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Meyer, Anneke  (2024) Blaming the victim, preserving the icon: the gendered moral work of celebrity sexual abuse scandals. *Feminist Media Studies*. pp. 1-15. ISSN 1468-0777

**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2024.2392102>

**Publisher:** Taylor and Francis

**Version:** Published Version

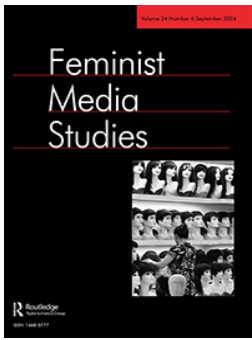
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# Blaming the victim, preserving the icon: the gendered moral work of celebrity sexual abuse scandals

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To cite this article: Anneke Meyer (21 Sep 2024): Blaming the victim, preserving the icon: the gendered moral work of celebrity sexual abuse scandals, *Feminist Media Studies*, DOI: [10.1080/14680777.2024.2392102](https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2024.2392102)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2024.2392102>



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Published online: 21 Sep 2024.



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# Blaming the victim, preserving the icon: the gendered moral work of celebrity sexual abuse scandals

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## ABSTRACT

This article takes as a case study the sexual abuse scandal surrounding British actor and “national treasure” William Roache, who went on trial for historical child sexual abuse in 2014. Based on a thematic newspaper analysis of the case, this article traces changing constructions of blame in the media to reveal how notions of guilt and innocence are both fluid and gendered. Throughout the course of the scandal, credibility and blame are reversed; Roache, who is initially assumed guilty, comes to be portrayed as an innocent victim of a “celebrity witch hunt” while the female complainants are framed as untrustworthy. Scandals have been shown to *transform* the status of a transgressor from “national treasure” to “monster”, but this article argues that scandals can also *preserve* male celebrities as noble icons by means of discrediting the female victims. Here, the moral work of sexual abuse scandals reveals itself as deeply gendered; it vilifies women and allows celebrity status to protect male transgressors by tapping into gendered cultural contexts of rape myths, “himpathy” and a “gendered economy of believability”.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 17 February 2023

Revised 23 July 2024

Accepted 9 August 2024

## KEYWORDS

Sexual abuse scandal;  
gender; celebrity; victim  
blaming; moral work

## Introduction

Sexual abuse scandals involving celebrities are a global phenomenon that shows little sign of abating: Jimmy Savile, Harvey Weinstein, or R Kelly are just some famous examples. On some measures, the public atmosphere seems more inclined to believe the victims: social media campaigns, such as #MeToo, have publicly documented the scale of sexual violence while frequent scandals have indicated that no institution or industry is immune from abuse and cover-up. Such developments help break the credibility barrier and make denial of knowledge of such crimes more difficult (Chris Greer and Eugene McLaughlin 2013). However, rape cases continue to be characterised by patterns of disbelieving and blaming victims and the cultural myths surrounding rape also govern sexual abuse scandals (Karen Ross 2017; Jennifer Temkin, Jacqueline M Gray and Justine Barrett 2018). After all, many men at the centre of such scandals retain their status and return to positions of power.

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This article investigates the discursive shifts which facilitate and justify blame transferal in celebrity sexual abuse scandals from accused to accusers, using the scandal surrounding British actor William Roache as a case study. The detailed discursive analysis required can only be produced in the confines of one exemplary case and the Roache scandal is highly suitable. William Roache is not just another actor but a “national treasure,” a widely known and well-regarded celebrity in the UK, who is most famous for starring in the soap opera *Coronation Street* since 1960. He has been honoured through numerous acting awards, a Guinness Book of World Records entry for the world’s longest-serving television actor in a continuous role, and Orders of the British Empire in 2001 and 2022 for his services to drama (BBC 2000, 2020, 2021). Yet Roache was arrested in 2013 and put on trial in 2014 for historical child sexual abuses. Specifically, he was charged with the rape of one 15-year-old girl in 1967 and indecent assault of four girls aged between 12 and 16 dating back to the time period between 1965 and 1968 (BBC 2013a, 2013b). The media initially sided with the victims but sharply reversed their position later on. The Roache scandal therefore allows for identifying *shifts* in positions and discourses, generating insights into how credibility, innocence and blame are made, unmade and shifted around in celebrity sexual abuse discourse. The young age of the accusers is important, too; children and teenagers have a strong moral claim to victimhood and the sexual abuse of children never falls into the “broadly morally acceptable category” that can mute moral outrage directed at transgressing celebrities (Mette Mortensen and Nete Nørgaard Kristensen 2020), meaning that narrative shifts observed in this case are substantive transformations because the tactic of “exoneration by downplaying the seriousness of the transgression” is not an option. Preceding the #MeToo movement by a few years, the Roache scandal highlights key discursive frames around sexual violence, particularly blame and disbelief, which the movement sought to publicly dismantle. This article reveals a robust cultural scaffold supporting discursive shifts related to blame in sexual abuse cases, offering insights into the current backlash against #MeToo and feminism.

