



Secure/ Higher Ed Foundation Special Report: An Analysis of
Reddit Posts by Sexual Assault Perpetrators

In 2012, an AskReddit thread posted the following: “Reddit’s had a few threads about sexual assault victims, but are there any redditors from the other side of the story? What were your motivations? Do you regret it” [sic]. This thread drew a huge number of responses and significant media attention.

We understand the reaction to the post from survivors and advocates (One survivor posted on another site “The thought that my rapist is PROBABLY a redditor and could very well be getting patted on the back RIGHT NOW by HUNDREDS OF PEOPLE for relating how rough raping me was for him is making me literally nauseous.”). We also understand that the sample is not random, the respondents could be lying, and all the limitations of this type of research, which are thoroughly documented and need not be repeated here.

All that said, these posts are potentially valuable for those of us on the prevention side. Very rarely do we get unfiltered explanations from perpetrators, or get to see unfiltered reactions to descriptions of their crimes. Given that the post has run its course, it made sense to analyze the data and determine what if any lessons it contains for sexual assault prevention. Other researchers have also examined the data, but not from the perspective of obtaining lessons in sexual assault prevention.¹

Why did the perpetrators say they committed sexual assault?

The perpetrator was extremely aroused and could not help him/her self.

Women say “no” when they actually mean “yes”.

Men are supposed to be aggressive sexually and women are supposed to put up the show of resisting, i.e., sexual scripts.

The victim did not say “no” enough, was drunk, dressed seductively, was slutty, or didn’t fight back.

The perpetrator was impaired by drugs or alcohol.

The perpetrator was influenced by pornography that was violent and degrading to women.

The victim initiated the encounter but did not want to go all the way.

The victim previously had sex with the perpetrator.

¹ Hipp, T. N., Bellis, A. L., Goodnight, B. L., Brennan, C. L., Swartout, K. M., & Cook, S. L. (2017). Justifying sexual assault: Anonymous perpetrators speak out online. *Psychology of Violence, 7*(1), 82-90.

The victim was merely an object to satisfy the perpetrator and not really a human being.

The perpetrator hated women and wanted to hurt one.

Importantly, none of these “justifications” would constitute a valid legal defense to a sexual assault charge. Many of the respondents expressed extreme remorse for their actions, some to the point of experiencing severe psychological trauma, except those in the last category who hate women. Perpetrators in the last category were happy to have an audience for their depravity, although, like many other sociopaths do, one repeated rapist saw fit to issue a warning:

Let me leave you with this message, you never know who someone truly is, so be careful. I'm going back to my main account to do normal reddit looking at cats and posting pictures of bacon, and I think it's kind of funny that no one will ever know if the person they're talking to on reddit, or someone who moderates their subreddit, is me on my main account... just food for thought.

We repeat this warning because it very graphically illustrates the serious danger of online relationships. To the extent we needed confirmation that terrible people are online doing seemingly normal things, we received it, and therefore repeat the caution that it is extremely risky to engage in online relationships.

Many responses to admitted sexual assaults were sympathetic (one even posted “it's not your fault”). When women posted that they had committed a sexual assault on a man, the idea was generally met with ridicule and derision.

We take away several lessons from the data. First, many perpetrators justified their actions as part of sexual scripts, so more education on this subject might be useful. Second, victim blaming and shaming is alive and well, as is sympathy for perpetrators who commit sexual assault. Moreover, there was little sympathy for male sexual assault survivors if the perpetrator was female and little condemnation of female perpetrators. Clearly, more education is needed on these subjects. Third, the perpetrators generally do not identify as sex offenders or even as bad people, although a fair number characterized their actions as unacceptable. Fourth, most posts involved a victim who had reason to trust the perpetrator (as one posted, “She was a good friend.”), underscoring the fact that most rapists are not hiding in the bushes.

Finally, a significant number of perpetrators knew what they were doing was wrong but proceeded anyway, so education seems futile for this category of offender. Unfortunately, the only message that will resonate with this offender type is violent physical resistance. Complicating matters is the fact that many victims are rendered helpless by incapacitation due to drugs or alcohol or by panic and fear (for example, one posted “She never said stop or anything but I could see how she could have froze

up in fear.”). However, other research demonstrates that when females are empowered with the knowledge of how to respond forcefully and violently, they are better able to do so even in extremely terrifying circumstances. Moreover, the descriptions of incapacitated sexual assaults underscore the critical need for sexual assault prevention courses to include effective education on alcohol, which is consistent with our earlier research on this subject.