The Department of Defense and Impression Management:

An Analysis of Reporting on Sexual Assault in the Military

by

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Abstract

Rates of sexual assault in the military have been increasing despite intervention by Congress and the Department of Defense (DoD) (Wood and Toppelberg 2017; Acosta, Chinman, & Shearer 2021). A mixed-methods approach was used to examine how the DoD presents sexual assault in the military in mandated government reports and how the narratives might change in response to public cases of sexual assault and social movements. Quantitative data was collected using the organizational impression management taxonomy (Mohamed, Gardner, and Paolillo 1999). A thematic narrative analysis was conducted to identify themes and patterns within these reports. A timeline of increased public awareness of sexual assault through publicized cases of military sexual trauma and victims' rights movements was created. Changes within the narrative within these reports were compared to this timeline. It was found that the DoD uses impression management tactics to present an image of morality, competency, and social worthiness. Rather than responding to victims' rights movements with effective programs and policies, the DoD increased these tactics. It is likely the DoD is reluctant to assess military culture, a contributor to high rates of sexual assault in the military, because it would require restructuring of the military as a total institution.

Keywords: military sexual trauma, total institution, organizational impression management

Introduction

In 1988, through the National Defense Authorization Act, Congress requested that the Department of Defense (DoD) report on the pervasiveness of sexual assault, sexual harassment, and rape in the military. The behaviors to be reported included rape, sexual assault, aggravated sexual contact, abusive sexual contact, and non-consensual sodomy of military members (Department of Defense 2018.). In response to this request, the DoD created the *Workplace and Gender Relations Survey of Active Duty Members*. As stated by the DoD, the purpose of the *Workplace and Gender Relations Survey of Active Duty Members* is to estimate rates of sexual assault in the military, assess military climate, and evaluate the progress of current Department of Defense programs that are intended to decrease rates of sexual assault (Department of Defense 2006; Department of Defense 2012; Department of Defense 2018). This survey is the sole data source for reporting the prevalence and severity of sexual assault of active duty military members (Department of Defense 2018). This study examines how the DoD presents sexual assault in the military in these mandated government reports and if the narratives change in response to public cases of sexual assault and social movements.

When someone joins the military their risk of sexual assault doubles (Schmid 2010; Brenner, Darcy, & Kubiak 2016). For women, this issue is even more pervasive. One in six women in the military are sexually assaulted; they are more likely to be sexually assaulted during their service than they are to be shot at by an enemy (Sierra 2021). Most of the perpetrators of sexual assault within the military are fellow military members. Of these victims, 70% of sexual assault victims are assaulted by their superiors, which is reflected in their military rank as well as their responsibility for lower-ranking individual.

Rates of sexual assault within the military have been rising since their numbers have been recorded (Wood and Toppelberg 2017). Much of this increase has occurred within the last ten years despite progressive action made by the Department of Defense (DoD) (Wood and Toppelberg 2017; Acosta, Chinman, & Shearer 2021). Between 2016 and 2018, rates of sexual increased by 40%. In 2018, an estimated 12,927 active service women and 7,546 men were sexually assaulted (Department of Defense 2018). A similar increase in rates of sexual assault occurred within the general population. In 2018, rates of sexual assault increased from 2017 to 2018, from 1.4 per 1,000 victimizations to 2.7 per 1,000. (Bureau of Justice Statistics 2018). The increased risk of sexual assault in the military has been linked to military culture which thrives within the setting of a total institution (Brenner, Darcy, & Kubiak 2016).

The military is a total institution that reinforces behaviors that increase the risk of sexual assault (Brenner, Darcy, & Kubiak 2016). It uses a hierarchical power structure to socialize large groups of new members into a similar set of cultural norms (Barnao 2019). This socialization occurs in a closed setting, cutting members off from the outside world to ensure this socialization into a new set of cultural norms is effective. Military group norms emphasize violence and physical prowess which are associated with society's definition of masculinity. When an individual's masculinity is questioned, they often engage in bullying and hazing behaviors to regain their power, all of which are common behaviors within the military (Schmid 2010). This is also done to assert one's power over a lower-ranking individual. The closed, hierarchical, and hypermasculine nature of the military are increasing rates of sexual assault.