Greer and McLaughlin (2013) contend that sexual abuse scandals do moral work, defined as “dramatising and clarifying normative boundaries” (245), which involves making moral statements and constructing the moral positions and status of key agents. Joshua Gamson (2001) has shown that sexual abuse scandals can undergo narrative reversal as the focus shifts from individual perpetrators onto institutional facilitation of sexual misdemeanours. This article brings feminist insights to bear on such theories to reveal that the moral work of sexual abuse scandals is highly gendered. Gendering becomes most visible in the reversal of moral positions as the initially vilified male is restored as honourable by means of the initially believed female claimant(s) being condemned as fraudulent. Such discursive shifting suggests that scandals do not only have the power to *transform* a “national treasure” into a “predatory monster” (Greer and McLaughlin 2013) but can also *preserve* it as a “national treasure” by ways of demonising the victim(s), even if those victims are initially believed. This article argues that the interplay between gender and celebrity shapes the perception of Roache’s version of events, leading to his exoneration. The discourse of a “celebrity witch hunt” plays a crucial role in this dynamic, suggesting that celebrities are being systematically persecuted based on unfounded accusations. Rooted in the European witch crazes of the middle ages, the “celebrity witch hunt” discourse evokes connotations of deep irrationality by presenting

legal prosecutions as orchestrated campaigns based on hearsay rather than evidence and executed by frenetic witch hunters (Erich Goode and Nachman Ben-Yehuda 1994). The “celebrity witch hunt” discourse is a way of effecting a narrative reversal of roles of victimiser and victim(s) and refashioning celebrity status as a risk rather than power.

## Literature review

### *Scandals, celebrity and sexual abuse*

A scandal can be defined as a “collective outburst of outrage caused by a norm transgression that is made public and that is experienced as an offence by a norm audience” (Kerstin Jacobsson and Erik Lofmarck 2008, 13). The central transgression is a violation of social norms stipulated by the moral order of society and the social reaction to it is marked by moral outrage and emotive condemnation. Scandals carry out moral work, that is making moral statements, drawing and re-drawing moral boundaries, affirming or challenging the moral status of key figures involved (Ari Adut 2005; Greer and McLaughlin 2013). Yet scandals are not simply driven by the severity of the moral transgression. Ross (2017) notes that transgressions do not automatically result in scandals as public reactions vary between censoring and ignoring wrongdoings. Adut (2005) argues that scandals are not caused by the nature of the transgression but the strategic interactions between concerned parties in the context of publicity, a publicity which changes the meanings of the transgression and shapes both the ramifications of the scandal and the strategic interactions themselves. Gamson (2001) demonstrates how sexual abuse scandals involving celebrities using prostitutes actually elicit little outrage about either the male use of prostitutes or the exploitative system of men paying disempowered women for sex, both are accepted as regrettable but normal parts of the sexual order.

Scandals thrive on publicity and celebrities are frequently at the centre of scandals. Celebrities are constantly (re)produced as the meanings and values attached to them are subject to change (Mortensen and Nørgaard Kristensen 2020). Historically, the media have oscillated between celebrity worship and attack, consecration and desecration (Romana Andò and Sean Redmond 2020). Consecration bestows sacred meanings, qualities and status to a celebrity to be revered; but processes of desecration can un-make and detached such meanings and revoke status (Misha Kavka 2020). Scandals often bring about desecration, though not inevitably: they do not destroy celebrity status when transgressive behaviour is considered wrong but broadly morally acceptable (Mortensen and Nørgaard Kristensen 2020). Immediately after a scandal breaks, there is a “period of negotiation” (92) in which the moral severity of the transgression is assessed; as such assessments, as well as the boundaries between consecration and desecrations, are fluid, there is constant movement between celebrity elevation and degradation (Andò and Redmond 2020). However, the Harvey Weinstein scandal has arguably ushered in a more critical attitude to celebrity that has sparked a trend towards de-sacralisation (Kavka 2020) or even “de-celebrification” (Mortensen and Nørgaard Kristensen 2020), where celebrity status and power are revoked. Yet at the same time, a backlash against #MeToo has begun which asserts that things have “gone too far” to generate a culture which victimises men by believing women’s allegations of sexual assault by default (Maja Brandt Andreasen 2023).

