

<b>Institution:</b> University of Leicester		
<b>Unit of Assessment:</b> 34A		
<b>Title of case study:</b> Empowering people and organisations to develop digital strategies to combat online sexual violence		
<b>Period when the underpinning research was undertaken:</b> June 2014–Present		
<b>Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:</b>		
<b>Name(s):</b> Kaitlynn Mendes	<b>Role(s) (e.g. job title):</b> Professor in Gender, Media and Sociology	<b>Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:</b> June 2014–Present
<b>Period when the claimed impact occurred:</b> August 2017–December 2020		
<b>Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014?</b> N		
<b>1. Summary of the impact</b>  <p>Mendes's research explores contemporary 'rape culture', demonstrating how digital technologies paved the way for new forms of online abuse, while simultaneously being used to challenge sexism, sexual violence, rape culture and harassment both on and offline. These findings have underpinned workshops, policy, technological tools and artistic responses by third-sector organisations, educators, industry and cultural producers. The research has directly influenced professional practice and strategic planning of organisations and directly improved the capability of young people, teachers, schools, and members of the public to identify, safely tackle and combat sexual violence and gender inequalities.</p>		
<b>2. Underpinning research</b>  <p>Mendes's research has tackled the global problem of 'rape culture': the structural conditions which enable and condone sexual violence in society (e.g. rape myths, victim-blaming, policing of women's bodies). She has paid particular attention to how rape culture manifests itself in contemporary culture, and how the public creatively use digital technologies to make visible, disrupt, and 'talk back' to it through 'digital feminist activism' [R1, R2, R3, R5, R6, R7].</p> <p>Her findings have demonstrated how challenging rape myths ('generalized, false ideas or beliefs about rape which trivialize it, suggests that it did not occur, or can only occur in certain contexts') [R6] plays a key role in contemporary feminist activism [R1, R2, R5, R6, R7]. Rape myths are problematic because they make people question the legitimacy of rape cases, redirecting blame from the perpetrator to the victim. They are also closely entwined with other systemic forms of oppression such as racism, ableism and homophobia, suggesting that some bodies are more rape-able than others.</p> <p>The 'fight back' by activists takes place on a wide range of online platforms. Mendes conducted interviews, surveys, and focus groups with over 250 feminist activists. Online observation, content, discourse and thematic analysis was conducted on over 2,000 pieces of media text from both highly visible and 'under-the-radar' campaigns globally. These include #MeToo, #BeenRapedNeverReported, SlutWalk, Everyday Sexism, and others.</p> <p>A major research finding identified by Mendes is the prevalence of highly aggressive and sexualized 'trolling' and abuse towards those who publicly speak about feminist issues [R1, R2,</p>		

**R3, R4, R6].** Although recent scholarship has documented the prevalence of trolling and other forms of technologically facilitated sexual violence, Mendes's work has pioneered the exploration of the experiences of those subjected to its harms. This research has therefore highlighted the deleterious silencing and traumatic impact that trolling has on many participants, and the ways it can either hinder or fuel online political participation **[R2, R6]**. Furthermore, while trolling itself can be harmful and silencing, Mendes's research demonstrated how existing legal and educational policies are failing to address its rise, and the increase of harassment and other forms of gendered harms which are particularly prevalent amongst young people **[R1, R2]**. Nevertheless, Mendes's findings have outlined how 'digital defence' strategies have emerged to help activists cope with such abuse, illuminating the significant role digital technologies play in fostering feminist networks **[R1, R2, R6]**.

Mendes also highlighted the role of power and privilege when thinking about which issues gain visibility, whose stories are told, in what way, and to what effect **[R2, R3, R6]**. Although it is tempting to claim that digital technologies have levelled the playing field, giving everyone an equal chance of speaking and being listened to, Mendes's research demonstrates how this is not the case. Instead, systemic and interlocking modes of oppression continue to operate in digital spaces, meaning that although diverse groups of people are telling their stories or engaging in activism, they are not equally heard nor valued.

### 3. References to the research

**R1.** Keller, J., **Mendes, K.**, and Ringrose, J. (2018). "Speaking Unspeakable Things: Documenting Digital Feminist Responses to Rape Culture", *Journal of Gender Studies*, 27(1): 22-36.

**R2. Mendes, K.**, Ringrose, J., and Keller, J. (2019a). *Digital Feminist Activism: Girls and Women Fight Back Against Rape Culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

**R3. Mendes, K.**, Belisário, K., and Ringrose, J. (2019b). "Digitized Narratives of Rape: Disclosing Sexual Violence Through Pain Memes", in Ulrika Andersson, Monika Edgren, Lena Karlsson and Gabriella Nilsson (eds.), *Rape Narratives in Motion*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

**R4. Mendes, K.**, Keller, J., and Ringrose, J. (2019c). "Digitized Narratives of Sexual Violence: A case study of #BeenRapedNeverReported and Who Needs Feminism?". *New Media & Society*. 21(6): 1290-1310.