Military members who are harassed or assaulted during their service are left with lasting negative effects on their mental, physical, and emotional health. Those who are sexually assaulted or sexually harassed during their military service experience higher rates of post-

traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) than those who serve in combat zones (Sierra 2021). The

effects of PTSD are negative and long-lasting, including depression, anxiety, isolation, and high

rates of drug and alcohol abuse (U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs 2022; Wood and

Toppleberg 2017). Military members who have been sexually assaulted during their time of

service are more likely to be dishonorably discharged, resulting in a loss of their governmental

benefits (Wood and Toppleberg 2017). The experience of sexual assault during one's military

service increases the difficulty in integration into civilian life, with many of these military

members facing higher rates of homelessness (Wood and Toppleberg 2017).

For this research, I analyzed the 2006, 2012, and 2018 *Workplace and Gender Relations

Surveys of Active Duty Members* for organizational impression management tactics. Thematic

narrative analysis was used to analyze the narrative presented by the DoD regarding sexual

assault in the military. These themes were then compared to a timeline of publicized cases of

military sexual trauma and sexual assault awareness movements. As the primary data source for

understanding the pervasiveness of sexual assault in the military, it is important to understand

how the DoD is presenting the issue of sexual assault in the military within these reports, both in

its prevalence and how it is being handled, because it could influence the creation of new

legislation based upon how Congress, the intended audience of these reports, interprets this

presentation.

Literature Review

The term *military sexual trauma* (MST) is used when referring to sexual assault

or sexual harassment experienced during military service" (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

2022). This includes any sexual activity during military service where the victim does not

consent or is unable to consent to the activity. Examples of MST, as provided by the U.S.

Department of Veterans Affairs, include being overpowered or physically forced to have sex, being pressured or coerced into sexual activities, and being touched or grabbed in a sexual way that makes the victim feel uncomfortable, including hazing. Much of the literature discussing sexual assault of military members uses the term of Military Sexual Trauma (MST). I will use this term throughout the rest of this paper when referring to the rape or sexual assault of military members during their service.

Military members adhere to an additional set of rules, regulations, and laws known as the Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ). The Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ) prohibits rape, sexual assault, aggravated sexual contact, and abusive sexual contact. Military members who break both civil law and military law may be tried for the same crime within both courts. Article 120 of the UCMJ defines which acts of MST are illegal and prosecutable under military law. Military members who have violated the UCMJ are held accountable under military law by a court-martial. The criminal definitions of sexual assault in the military are clear, yet they might not be addressing the root cause of sexual assault, resulting in an increase in rates of military sexual trauma (Kuhl et. l. 2017).

Approximately 12,927 military women and 7,546 military men experienced a sexual assault between 2017 and 2018. For women, this was a significant increase in rates of sexual assault, from 4.3% in 2016 to 6.2% in 2018 (Department of Defense 2018). The increase for women was driven by a significant increase in penetrative sexual assault, which increased from 2.2% in 2016 to 3.1% in 2018. This increase mirrors trends within the general population; according to the National Crime Victimization Survey, self-reported rates of sexual assault doubled between 2017 to 2018, increasing from 1.4 per 1,000 victimizations to 2.7 (Bureau of Justice Statistics 2017; Bureau of Justice Statistics 2018; Benner 2019).

While these numbers allude to the severity of sexual assault as a social problem, it is likely they do not accurately capture its full extent. Estimations of sexual assault are believed to be inaccurate due to underreporting (Kelly and Stermac 2008). In the general public, an increase in rates of self-reported sexual assault occurred alongside a decrease in official reports of sexual assault. In 2017, 40% of rapes and sexual assault were reported to the police. By 2018, only 25% of rapes and sexual assaults were reported (Bureau of Justice Statistics 2017; Bureau of Justice Statistics 2018; Benner 2019).