The UK's biggest celebrity sexual abuse scandal to date is the Jimmy Savile scandal, which broke in 2012 and sparked the police's *Operation Yewtree* which led to the arrest of many celebrities for historical sexual abuse, including William Roache. A famous British TV entertainer and eccentric media celebrity, Savile abused hundreds of victims over a period of more than 50 years (Greer and McLaughlin 2013). Savile's celebrity status helped him get access to victims and cover up his crimes. Celebrities are protected by a complex structural system of "multi-institutional masking," in which major societal institutions co-produce such a deeply moral mask that the celebrity icon can act with impunity and is rendered almost untouchable (Chris Greer and Eugene McLaughlin 2021). Moreover, Karen Boyle (2018) has pointed out that gender and sexism were central in facilitating Savile's decades of abuse. She argues that a cultural acceptance of men's sexual entitlement to and abuse of women allowed Savile to hide in plain sight: as he joked openly about his sexual misdemeanours and inappropriate treatment of women and girls, it became difficult to call out specific abuse.

Savile may be extreme but he is not an exception; research shows that celebrities who transgress the law are less likely to be detected, tried, convicted and punished. Sexual abuse allegations against celebrities are often disbelieved, especially in cases where the public persona does not fit offender stereotypes or transgressions do not connect to the central meaning of the persona (Katja Lee and P David Marshall 2021). In the cases that do go to court, celebrity status correlates with fewer convictions and less severe punishment (Jennifer L Knight, Traci A Giuliano and Monica G Sanchez-Ross 2001). Celebrity status has therefore been theorised to function as a "protective shield" (Paul Skolnick and Jerry I Shaw 1994), allowing celebrities to transgress norms and break the law without consequences. However, this protective shield does not work equally for all celebrities—it works only for men and more so for White men (Knight, Giuliano, and Sanchez-Ross 2001). Kate Manne's (2018) theory of "himpathy" factors in these intersecting structural complexities. She conceptualises himpathy as the excessive and misplaced sympathy afforded to men who transgress, especially in cases of sexual violence. Himpathy describes a cultural propensity to believe men and disbelieve women, which serves to further entrench gender inequalities. Among men, himpathy is socially stratified and flows upwards the social hierarchy ladder so that men privileged beyond their masculinity, such as White men or male celebrities, enjoy the most (Manne 2018).

### ***Gender, belief and media in sexual abuse cases***

The phenomenon of *famous* men evading consequences for their sexual abuses needs to be understood within the context of how men *in general* frequently escape legal punishment for sexual violence. Sexual violence is a continuum which captures a range of offences united by shared defining principles, including a lack of consent, the structural foundations of a patriarchal society and a culture of male rights (Liz Kelly 1988). At the severe end of the continuum rape has attracted particular attention and illustrates the shortcomings of the criminal justice system. In the UK rape attrition rates are high and rape conviction rates are low, hovering usually between five and eight percent of all rape cases reported to the police (Katrin Hohl and Elisabeth A Stanko 2015). Most sexual violence goes unpunished then; the focus here is on understanding the role of the media and culture in helping produce this pattern.

Sexual abuse cases take the form of contests where accuser and accused compete for being believed (Sarah Banet-Weiser and Kathryn Claire Higgins 2023; Manne 2018). In the vast majority of cases accusers are female and the accused male. The central issue, then, is not simply who is believed but who is believed *more*. Both Miranda Fricker (2007) and Banet-Weiser and Higgins (2023) describe bids to be seen as truthful as governed by an “economy” marked by structural inequalities. Fricker (2007) argues that “testimonial injustice” characterises the criminal justice system where a systemic bias towards disadvantaged groups means that their testimonies are considered less convincing. Men’s ability to get away with sexual violence is rooted in this “credibility deficit” of their female victims. Banet-Weiser and Higgins (2023) concept of “believability” considers credibility not so much a quality of an individual’s account but as *culturally situated*; it recognises that privileged social groups are advantaged by their subjectivity positioning them in close proximity to the truth, making their accounts more believable. This approach locates men’s ability to evade conviction for sexual violence in their version of events being *culturally situated as more credible and convincing* by their male subjectivity. This thinking points to the media as hugely important players which create the *conditions* of the believability contests by situating the accuser and accused, females and males in specific meaning contexts.

