlated with the likelihood of sharing gossip with proximal women (see Table 4)—given that they are the recipients most likely to directly benefit from such a warning. One of the next strongest motivations for sharing gossip was to damage the reputation of the man. Each of these motivations have the possibility of reducing the risk of future victimization—by directly warning a potential future target, and by tarnishing the reputation of a perpetrator. As expected, women were more strongly motivated than men to share gossip in order to damage the reputation of the man. Men's comparably weaker desire to damage the man's reputation may be due to contrasting motivations. On one hand, damaging the man's reputation serves to protect close friends and family and derogates the character of an intrasexual mating rival (Buss & Dedden, 1990), but men may also be cognizant that strong condemnation of men's sexually aggressive behavior could hurt their own reputation in the future (Kurzban et al., 2010), or hurt their ability to form male-male alliances (Smuts, 1992).

Surprisingly, men and women did not differ in the strength of their motivation to warn the recipient. This may be because men have a similar interest in warning proximal women—particularly female family members, as men and women both share equally in the indirect fitness consequences that occur as a result of a female family members' sexual victimization (Hamilton, 1964; Trivers,

1972). Moreover, to the extent that men have a romantic interest in close female friends, then they may also have a direct fitness interest in ensuring their female friends are not assaulted.

The evidence that women are motivated to share sexual assault gossip in order to protect themselves is less direct, and must predominantly be inferred by the sharing behavior and motivations their personal fear of rape engenders. Women's fear of rape implies a self-perceived vulnerability that is expected to motivate defensive behaviors, which could include creating a sharing network to communicate reports of sexual assault. Consistent with expectations, women's fear of rape was significantly and positively associated with sharing sexual assault gossip with all recipients except proximal male friends. This is consistent with the idea that women possess a threat management system for rape avoidance (McDonald et al., 2015, 2019, 2021), such that women's fear of rape is calibrated to their reproductive risk of assault, which subsequently drives engagement in behaviors that could protect them from future victimization, such as gossip about sexual assault. Indeed, sharing sexual assault gossip with proximal and distal women, and even via social media, may activate a norm of reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960) by conveying to the recipients that the sharer is interested in this kind of information, that they trust the recipient, and that they are sharing it in hopes of receiving similar communication in return. This is supported by prior research demonstrating that self-disclosure is often reciprocal in relationships (for reviews, see Dindia, 1988, 2002; Hill & Stull, 1982).

Women's stronger intention to share with authority figures is likely to function to alert someone who may act directly to remove or reduce the threat posed by the perpetrator, and/or to implement policies that reduce the affordances for sexual assault in a given environment. That women were particularly open to sharing stories of another woman's experience of sexual assault with an authority figure may be surprising given that women are generally reluctant to report their own experiences of assault to the police. However, these vignettes asked women about their likelihood of sharing with mostly local authority figures, such as the resident assistant at the dorm where the assault took place. Women may expect local authorities to create more meaningful social change than the police, such as adding hallway cameras in the dorm or increasing security at entrances. Here women were also reporting about someone else as the victim, so personal concerns with re-traumatization during a legal battle or via media coverage are minimized. Participants were also asked to assume that what they shared would respect the privacy of the victim, so reporting to an authority figure in this context was low-cost. In general, we may expect women to report less willingness to share with authority figures when reporting on their own experiences of sexual assault, when doing so

entails high potential costs, and when trust in the authority figure is low.

Women's fear of rape was also significantly positively associated with their motivation to share sexual assault gossip in order to damage the reputation of the man. This potentially implies a desire not just to warn others of the perpetrator's past behavior, but to so damage the reputation that the perpetrator is less likely to reoffend owing to an increase in attentive vigilance by those around him aware of his reputation. Women's fear of rape was not associated with the motivation to share sexual assault gossip to warn the recipient, despite the fact that women were highly likely to share as a result of this motivation. However, this makes sense if fear of rape predominantly motivates behaviors aimed at self-protection, as warning others is a behavior directly aimed at protecting others.