According to the DoD, military members who were subjected to MST during their time of service did not submit a report because they wanted to forget about their MST, they did not want people to know about their MST, they felt ashamed or embarrassed, they felt partially to blame, they thought their MST was not serious enough to report, or they did not think anything would be done about their MST (Department of Defense 2018).

Similar responses were found when lack of reporting of MST was examined solely in military women. Of the 1,339 servicewomen examined, only 25% reported their MST. Rates of reporting did not differ based on service type, branch of service, military status, deployment experience, or the use of drugs and/or alcohol at the time of the assault. However, rates of reporting showed statistically significant correlations with education and rank. Higher-ranking military women, including military officers, were less likely to report their military sexual trauma than lower-ranking military women; only 10% of military officers reported their sexual assault. Reasons for not reporting included embarrassment, not knowing how to report, fear of a loss of confidentiality, fears of negative impact on career, and beliefs that nothing would be done (Mengeling et. al 2014). These fears are supported by the negative outcomes experienced by female military members who do report their MST such as retaliation, maltreatment from their

leadership and coworkers, being ostracized by their leadership and coworkers, and professional reprisal (Department of Defense 2018).

In 2016, the DoD offered two types of reporting of MST, restricted reporting, and unrestricted reporting with the hope that it would increase rates of reporting while decreasing negative outcomes. An unrestricted report will notify law enforcement as well as the member's commander. A restricted report is considered a confidential report. This report will not trigger any investigation; it will provide access to medical treatment, counseling, and advocacy services without notifying the member's commander (Department of Defense 2021). Of those who submitted an unrestricted report, 70% of military women had a negative experience. These experiences include loss of confidentiality, being told to forget about their assault or not tell anyone else, implications that the MST was their fault, and a suspicion that the report was not officially documented despite being made (Mengeling et. al. 2014). Forty-eight percent of women who made an unrestricted report stated that no action was taken against their perpetrator. Women who made a restricted report were more likely to have a positive experience; however, fewer servicewomen used this type of reporting compared to unrestricted reports.

Despite numerous programs and policies, rates of MST remain high (Castro et. al. 2015). It appears that a deeper understanding of the complexity of MST is needed to create effective prevention strategies and programs (Castro et. al. 2015). Scholars have proposed that military culture is the strongest contributor of MST. Perpetrators of sexual violence are more likely to be hypermasculine males (Department of Defense 2018; Fahlberg and Pepper 2016).

Standards of masculinity are learned through gender role socialization. Even though not every individual may enter the military with learned norms and behaviors of hypermasculinity, they are socialized into military culture which has been shown to be violent and hypermasculine

due to the idealization of physical prowess and violence (Barnao 2019). As such, there is a high concentration of hypermasculinity within the military (Harway and Steel 2015). Hypermasculinity is an extreme form of male gender socialization that demonstrates apathetic beliefs towards sex and women (Zaitchik and Mosher 1993). Because of this, hypermasculine cultures such as the military are correlated with higher rates of acceptance of rape myths, such as the victim was asking to be sexually assaulted or somehow deserved it (Castro et. al. 2015). Rape myths place blame upon victims rather than perpetrators and have been used to justify and sustain sexual violence against victims (Edwards et. al. 2011).

Hypermasculinity is also linked to competency and physical strength which are qualities valued within the military (Barnao 2019). Any legislation intended to address MST needs to acknowledge the existing misogynistic and hypermasculine group norms within the military (Schmid 2010; Acosta, Chinman, & Shearer 2021). Not only would this more effectively decrease rates of MST; a decrease in misogynistic group norms would address the higher rates of victimization of female military members.

Women make up 15% of active duty military members (Sierra 2021). These women are essential in ensuring that the United States has a strong and adequate military presence. According to Don Christianson, a retired air force colonel and current military lawyer, "in an all-volunteer force, the American military cannot meet its requirements if women don't serve. We do not have enough qualified men if women don't serve" (Sierra 2021). Not only are women needed within the military, but women have higher rates of success than their male counterparts for peacekeeping missions (Sierra 2021). Women are an important aspect of the United States military, yet they are the most frequent victims of MST because of misogynistic cultural norms in the military that perceive women as the "other" (Schmid 2010) as well as a lack of access to

power. Women have historically been excluded from combat roles due to biological essentialism and stereotypes about physical strength (Nagel, Spears, and Maenza 2021). This exclusion impacted promotions for women which is reflected in the lack of senior ranking women in the military.