Rape myths, which are widely held but inaccurate beliefs about rape, rape victims and rapists (Nickie D Phillips 2018), are a staple of media coverage of sexual violence and a good example of how meanings affecting believability can be discursively attached to accusers and accused. Key rape myths include “stranger danger,” “bad things don’t happen to good girls,” “women invite rape through certain behaviours,” and so on, creating an overall picture of rape where the focus is as much on the victim as on the perpetrator, victims are categorised according to mythical ideas and see their behaviour scrutinised (Emily Finch and Vanessa E Munro 2005; Temkin, Gray, and Barrett 2018). A generally doubtful attitude to women and their accounts is generated, their credibility called into doubt and they are held responsible not just for their own behaviours but those of their attackers—these ways of thinking set rape cases apart from other crimes and form part of a “rape culture” (Phillips 2018). The “cry rape” myth, which stipulates that women falsely accuse men of rape without much hesitation and often as a form of revenge, possesses particular cultural-legal importance because it directly undermines the credibility of all women. While debunked by research as an extreme and rare reaction, the “cry rape” myth continues to thrive in a context of legal complexity and structures which frame cases of attrition and acquittals as instances of false allegation (David Lisak, Lori Gardinier, Sarah Nicksa and Ashley Cote 2010). Across US and British media, the “cry rape” myth remains a common feature of the discourse on sexual violence which continues to be largely hostile towards women and often excludes their voices (Brandt Andreasen 2023; Renae Franiuk, Jennifer L Seefeldt, Sandy L Cepress and Joseph A Vandello 2008). Cases deemed to be false allegations are reported prominently—e.g. in the British press (Sue Lees 2002) or on US prime time television (Lisa M Cuklanz 2000)—skewing reality by making false allegations appear common-place. This impression is further reinforced by media framing of outcomes of attrition and acquittals as instances of false allegations, rather than allegations not meeting the high burden of proof or the criminal justice system disadvantaging women (Lees

2002). Such media selectivity and framing bolster the “cry rape” myth, which feeds back into the criminal justice system via juries who bring their own “good sense” to bear on decision-making; this sense is based on double standards of sexual morality, gender stereotypes and rape myths, which makes juries reluctant to convict as they tend to hold victims responsible and consider false allegations common practice (Finch and Munro 2005). Moreover, the “cry rape” myth continues to be routinely used by legal defence teams to discredit victims (Temkin, Gray, and Barrett 2018). Media-fuelled rape myths, then, turn the focus on women and undermine their credibility, thereby shoring up men’s credibility and contributing significantly to a gendered economy of believability which then plays out in public discussion and legal trials.

### **The case study: data collection and methodological approach**

This article uses the William Roache scandal as a case study to analyse in-depth the discursive developments around blame. To facilitate this, it examined four major national British newspapers which reach wide readerships and capture different ends of the spectrum in terms of political outlook and quality: the populist right-wing tabloid *The Sun*, the moralistic right-wing mid-market paper the *Daily Mail* (and sister paper the *Mail on Sunday*), the moderately right-wing broadsheet *The Times* (and sister paper *The Times on Sunday*) and the liberal left-wing broadsheet *The Guardian* (and its Sunday sister paper *The Observer*). The research focused on a one-month period – January 14 2014 until February 16 2014 – to capture the court trial and its aftermath. The search term “Roache” was used to retrieve relevant articles in the specified time period via the *Lexis+* online newspaper archive. The total number of articles varied between 22 and 39 articles per newspaper and the vast majority of coverage took place in news articles, with a small number of opinion pieces and editorials. The story was front page news in three newspapers (*The Sun*, *The Times* and *The Guardian*) on the first day of the trial and in all newspapers the day after the verdict.

This article adopts qualitative thematic analysis as its method (Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke 2006). This method allows researchers to identify and analyse certain themes and patterns within their data. It is a flexible and much-used method which can take many different forms. This study adopts a moderate social constructionist position which presumes that the media play a key role in socially constructing a reality of sexual violence via the representations they disseminate (Ray Surette 2015). It takes the form of a “theoretical thematic analysis” (Braun and Clarke 2006, 84) which is focused on the questions of believability, responsibility, innocence and blame in the portrayal of a sexual abuse scandal. Hence, presented here is not an overview of the media coverage of the Roache case but a focused analysis of the shifting discursive allocations of blame and innocence. The analysis pays attention to media discourses, the agents involved in constructing these discourses (including the media, the claimants, the defendant, and the legal teams) and the contextual events which framed them. The identification of certain themes—such as credible victims, false allegations, “celebrity witch hunt” and so on—helps produce an analysis which reveals the processes, shifts and outcomes of believability and blame allocation and how they connect to gender.