Women were also highly motivated to share sexual assault gossip in order to check agreement with the recipient, and among women, this motivation was significantly associated with their fear of rape. The motivation to check agreement may mean that women are testing to see the degree to which the recipient expresses condemnation of the actions of the alleged perpetrator and the quality and intensity of their emotional reaction to the information. Although many women feel supported after disclosing their own experiences of sexual assault to peers, women sometimes report receiving poor reactions to disclosure ranging from blame to revictimization (e.g., Ahrens et al., 2007; Ullman et al., 2007). These negative reactions to victims' sexual assault disclosure have consistently demonstrated strong negative impacts on victims (for a review, see Ullman, 1999). Thus, those who react with weak condemnation and/or muted emotional negativity to sexual assault gossip may be perceived as poor allies to victims of sexual assault, unlikely exchange partners, or even potential perpetrators. Alternatively, the desire to check agreement with the recipient may mean that men and women are motivated to validate the inferences they've made about culpability among the parties involved in a sexual assault. The nature of sexual assault often means that the only witnesses to the event are the parties involved, leaving room for people to disagree about the truthfulness of each person's account. Consequently, people may be motivated to seek the opinions of others to inform their own understanding of the events. This too may be self-protective to the extent that it improves the accuracy of the inferences that one makes.

Notably, the association between fear of rape and the motivation to bond with the recipient did not reach statistical significance ($r = 0.10$, $p = 0.054$), which weakens support for the hypothesis that women's sharing functions to create a reciprocal exchange network. Indeed, the motivation to bond with the recipient of the gossip seems most strongly connected to the desire to create a reciprocal exchange network, as deepening a connection with another woman

may increase the likelihood that such information is shared in the future. However, the motivation to bond in women may be diluted by the fact that it was assessed broadly for all recipients, and not specifically with women.

## Limitations and Future Directions

A key limitation to the conclusions drawn here is that we do not directly assess information exchange networks, nor any motivations for sexual assault gossip that ask participants to identify direct benefits to oneself. For instance, an additional item assessing the motivation to receive reciprocal information in the future, would have provided direct evidence of the claim of desired reciprocity. Future research would benefit from a direct assessment, as well as research on how information about sexual assault and harassment is exchanged among women in the real world. For instance, women may be most likely to share gossip with those who they expect would share similar gossip with them.

A number of methodological limitations were present in the current design. First, the measures were presented to participants in a constant order, without any randomization or counter-balancing, which could produce order effects. For instance, fear of rape was assessed prior to the presentation of sexual assault vignettes, which may have had an impact on the way participants interpreted the vignettes, as the fear of rape measure is likely to make a woman's vulnerability to assault more salient. However, because the vignettes describe sexual assault events, participants' vulnerability is likely to be quite salient, regardless of when the fear of rape measure was completed.

Another limitation is that we did not include a set of control vignettes to provide context as to the magnitude of women's interest in sharing sexual assault gossip. However, our intent was not to make a claim that women are more likely to gossip about sexual assault than other topics, only that they will have an interest in sharing sexual assault information. To that end, the finding that women report, on average, a likelihood of sharing sexual assault information with a close female friend or family member at mean values (> 3.0) that approach the ceiling of the scale (4.0), does provide evidence for our intended claim.

Relatedly, the lack of a comparison topic also makes it hard to assess the extent to which the gender differences observed in sharing likelihood are due to a general tendency for women to engage in more interpersonal communication and gossip than men, or if they are more motivated than men to share sexual assault gossip than men because of a stronger desire to protect themselves and others. Some of the findings make this an unlikely explanation, for instance, if the gender effects were driven simply by a difference in intrasexual communication frequency, then it would not follow that women who report being more fearful of rape are more likely

to share sexual assault information with close female friends and family. However, future research could demonstrate the sex-specific adaptive value of gossip by examining different gossip topics that draw on information exchange relevant to sex-specific adaptive challenges. For instance, men may be more likely than women to gossip about status and promotions in the workplace given its impact on men's reproductive fitness (e.g., Buss, 1989), whereas women may be more likely to gossip about workplace sexual harassment.

Another methodological limitation is that the motivations for sharing sexual assault gossip were not assessed separately for each target. Consequently, it is not possible to directly compare how motivations differ as a function of the recipient of the gossip. This design was necessary to manage participant fatigue, but future research could reduce the number of vignettes and assess motivations for each recipient. This is an important question as it is likely that motivations are recipient-dependent. For instance, women may be more motivated to bond when they share gossip with women than men. In contrast, men may be motivated to bond with other men in order to create their own information exchange systems for reputation management, for example, by avoiding associations with alleged male perpetrators, or even by warning one another about women who have made sexual assault allegations.

Future research may also consider assessing motivations that are more specific to the exchange of sexual assault gossip. For instance, we articulated two different ways that participants may have interpreted the motivation to "check agreement" with the recipient—but these could be assessed separately in future research. Qualitative research that asks women about times that they have shared gossip about sexual assault and the motivations they had for doing so may be especially helpful in generating a wider variety of motivations.