Physical violence is most likely to occur in relationships that have an imbalance of power and control (Grose and Grabe 2014). The most common forms of interpersonal physical violence in the military are that between a victim outranked by their perpetrator, and domestic violence between military men and their wives. In 2020, the United States Air Force surveyed 68,000 military members–approximately 10% of the members in the Air Force and Space Force–to determine the types of mental and physical abuse they experience at home and in the workplace. Violence in this survey was defined similarly to the World Health Organization's definition, "the intentional use of physical force or power …that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment, or deprivation" (WHO 2002: 4). Of the 68,000 members surveyed, nearly 37,000 reported the experience of physical or psychological violence (Department of the Air Force 2020). Approximately 18% of male respondents experienced non-partner physical violence; 12% of females experienced non-partner physical violence. Overall, rates of victimization were higher for lower-ranking Air Force men and women (Department of the Air Force 2020).

A person or organization's acceptance of rape myths can be evident in how they discuss sexual assault (Süsseenback, Eyssel, Rees, and Bohner 2015). People who accept common rape myths, such as the victim deserved the assault or in some ways were "asking for it," prefer information that focuses on the victim as opposed to the aggressor (Süsseenback, Eyssel, Rees, and Bohner 2015). An increased acceptance of rape myths is also correlated with anti-victim and

pro-defendant judgements. These forms of grammatical construction have been used to examine the author's perspectives regarding sexual assault and domestic violence (Bohner 2001; Süssenback, Eyssel, Rees, and Bohner 2015; Niemi and Young 2016). Previous studies found that male authors are more likely to utilize *linguistic avoidance* to minimize the severity of the situation (Bohner 2001). When analyzing media depictions of a specific date rape case, it was found that the man who was accused of rape was portrayed as the victim, not the female victim. The female victim was the active subject within this case (Holloway & Jefferson 1998).

Other media discussions of sexual assault used similar tactics when discussing sexual assault. The assault was described in passive terms with no mention of a perpetrator; rather, the crime *happened* to the female victim. In some cases, the media presented the data as if the female victims allowed the crime to happen because they put themselves at risk of being sexually assaulted. Per the researcher's interpretation, linguistically, when this is done, it ascribes blame to the victim rather than the perpetrator. Though this presentation contradicts the traditional active/passive gender dichotomy, it does uphold the belief that women, while typically seen as more passive, should be active agents in protecting their virtue (Lindqvist 2017).

Rates of MST are increasing (Castro et. al. 2015; Department of Defense 2018). The DoD attributes increasingly high rates of MST to an increase in reporting (Department of Defense 2018). However, evidence suggests military members are reluctant to report their MST for fear of negative outcomes (Mengeling et. al. 2014; Department of Defense 2018). These fears are justified by the experiences of those who do report their MST. Instead, military culture is linked to high rates of MST because it reinforces hypermasculine and misogynistic behaviors (Zaitchik and Mosher 1993; Schmid 2010; Harway and Steel 2015; Barnao 2019; Acosta, Chinman, & Shearer 2021). This also explains why women are at higher risk of MST;

hypermasculinity is linked to apathetic views towards women and sex (Zaitchik and Mosher 1993). Therefore, policy and programs designed to decrease rates of MST would need to address military culture in order to be effective. However, hypermasculine cultures are linked to an acceptance of rape myths. Evidence of the acceptance of rape myths can be found in how sexual assault is portrayed (Süsseenback, Eyssel, Rees, and Bohner 2015). By analyzing how sexual assault is discussed in mandated government reports, this process can be explored within the DoD.