## **Overview of the William Roache case: from fame to scandal**

The 2013 and 2014 scandal centred on actor William Roache, protagonist of Britain's longest-running television soap opera *Coronation Street*. Broadcast since 1960, the soap still airs several days a week, achieves viewing figures around 5 million and is consistently one of the top-ten most watched programmes on British television (Thinkbox 2023). Set in a working-class community in Manchester, the serial revolves around a set of characters and their everyday lives, trials and tribulations. William Roache is not an average soap actor but a celebrity, a household name and a "national treasure," who has been widely decorated for his acting throughout his life. His soap character, Ken Barlow, appeared in the first ever episode in 1960 and is considered the face of *Coronation Street*. Roache's soap character is a likeable, if somewhat contradictory, persona, who appears knowledgeable, reasonable and measured to the extent of being dull, but has also been portrayed as a womaniser, who has affairs and fathers children with different women.

The sexual abuse scandal began in May 2013 when William Roache was arrested by police and charged with offences against five female minors: the rape of one 15-year-old in 1967 and the indecent assault of four girls aged between 12 and 16 in the time period between 1965 and 1968 (BBC 2013a, 2013b). The offences were alleged to have occurred on the *Coronation Street* production set, such as dressing rooms and toilets, as well as Roache's car and his home. The case went to trial on January 14 2014 and on February 6 2014 Roache was acquitted of all charges by a unanimous jury.

## **Newspaper reporting and analysis**

### ***Believing the victim***

The initial three weeks of the William Roache trial coverage are marked by a narrative framework of "believing the victim" in all newspapers. There are no opinion pieces overtly stating the papers' positions, but news reporting details the unfolding court testimonies and cross-examinations where the claimants' versions of events appear credible. Importantly, the newspapers do not challenge this credibility, using declarative verbs such as "state," "say," "express" to introduce victim accounts, which positions them as truthful and contrasts with much rape reporting which habitually calls victim credibility into doubt (Lees 2002). The overall impression is one of claimants as genuine victims; their testimonies are detailed depictions of human fear and suffering, which make it difficult not to believe and empathise. This victim testimony covered in the *Daily Mail* illustrates this well:

He was dressed in character as Ken Barlow, looked "like a ghost" because of stage make-up, and was aroused, she [victim] said, adding: "He came over to me, stood really close to me then put both hands on my breasts." Moments later, she said, "he took his right hand off and he had gone up my skirt into my knickers." She added: "He was like an octopus. Hands everywhere . . . I panicked, and I knew I couldn't run, I was frightened of running anyway in case he grabbed me, so I just told him I was on my period." She said he "asked me not to say anything to anybody" and said "next time you come he would take me round the rest of the set." (James Tozer 2014a)

In this context, the defence's cross-examination, which focuses on minor inconsistencies in victims' accounts going back to the 1960s, comes across as inhumane treatment of genuine victims:

Challenged about her account by Louise Blackwell QC, defending, the witness told the court: "I'm telling the truth. Why the hell would I put myself through all of this?" She went on: "I am confused with all the dates. I'm here as a witness to witness what happened in that room. If I had known what I was going to go through, I wouldn't have come forward. 'I feel like I'm on trial here. It's Mr Barlow, Ken Barlow, who has done it, not me. The issue is what he did to me. I'm sorry, but, as a victim, I'm so sorry that I ever come forward.' Distressed, she told the barrister: 'It's easy for you to sit there and judge, but you wasn't (sic) in that room. He abused me whether he likes it or not. He assaulted me and I had to carry it round with me. 'Can you imagine what would have happened to me if I'd gone to the police as a child. He's a dirty b\*\*\*\*\*, he tried it on with me.'" (Jaya Narain 2014)

This outburst, which provides a sense of the victim's torment when she finds herself attacked by the very system she was looking to for justice, encourages empathy. Moreover, the credibility of the five claimants is strengthened by newspapers emphasising the power differentials between the victims and Roache, who is portrayed as exploiting his position. For example, *The Times* and *The Guardian* keep emphasising the young age of the victims while *The Sun* employs the language of paedophilia to describe Roache as "preying on," "pouncing on" or "ensnaring" his victims and classifies his behaviour as "grooming." The alleged offences are clearly labelled as sexual assault and rape in all papers. Headlines such as *The Sun's* "Groomed by Roache" (Andrew Chamberlain and Lauren Veevers 2014) or *The Times's* "Roache Accused of Raping Starstruck Girl, 15" (John Simpson 2014b) illustrate how a focus on exploitation and age, coupled with a clear language of sexual violence, positions readers to have compassion for and believe young victims.