**R5. Mendes, K.** and Ringrose, J. (2019). "Digital Feminist Activism: #MeToo and the everyday experiences of challenging rape culture", in Bianca Fileborn and Rachel Loney-Howes (eds.) *#MeToo & the politics of social change*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

**R6. Mendes, K.** (2015). *SlutWalk: Feminism, activism and media*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

**R7. Mendes, K.**, Ringrose, J., and Keller, J. (2018). "# MeToo and the promise and pitfalls of challenging rape culture through digital feminist activism". *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 25(2), 236-246.

### Underpinning Grants:

**Mendes, K.**, Ringrose, J. and Keller, J. (2014-2016). "Documenting digital feminist activism: Mapping feminist responses to new media misogyny and rape culture". AHRC Standard Grant (AH/L009587/1). GBP136,872.

**Mendes, K.** and Ringrose, J. (2020-2021) "Developing Digital Defence & Activism Lessons". AHRC Follow-on-Funding for Impact and Engagement Grant (AH/T008938/1). GBP98,424.91.

#### 4. Details of the impact

Mendes's research has defined and underpinned work in several third-sector organisations, improved knowledge and understanding of the issue of sexual violence across the diverse groups of society—resulting in new policies and technological tools—and inspired new forms of artistic expression.

##### Policy

Sharing insights on the key issues young people face when using digital technologies (trolling, poor mental health, forms of online abuse), Mendes co-authored a policy position statement **[E1c]** with the School of Sexuality Education (SSE) (formerly Sexplain), which the Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL)—a trade union representing over 19,000 school and college leaders—actively fed into and co-badges. This policy provides guidance on management and best practice concerning gendered forms of online harm and harassment (e.g., upskirting, revenge porn, sending unsolicited nude pictures). ASCL has previously taken a stand on a range of issues such as inclusion and digital health, but this collaboration is the first time its policies include a specifically gendered lens **[E1a]**. Testimony from one school which adopted SSE online sexual harassment policies directly points to the sharp drop in non-solicited image sharing, and the Deputy Head credits this “directly to the Online Sexual Harassment policies and their advice to take a holistic, whole school approach to the issue” **[E1b]**.

The 2018 Violence Against Women and Girls Helpdesk Report, “What Works to Prevent Cyber Violence against Women and Girls”, published by the Department for International Development, cites Mendes's research. Her findings on how technologies that are used to abuse without physical contact and from anywhere (i.e. virtually and using digital technologies) can also facilitate solidarity and talk-back—forming the only example of an approach to combat ‘at a distance’ cyber violence, which is identified as one of the five characteristics that distinguishes violence against women and girls from other forms of violence **[E8]**. It also underpins international think tank EuroMesco's Policy Brief on Strategies against Gender-Based Violence, which also draws from and directly quotes Mendes's research regarding online safety recommendations. EuroMesco is a member network of over 100 research institutes and think tanks from 29 European and Southern Mediterranean countries **[E9]**.

##### Practice

In 2019, the SSE began integrating Mendes key research findings into their workshops and as a result changed their approach: from a strict focus on sex education, towards an increasing emphasis on personal resilience, mental health, online defence strategies and activism. They also now offer a series of new workshops around digital defence and activism, which were not possible prior to engagement with Mendes's research. The CEO and Co-founder of SSE states that “Prof Mendes's research highlighted issues of digital consent, digital defence and online activism which are of particular relevance to young people who we work with and as a result we incorporated Mendes's research in our training programme. Currently these research findings comprise around 1/6 of the workshop” **[E2a]**. She goes on to stress that Mendes's research “has also been vital in endorsing and confirming the benefits of digital activism which was already present in our practice and has enabled us to be certain that this approach results in the best possible outcomes for young people” **[E2a]**. Mendes is listed as an advisor and UoL a recognised partner on the SSE website **[E2b]**. Working with secondary school students and qualified and trainee teachers, SSE workshops drawing on Mendes's research reach

approximately 10,000 secondary school students per year. To date, the training has been delivered to 1,290 qualified teachers [E2a] and 29,477 young people [E3].

After participating in workshops, 86% of young people reported better understanding of digital activism and how to speak out about issues they care about online; and 69% were more likely to report online or offline harassment. When asked what they will do differently in response to their workshops, one pupil said: "I will think more about how I can use media to talk about problems/challenges I might face" [E3]. Many students shared activist messages, memes and posts after the workshops finished, for example:

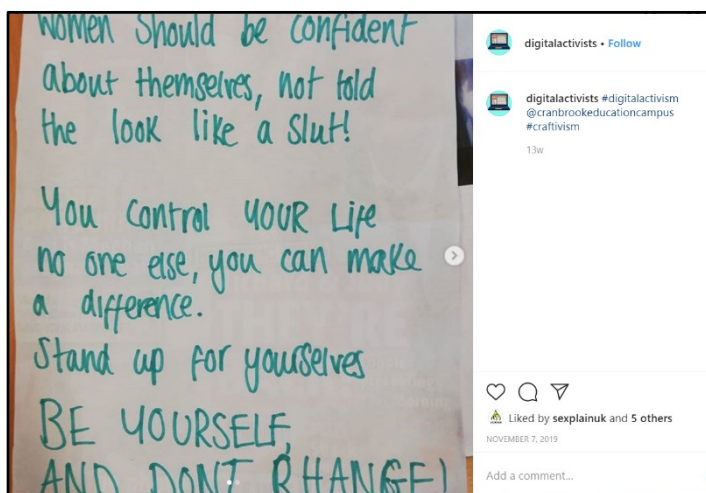


Figure 1: example of student activism

Several participants continue to engage in activism after SSE workshops, through different platforms. For example, one participants' Instagram page *@everybodiesperfect* reads: "We're All Perfect | Everybody is perfect | Sending love and support | Just a group of school girls doing our bit".