Theoretical Framework

Total Institution

The risk of sexual assault risk increases once a person enters the military, especially for women (Schmid 2010; Brenner, Darcy, & Kubiak 2016). Previous scholarship has theorized that the closed nature of the military as a total institution alongside military group culture contributes to high rates of MST. Total institutions socialize groups of people into a similar mindset by combining their public and private spheres for a specific purpose related to the institution's objectives. This form of socialization most often occurs after an individual's initial socialization and is done by a powerful authority figure within the organization (Goffman 1961).

This socialization requires separation from the outside world to break down the individual's pre-existing socialization patterns to introduce a secondary set of social norms (Goffman 1961). According to Brenner, Darcy, & Kubiak (2016) it is this separation from mainstream society that contributes to increased rates of sexual assault in the military as well as prisons.

"The closed nature of these systems creates an environment where sexual victimization occurs in isolation, often without knowledge of or intervention by those on the outside, and the internal processes for addressing this victimization allow for sweeping discretion on the part of system actors" (Brenner, Darcy, & Kubiak 2016: 881).

Gender Socialization and Group Culture

Group culture and social norms within the military have also been linked to increased rates of sexual assault. There is a culture of "domination and denigration" in the United States military which is linked to misogyny and hypermasculinity (Schmid 2010).

"Masculinity is traditionally defined around the idea of power. Therefore, the military–serving as both the symbolic and actual source of the nation's power–is the ideal forming ground for a culture of masculinity" (Schmid 2010: 491).

When an individual's power, and by extension their perceived masculinity, is questioned, military men attempt to regain their power through group rituals that force other members into a state of submission (Schmid 2010). Easy targets for this ritual are members of groups that are perceived as weak or opposing to the military's definition of power and masculinity. One example of this ritual is *insult talk*. Military members will degrade each other by calling them "sissies," "girls," and "pussies" (Schmid 2010: 475). Based upon the military's use of insult talk, previous scholars have theorized that women are perceived as the "other" within the military. Any association with femininity is degrading within this culture. This could be why women are frequent victims of MST at the hands of male perpetrators.

The DoD has attempted to address rising rates of MST (Schmid 2010; Acosta, Chinman, & Shear 2021). The *Workplace and Gender Relations Survey of Active Duty Members* is one example of these attempts. However, pre-existing literature states that, unless the DoD addresses toxic military culture and the military as a total institution, they will not effectively address MST, which continues to rise (Schmid 2010; Acosta, Chinman, & Shear 2021). The current policy is not effective and may just be an act of impression management by the DoD.

Impression Management

Impression management is the individual process of creating and maintaining a desirable social identity, mostly through "intentional verbal statements and non-verbal acts" (Goffman 1959: 209). The extent to which an individual engages in impression management is based upon "their dependence on others for valued outcomes" (Drory and Zaidman 2006: 293). An individual is more likely to engage in impression management if they are reporting to a superior with a desired outcome in mind. Individuals are motivated to construct a desirable social identity based upon the social norms and values of the other individuals who are present for the interaction (Drory and Zaidman 2006). The theory of impression management has since been expanded to include organizations. Just like individuals, organizations use tactics of impression management within their social setting to maintain a desired impression. Mohamed, Gardner, and Paolillo (1999) created a 2x2 taxonomy to classify organizational impression management techniques. This taxonomy categorizes organizational impression management as direct versus indirect, and assertive versus defensive.

Direct and Assertive Tactics

Organizations employ direct and assertive impression management tactics when the impression is directly related to the organization and has been created for a specific audience. *Ingratiation, intimidation, organizational promotion, exemplification*, and *supplication* are the direct, assertive impression management tactics within the Mohamed, Gardner, and Paolillo (1999) taxonomy. *Ingratiation* is the set of behaviors organizations use to appear desirable to an audience, also known as constituencies, that has authority over the organization and controls access to desired outcomes. The purpose of *ingratiation* is to increase its attractiveness to its key constituents with the intention for the constituents to look favorably upon the organization and decrease their demands upon the organization. Corporate advertising and conformity are two common methods of ingratiation—corporate advertising is designed to positively influence the perception of the organization based upon the values of the targeted audience, whereas conformity is the adoption of a particular practice or position with the intent of impressing the organization's constituents through mimicry (Mohamed, Gardner, and Paolillo 1999).