### ***The narrative shift: blaming the victims***

After three weeks of sympathetic coverage, the court acquittal of Roache triggers a reversal of tone and position in three of the four newspapers. *The Sun*, *The Times* and the *Daily Mail* now construct a new narrative framework which goes *beyond* agreeing that Roache has been rightly cleared to express outrage that "the charges should have never been brought to trial in the first place." Victims' accounts are suddenly portrayed as so weak or obviously false that there was no case to answer. The *Daily Mail* screams in its front-page headline "How Did it Ever Get to Court?" (James Tozer, Paul Harris and Paul Bentley 2014) while *The Sun's* (2014) editorial opens with the statement "Considering the holes in the evidence against Bill Roache, it is extraordinary the CPS ever decided to haul him to court." *The Times* couches the narrative in legalistic terms through critique of the technique of "bundling cases," alleging its use hides weaknesses of individual cases and risks miscarriage of justice (e.g., Daniel Finkelstein 2014; *The Times* 2014). The narrative switch highlights the volatility of narrative frameworks in the media. Female complainants are now branded as liars and dishonest fabricators of false allegations, cemented by explicit statements such as *The Times* opening sentence "The jury took less than six hours to decide that five women, largely unknown to one another, gave false accounts of being sexually abused or raped by William Roache" (John Simpson 2014a) or by comments such as this in the *Daily Mail*:

First Bill Roache, now Dave Lee Travis has been acquitted of “historic” sex crimes. (...) I’ve been concerned that the celebrity witch-hunt launched in the wake of the Jimmy Savile case has turned the presumption of innocence on its head. Who knows how many women came forward with false allegations because they thought there was a drink in it for them? (Richard Littlejohn 2014)

This illustrates the role of the media in making the gendered shift in narrative and blame work. Banet-Weiser and Higgins (2023) show that believability does not simply derive from an individual’s *performance* but their *subjectivity* which culturally situates them as more or less believable. The gendered economy of believability makes it easier for men than women to be read as believable. Here, the newspapers are important players shaping the conditions of believability of the individuals involved by situating them in specific meaning contexts: by talking about “false accounts” and suggesting allegations were fabricated for no good reason—“a drink in it for them” – the female claimants appear fraudulent. This impression is further reinforced by drawing on established rape myths. For instance, the “cry rape” myth provides readers with a familiar explanatory framework that renders the idea of false allegations intelligible by portraying it as an established pattern of female behaviour. Other rape myths are important, too, because they position women generally as responsible, which familiarises audiences with the approach of identifying women’s behaviour as the *real* problem in sexual violence cases. This robust scaffold of a gendered economy of believability and rape myths helps gloss over the glaring contradictions and questions raised by the narrative reversal, such as how credible testimonies from five different victims can be written off as false allegations, or how the “cry rape” myth fits with post-trial revelations that many more women had lodged similar allegations with the police. The narrative shift, then, is deeply embedded in gendered social and meaning structures and it genders the moral work of the scandal which exonerates the male defendant by vilifying and blaming the female accusers. If gender roles were reversed, blame could not be shifted in the same way as the required cultural scaffolds do not exist.

*The Guardian* is the exception in this case study. It rejects the new dominant narrative and continues to portray the complainants as truthful, underlining the importance of the media in situating individuals as believable/unbelievable and feeding into, or challenging, a gendered economy of believability. The newspaper actively mitigates against Roache’s acquittal being interpreted as evidence that his accusers were lying. Firstly, by clarifying that weaknesses in the evidence are “not necessarily to criticise those witnesses” (Hugo Muir 2014) and emphasising that women’s allegations were “rejected by a jury” (Helen Pidd 2014b) rather than false. Secondly, by pointing to the socially constructed nature of the law and its outcomes, highlighting that “Sometimes the prosecution were hamstrung by the judge’s refusal to allow evidence pertaining to Roache’s past” (Helen Pidd 2014a). In contrast to other newspapers, *The Guardian’s* (2014) leading article interprets the acquittal verdict as a failure of the system to convict, not as an indicator of a false allegation, arguing that the current law makes successful rape prosecutions very difficult and fails women by disbelieving them. It calls for the opposite solution to other papers, urging the crown prosecution service to continue with its efforts. *The Guardian’s* alternative voice may not significantly dent the new dominant narrative—Roache does end up thoroughly restored in the British public sphere—but highlights the importance of the media for interpreting complex scandals and legal cases for their audiences and shows that very different readings can be offered to the public, including readings which avoid

rape myths and victim blaming. *The Guardian's* coverage also illustrates that, despite its more sober tone and detailed argumentation, *The Times'* coverage is essentially as uncritical and patriarchal as that of the tabloids, overlooking the broader context of the demonstrable failure of the criminal justice system to address sexual violence in a way that delivers justice for victims.