Teachers in SSE workshops demonstrate similar levels of engagement and thought, with Workshop evaluation showing that it makes a significant difference in action planning for attendants. For example: "I am keen to emphasise how dangerous an 'abstinence only' approach can be when teaching students about sending nudes" [E6]. Via SSE, Mendes developed and, in some cases, delivered training for teachers through PGCE programmes at the University of Leicester and University College London (UCL). 110 PGCE students (the whole cohort) at the University of Leicester attended this training, and a majority strongly agreed or agreed that they felt more confident to deliver relationships and sex education (RSE) or to instruct others on how to deliver RSE because of this training. One training participant said "I think when I teach sex ed, I will be less traditional and shame based, and more sex positive" [E3]. At UCL, training was delivered to a cohort of 40 students from a range of disciplines as a first-of-its-kind specialist Relationships and Sex Education PGCE course, ahead of the introduction of mandatory RSE in all schools from September 2020. The content was praised by participants, in particular "having the guest speakers was helpful ... it gave us a community and showed us the array of people that are out there" [E3].

In 2019, Mendes also delivered her research-informed sessions to the EU-funded network for practitioners, Inspiring Male Action on Gender Equality in Euro (IMAGINE), working with The Good Lad Initiative charity, to 30 attendees. Sessions were targeted towards facilitators and charities who use educational workshops to transform and challenge 'toxic' masculinity to

prevent gender-based violence. Participants left the workshop with a greater understanding of the importance of tackling the ways 'toxic' masculinity is performed in and through digital technologies, stating that they needed to "be more aware and speak up" [E4]. As a result of Mendes's research and sessions, charities such as The Good Lad Initiative have adapted their workshops to address this issue [E4].

Mendes worked with coders from Opt Out Tools, an open-source feminist technology collective building digital tools to empower women, to contribute to the development of their new web browser extension that allows people to block sexist harassment online, much like an adblocker. Mendes's research was, according to coders, "hugely helpful in structuring our activism strategy". The browser extension launched on 8 March 2020, releasing it to the Firefox add-ons library [E5]. The research and engagement lead at Opt Out Tools stated that Mendes's work [R2] was particularly influential and had "inspired us to build a larger decentralised network" [E5].

### Raising awareness

Mendes's research underpinned development of an innovative 'artful intervention': "Let's Talk about Sexual Violence", which ran in Leicester (2-9 February 2019 and 3-16 February 2020) and Birmingham (3-16 February 2020) and was subsequently digitized in November 2020. The intervention educated students, staff and the wider public as to the reality of rape and sexual violence. In post-event survey data, over 90% of respondents agreed that the exhibition challenged myths and misconceptions relating to sexual violence: "Much of the exhibition confirmed my perspectives, however the photograph of the elderly person ... challenged me to recognise that people everywhere ... have the potential to become victims" [E7]. The Exhibition raised awareness of the realities of sexual violence and pervasiveness of rape myths and it helped develop more refined understandings. As one participant stated: "Although I thought I had a strong awareness of rape and its misconceptions, it highlighted to me the stereotypes and clichés that have become entrenched in society and has infiltrated my own thoughts on the issue" [E7].

### 5. Sources to corroborate the impact

**E1a.** Testimonial: Inclusion Policy Advisor, Association of School and College Leaders.

**E1b.** Testimonial: Deputy Head (Pastoral), St John's College, Southsea.

**E1c.** School of Sexual Education Guidance for Schools:

<https://schoolofsexed.org/guidance-for-schools>

**E2a.** Testimonial: School of Sexual Education, formerly Sexplain.

**E2b.** School of Sexual Education Team: <https://schoolofsexed.org/team>

**E3.** Sexplain website data; Impact report Survey responses and qualitative feedback.

**E4.** IMAGINE and Good Lad Survey/evaluation data.

**E5.** Testimonial: Research and Engagement Lead, Opt Out.

**E6.** Online Sexual Harassment event: impact report.

**E7.** Let's talk about Sexual Violence Post survey and Focus Group data.

**E8.** Faith, B., and Fraser, E. (2018). What Works to Prevent Cyber Violence against Women and Girls? Violence Against Women and Girls Helpdesk Research Report No. 212.

**E9.** Mecky, M (2019). RIDING THE CYBER WAVE: How Feminist Activism Develops Strategies against Gender-Based Violence, EUROMESCO Policy Brief, No. 100, 16 October 2019.