Intimidation is the organizational impression management technique used when the organization wishes to appear powerful, intimidating, and capable of inflicting harm. This technique can be used by organizations with less power who wish to influence the outcomes of a situation based upon their impression given to their targeted audience (Mohamed, Gardner, and Paolillo 1999). Organizations use *organizational promotion* when they desire to appear competent due to their successes in particular tasks usually related to the desires of the constituents. An organization attributing the phenomenal sales of a new product to its savvy marketing campaign is an example of organizational promotion (Mohamed, Gardner, and Paolillo 1999).

Closely related to *organizational promotion,* organizations employ *exemplification* tactics "to project images of integrity, social responsibility, and moral worthiness" (Mohamed, Gardner, and Paolillo 1999: 118). An organization will engage in *exemplification* to gain the trust and support of their constituents, thereby increasing the organization's power within the impression. *Supplication* is used when the organization seeks to create an image of dependency accompanied by a lack of resources. Organizations will use these tactics when they wish to receive aid from their targeted audience.

Direct and Defensive Tactics

Organizations use direct, defensive tactics when they wish to protect the impression that has been created using direct, assertive tactics to their desired audience. *Accounts*, *disclaimer*, *organizational handicapping*, *apologies*, *restitution*, and *prosocial behavior* are the direct, defensive tactics described by Mohammed, Gardner, and Paolillo (1999).

Accounts are given when an organization wishes to explain negative disruption to their impression and restore their positive image. *Denials or defense of innocence, excuses, justifications, and apologies* are the methods of *accounts*. *Excuses* are an account that admits the harm caused by the disruption but distances the organization from any responsibility related to the disruption. Organizations use *justifications* when they accept some responsibility for the disruption but attempt to deny or minimize the severity of the disruption. *Disclaimers* are an account given before any negative disruption. "Disclaimers are routinely used in corporate advertisements to spell out the limitations of a firm's products or services and mitigate its

responsibility for those that fail to meet customer expectations" (Mohamed, Gardner, and Paolillo 1999: 121)

Organizational handicapping is an expansion upon self-handicapping, which occurs at the individual level (Goffman 1959). Organizations will describe the intended outcome in a way that makes success appear unlikely to minimize disappointment in the event of a negative disruption (Mohamed, Gardner, and Paolillo 1999). *Apologies* are made by organizations with a desire to receive a pardon, oftentimes when an apology is unavoidable. The organization will accept responsibility while asking for forgiveness from their constituents. *Restitution* is the expansion of an apology and offers compensation to those harmed by the organization. *Prosocial behavior* is when an organization engages in positive social action to atone for the negative disruption to their behavior.

Indirect Tactics

Organizations use *indirect* impression management tactics when creating and protecting their image that is associated with other people, things, and organizations. "The extent to which actors attempt to associate themselves with particular individuals, groups, organizations, and/or entities, is directly related to the extent to which they view them as possessing a desirable image" (Mohamed, Gardner, and Paolilli 1999: 123). Burying, an indirect tactic, is used to "obscure a positive link to an unfavorable other" by not addressing that such a relationship exists (Mohammed, Gardner, and Paolillo 1999: 124).

Linguistic avoidance, or "the strategies of text construction that obscure the…perpetrators' responsibility" (Bohner 2001: 518), is a grammatical form of burying. Linguistic avoidance applies *distancing formulations* that downplay or bury the responsibility of

the aggressor in relation to the harm done to the victim, thus removing agency or attributing it to the object rather than the subject. In distancing themselves from their own agency, they instead attribute that agency to the recipient of the action, in this case the target of the assault. Linguistic distancing is about removing one's accountability or agency from an action.

The writing style of *passive voice* reverses the order of the subject and object in relation to the verb, placing the responsibility of the verb upon the object versus the subject (Bettinsolli, Maas, Kashima, and Suitner 2015; Bohner 2001). It is a grammatical construction where the object of the action becomes the subject of the sentence. Common examples of passive voice include the "get"-passive, such as "the woman was raped." This use of passive voice places the responsibility of the action upon the victim and erases the presence of a perpetrator (Bohner 2001).

