

Case 3

Rape Jokes and Popular Culture

In late 2011, Facebook gained some public notoriety (and support) when it refused to take down a page on its site entitled, "You know she's playing hard to get when your [sic] chasing her down an alleyway". The page was created by a user who thought it was a funny joke. The page, and others like it, came under attack from support groups and charities for victims of rape and sexual assault who asked that it be taken down as a violation of Facebook's Terms of Service (which bans "content that is hateful, threatening, or pornographic; incites violence; or contains nudity or graphic or gratuitous violence"¹). Due, in part, to the controversy, the page gained more than 190,000 "likes" before Facebook finally took it down².

A page on a social networking site trumpeting rape humor is hardly an anomaly in contemporary popular culture. Hundreds, if not thousands of jokes involving rape are posted to social networking site Twitter each day, rape jokes are a surprisingly regular feature of the new CBS comedy "2 Broke Girls"^{3,4} and t-shirt designers online offer t-shirts that feature sayings such as "No + Rohypnol = Yes"⁵. While jokes about rape and sexual assault certainly aren't modern inventions, their apparent rise in prevalence and acceptance has many groups worried.

Victims support groups maintain that rape jokes contribute to a phenomenon they call "rape culture". This term first came to prominence among feminists in the 1970s as a way of describing the cultural features and stereotypes that lead to a tacit acceptance of rape, sexual assault, sexual harassment, and blaming (either wholly or in part) the victims of rape, sexual assault, and sexual harassment for the crimes committed against them. Recent research by social psychologists at the University of Kent suggests that men who are primed with sexist jokes have greater self-reported "rape proclivity" than those who do not, and are more prone to see acquaintance rape as less serious⁶.

Those who defend rape humor argue that there is a difference between telling, writing, spreading, and laughing at rape humor and condoning or celebrating rape. They maintain that opponents of joking about rape are committing the error of taking humor too seriously. Often, they maintain, people tell jokes about things that make them nervous or upset in order to defuse tension and make people less upset. Humor is often used as a kind of defense mechanism against the worst of humanity's sins in order to keep from losing hope altogether. They may appeal to theories of laughter such as the one in V. S. Ramachandran's *A Brief Tour of Human*

¹ Statement of Rights and Responsibilities, Facebook, June 8, 2012. <http://www.facebook.com/legal/terms>.

² "Facebook rape joke pages taken down from social network," *BBC News Technology*, November 8, 2011. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-15641998>.

³ Margaret Lyons, "The Sitcom Season in Rape Jokes," *New York Magazine: Vulture*, January 20, 2012. <http://www.vulture.com/2012/01/rape-jokes-sitcoms-broke-girls.html>.

⁴ Tricia Romano, "Rainn Wilson, '2 Broke Girls,' and the Rise of the Rape Joke," *The Daily Beast*, February 22, 2012. <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2012/02/22/rainn-wilson-2-broke-girls-and-the-rise-of-the-rape-joke.html>.

⁵ Sarah Graham, "If you thought Topman's misogynist t-shirts were bad," *La Petite Feministe Anglaise*, October 7, 2011. <http://petitefeministe.tumblr.com/post/11147722684/trigger-warning-rape-if-you-thought-topmans>.

⁶ G. Tendayi Viki, Manuela Thome, and Amy Cullen, *et al.*, "The Effect of Sexist Humor and Type of Rape on Men's Self-Reported Rape Proclivity and Victim Blame," *Current Research in Social Psychology*, Vol. 13, No. 10, December 2007.

*Consciousness*⁷ which speculates that laughter evolved to defuse tension after recognizing that a perceived threat is not a real threat.

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⁷ V.S. Ramachandran, *A Brief Tour of Human Consciousness*. Pi Press. 21-23. 2004.