### ***Role reversal: victims, victimisers and celebrity***

Defence teams often attempt to reverse the roles of victim and victimiser to present their clients as the *real* victim in sexual abuse cases (Manne 2018). William Roache is claimed by his legal team as a victim of both the women falsely accusing him as well as a systemic "celebrity witch hunt:"

The "spectre" of Jimmy Savile and an unhealthy interest in sending celebrities to court for sex offences is haunting the trial of William Roache, his defence counsel claimed yesterday. (...) Miss Blackwell told jurors "the spectre of Jimmy Savile hangs over this case," saying it had "infected" the trial. Jimmy Savile is like an elephant in the room,' she went on. "You can't ignore it." Miss Blackwell said the entire investigation into the allegations against Roache showed "an unhealthy interest in the concept of celebrity." "We say everything in this case suggests that when allegations are made against a celebrity, the Jimmy Savile crisis of conscience means that a fair investigation does not take place." (James Tozer 2014b)

The discourse of a "celebrity witch hunt" maintains that the British legal system is on an overzealous mission to prosecute celebrities accused of sexual abuse, no matter how thin the evidence, in order to make up for its failure to deal with Jimmy's Savile's crimes. Key to Roache's defence argumentation, then, are his subject positions as a man and a celebrity, as well as temporal proximity to Savile. Being a celebrity involves consecration, the bestowal of a sacred quality and status to a person which commands reverence, but scandals threaten desecration, the removal of these values (Kavka 2020). Given the prestige of the celebrity position, it is a significant challenge to refashion it as a disadvantage and a source of unfair treatment, but Roache's defence team succeeds by working the Savile scandal to its advantage. The police investigation *Operation Yewtree*, sparked off by the Savile scandal, cast its net widely and proactively examined historical sexual abuse allegations against numerous British celebrities, including Cliff Richard, Gary Glitter and Rolf Harris. This, coupled with the low number of convictions achieved, fuelled the theory of a "celebrity witch hunt" and made plausible the claim that a powerful celebrity like Roache could become a victim of the system.

Post verdict, all newspapers except *The Guardian* claim the "celebrity witch hunt" discourse as truth and Roache as its victim. Across the *Daily Mail* and *The Sun* there is ubiquitous talk of a "celebrity witch hunt," a "Savile witch hunt," and a "Savile bandwagon," including prominent headlines such as *The Sun's* "Corrie Stars Slam Witch Hunt" (Andrew Chamberlain 2014). *The Times* shuns the emotive term "witch hunt" but agrees with its essence. *The Times'* (2014) leading article presents Roache as the victim of the criminal justice system's differential treatment of celebrities that unfairly brought him to trial. The "celebrity witch hunt" idea is recast in legal language as a theory of "over-correction" driven by the Savile debacle (Camilla Cavendish 2014). The absence of critical analysis across the three newspapers is remarkable: there are no critical questions (e.g., why would five unrelated victims be lying?) and facts that may cast doubt on the truthfulness of the "celebrity witch hunt" discourse are ignored (e.g., that its key architects

are Roache's defence team, that acquittals may reflect a lack of evidence to convict rather than false allegations, that the discourse runs counter to evidence that celebrities are *less* likely to be punished for crimes (Greer and McLaughlin 2021)). This begs the questions why and how this discourse comes to be so widely accepted as the truth; some answers can be found in celebrity and gender playing out in the context of a cultural framework of himpathy, rape myths and a gendered economy of believability.

Skolnick and Shaw (1994) have theorised that celebrity status acts as a "protective shield" for celebrity men who transgress, protecting them from exposure, criminal prosecution and severe punishment. In sexual abuse cases, however, gender is an equally central factor shaping how celebrity transgression is framed and responded to (Boyle 2018). Moreover, the framing of both accusers *and* accused is important because what emerges as "the truth" does not just depend on portrayals of the male "winners" but also the female "losers" in the believability contest (Banet-Weiser and Higgins 2023; Manne 2018). Applying the work of these writers, we can suggest that it is a complex mix of celebrity, masculinity and gendered culture which creates a culture receptive to the "celebrity witch hunt" discourse. Roache is ultimately exonerated because as a multiply privileged White male celebrity he is positioned to receive enormous himpathy (Manne 2018) and the victim-victimiser role reversal at the heart of himpathy is persuasive because it transfers blame onto the accusing women who, by virtue of their female subjectivity as well as rape myths, are already positioned as less believable (Banet-Weiser and Higgins 2023). In the context of this gendered cultural scaffold, doubts are swept aside. By documenting the strength of the cultural scaffold underpinning common discursive frames around sexual violence, the Roache scandal is instructive beyond its immediate case. It helps to understand the magnitude of the challenge feminism faces in transforming a culture's way of thinking, the limits of #MeToo's successes, and the contemporary backlash against it. The #MeToo movement's specific criticisms—e.g., of victim blaming or the unrecognised true scale of sexual violence—were persuasive for many, but did little to dent a deeply ingrained cultural tendency to find men more believable than women, rely on rape myths to understand sexual violence, and more readily extend the benefit of the doubt to men than to women. Part of the problem is the lack of radical thinking. Sara De Benedictis, Shani Orgad and Catherine Rottenberg (2019) show that news media coverage of #MeToo has been tame, rarely discussing solutions to sexual violence, and limiting solutions to consciousness-raising and individual speaking out. Sarah Banet-Weiser (2018) has argued that in the digital era, visibility becomes an end in its own right for social movements and radical, systemic analyses are missing. The Roache case illustrates that absence of radical thinking can come back to haunt feminist movements. Without it, gains in visibility and popularity of certain progressive ideas can be swept aside again by discourses which mobilize the power of entrenched cultural norms, beliefs, and myths about gender that have remained largely unchallenged.