## Conclusion

Although a large literature exists examining the patterns and functions of different types of gossip, we are not aware of any existing research examining gossip about sexual assault. Yet women are uniquely and intensely fearful of rape, and engage in a variety of defensive behaviors to try and prevent their own victimization. Gossip about sexual assault could be one such behavior. Indeed, although gossip is often maligned as being petty, disparaging, nefariously motivated, and often exaggerated or altogether untrue, it can also be an important tool for self-protection in social systems that marginalize, oppress, and victimize specific groups of people–so-called whisper networks. Here we provide preliminary empirical evidence that sexual assault gossip may serve such a function. Women, particularly those who most fear sexual assault, report a strong motivation to share sexual assault gossip

with women who can most benefit from the information, and they appear to do so both out of the desire to protect those women and themselves. More research is needed to examine the existence of such networks in the real world, including how they work and what their impact is on women's behavior.

# Appendix

## Sexual Assault Vignettes with Intentions and Motivations for Sharing

### Sharing Intentions

Instructions: In the questions below, indicate how likely you would be to share details about this assault and information about the perpetrator with others. Assume that what you share will respect the privacy of your friend, and not cause any harm to your relationship with her.

Answers recorded on a 1 = "very unlikely" to 4 = "very likely" response scale.

Imagine that a close friend tells you that she has been sexually assaulted by a stranger after walking to her car alone late at night after leaving the gym.

How likely are you to share this information with:

1. A young adult female family member who lives in the same town?
2. A young adult male family member who lives in the same town?
3. A female friend who lives in the same town?
4. A male friend who lives in the same town?
5. A female friend who lives a few hours away?
6. A male male friend who lives a few hours away?
7. On your personal social media?
8. The manager of the gym near where the assault occurred?

Imagine that as you are entering your dorm you stop to talk with your hallmate. She tells you that a man she had never seen before followed her into the dorm at night, grabbed her, and tried to force his way into her room. As she struggled against him and yelled for help, another hallmate came out of their room to see what was going on, and the man fled.

How likely are you to share this information with:

1. A young adult female family member who lives near campus?
2. A young adult male family member who lives near campus?
3. A female friend at the university?
4. A male friend at the university?
5. A female friend who lives a few hours away?

6. A male friend who lives a few hours away?
7. On your personal social media?
8. The dorm RA (resident assistant)?

Imagine that you read a public Facebook post about a teacher in a nearby city who opened up about having been sexually assaulted by a stranger while walking to meet some friends for dinner downtown.

How likely are you to share this information with:

1. A young adult female family member who lives near downtown?
2. With a young adult male family member who lives near downtown?
3. With a female friend who lives near downtown?
4. With a male friend who lives near downtown?
5. With a female friend who lives a few hours away?
6. With a male friend who lives a few hours away?
7. On your personal social media?
8. With the city police?

Imagine that a Twitter thread is circulating regarding a sexual assault of a young woman on her way to work on a public bus in another state.

How likely are you to share this information with:

1. A young adult female family member who lives in that state?
2. A young adult male family member who lives in that state?
3. A female friend who lives in that state?
4. A male friend who lives in that state?
5. A female friend who lives in a different state?
6. A male friend who lives in a different state?
7. On your personal social media?
8. The bus company?

Imagine that a friend of yours just returned from a trip to Germany. She tells you that while she was there, she was sexually assaulted in the hotel she stayed at.

How likely are you to share this information with:

1. A young adult female family member who lives in Germany?
2. A young adult male family member who lives in Germany?
3. A female friend who lives in Germany?
4. A male friend who lives in Germany?
5. A female friend who lives in the US?
6. A male friend who lives in the US?
7. On your personal social media?
8. The hotel where the assault occurred?

## Motivations for Sharing

People can have different reasons for sharing information with others. Below please indicate to what extent each of the following represents your motivation for sharing the above information with others.

Answers recorded on a 1 = "strongly disagree" to 5 = "strongly agree" response scale.

I would share this information with others:

1. To bond with the person I was talking with
2. To damage the reputation of the man we talked about
3. To damage the reputation of the woman we talked about
4. To check whether the person I talked to had the same ideas about the people we talked about
5. To warn the person I was talking with about the behavior of the person we talked about

## Declarations

**Conflicts of interest** Not applicable.

**Ethical Approval** All research procedures were approved by the Oakland University institutional review board.

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