The Roache case also highlights the extent to which celebrity men can rely on media adherence to a status quo marked by gender inequality and underwritten by a patriarchal system. Following the verdict, a thoroughly uncritical narrative comes to dominate the media which repeats the "celebrity witch hunt" discourse as truth, uses rape myths to discredit women, never questions how a White male celebrity has become the victim of the five ordinary women, never asks any critical questions about a criminal justice system that convicts few sexual abusers, or the number of male celebrities accused of sexual

abuse, or a society that tolerates high levels of violence against women. It is important that *The Guardian* does ask these questions and critiques the dominant narrative. It carries opinion pieces arguing that claims of witch-hunting are incorrect and undermine justice by creating pressures to prosecute fewer cases (Keir Starmer 2014) and pointing to dangers of the “celebrity witch hunt” discourse effectively demanding immunity from prosecution for celebrity offenders of historic abuses (Catherine Bennett 2014). *The Guardian* assesses the prosecution of Roache as an indicator of progressiveness, writing in its editorial that Savile brought about a “cultural shift” and that “victims should now know they can complain, and they will be heard” (*The Guardian* 2014). In direct contrast to *The Times’* critique of prosecutions of celebrities as an *over-correction*, *The Guardian* welcomes prosecutions as a correction to a traditionally sexist system. *The Guardian* opposition to the majority narrative shows that dominant discourses in the service of patriarchy *can* be challenged and that a different way of covering sexual abuse *is* possible. Moreover, media diversity highlights the importance of the media to translate complex legal cases for their audiences and that readers gain very different understandings of the case depending on which newspaper they read. *The Guardian* is a lone voice, though, suggesting that only a small proportion of media—the left-leaning quality end of the newspaper spectrum—is willing to challenge dominant discourses and the status quo. As the vast majority of the media adhere to the dominant narrative which accepts gender inequalities and patriarchal structures, this is what male celebrities like Roache can rely on when accused of sexual abuse.

## Conclusion

The Roache case is instructive for revealing the gendered nature of the moral work of sexual abuse scandals, which can reclaim an initially vilified male celebrity as a “national treasure” and blameless victim-of-the-system by means of discrediting female claimants as the real villains. The case allows for documenting in detail the significant narrative shift, from victim-believing to victim-disbelieving, which lays the foundations of the gendered moral work and demonstrates the volatility of narratives and fluidity of notions of guilt and innocence in media coverage of scandals. The exoneration of Roache is grounded in his position as a male celebrity, which creates a double advantage and ability to mobilise the resources of his subjectivity and status. Celebrity functions as a protective shield but not in simple terms; it works in conjunction with gender, specifically the cultural contexts of rape myths, sympathy and a gendered economy of believability, which together provide a cultural scaffold for specific claims around a “celebrity witch hunt” to be met with credence. In this specific case, the Savile scandal also provides a supportive historical context. The media play a key role in constructing the cultural scaffold by means of perpetuating rape myths and shaping the *conditions* of the believability contests by situating female accusers and male accused in specific meaning contexts. The media are also hugely influential in helping audiences make sense of sexual abuse scandals—the allegations, events, participants, legal processes and outcomes—by means of discourses which can attribute very different meanings and interpretations. This newspaper case study has revealed the existence of both a dominant discourse—across *The Sun*, the *Daily Mail* and *The Times* – and an alternative one in the progressive broadsheet in *The Guardian*;

this indicates that dominant discourses *can* be challenged, that a more feminist, women-believing journalism providing a different reading of sexual abuse scandals is possible, but also that powerful men who transgress can continue to rely on the majority of the media to shore up their privileged position by subscribing to the patriarchal status quo and not asking too many questions.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributor

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