Topic and focus are additional grammatical constructions that, while written in an active voice, can obscure agentic roles within a sentence through manipulation of the thematic roles within a sentence. The topic of a sentence, also referred to as theme, is linguistically defined as what is being talked about (Gundel and Fretheim 2004). Focus is what is being said about the topic (Matíc 2015). Linguistic avoidance occurs when the focus is shifted away from the topic or omits the topic entirely.

Military members are socialized into a similar mindset through the process of a total institution by a higher-ranking authority (Barnao 2019). This mindset includes hypermasculine and misogynistic and informs this military culture which is a contributor to MST (Schmid 2010). Despite recent policies and programs, rates of MST remain high and continue to increase because they do not address military culture, the root cause of MST (Schmid 2010; Acosta,

Chinman, & Shear 2021). How the DoD presents sexual assault in the military could provide insight on why programs and policies that address military culture have not been made. How much of this presentation consists of organizational impression management?

Methods

The *Workplace and Gender Relations Survey of Active Duty Members* has been conducted bi-annually since 1988 at the request of the United States Congress through the National Defense Authorization Act of 1988. As the sole data source for the prevalence and severity of sexual assaults committed against active military members, analysis of this report can reveal prevalent military attitudes toward sexual assault (Department of Defense 2018).

When the survey is complete and the data has been interpreted, the report is first presented to Congress. Then it is published for public access several months later on the Department of Defense Sexual Assault and Prevention Response Office website. While this report is typically published biannually, some years, such as 2014, are not included on the website with no explanation for the omission. The earliest Workplace and Gender Relations Surveys of Active Duty Members are unavailable. Of the available reports, the 2006, 2012, and 2018 reports provide data covering a six-year span, enabling analysis of potential change in cultural norms and attitudes toward sexual assault in the recent decades. The years indicate when the survey was conducted, not the year of publication. Most reports were released to the public the year following the survey aside from the 2006 report which was released in March of 2008.

Content analysis of three *Workplace and Gender Relations Survey of Active Duty Members* explored the ideas presented and language used to determine cultural norms and attitudes toward sexual assault within the U.S. military. Qualitative and quantitative methods of content analysis were used to analyze the narrative presented by the DoD in the reports regarding

military sexual trauma–specifically, sexual assault. As such, the portions of the report that focused on sexual assault were analyzed–the executive summary, the introduction, and chapter 2 which focused on sexual assault in all three reports. The quantitative data was informed by a priori codes which were derived from the organizational impression management taxonomy. This taxonomy was created to examine the actions and behaviors of organizations (Mohamed, Gardner, and Paolillo 1999). They provided insights on the type of impression the DoD is creating and how they responded to outside influences. Until now, these codes have not been used to examine government reports.

After conducting a preliminary analysis, I narrowed down the categories of the impression management taxonomy. I only used the following categories for a priori coding: exemplification and organizational promotion as direct assertive tactics, disclaimers, and accounts in the direct and defensive tactics, and burying as an indirect tactic. As the organizational impression management taxonomy was designed to measure actions and behaviors, some of the codes were irrelevant to the examination of a written report.

The qualitative data was collected using thematic narrative analysis. Narratives are stories that have been organized in a specific order of events that convey meaning to an intended audience (Esin 2011). Thematic narrative analysis focuses on the content within the narrative, or what is being said about the events (Riessman 2005). This form of analysis is useful when establishing themes throughout several data sets and theorizing about the meaning behind the narrative (Esin 2011). Per the steps of thematic narrative analysis (Esin 2011) I used open coding to establish patterns in the reports. Next, I categorized patterns into themes. Using the theoretical framework of this study, I hypothesized about the meanings of these themes.

Finally, I created a timeline of publicized events of MST, victim's rights movements, and newly introduced or ratified legislation. This was done by searching the internet using various combinations of the terms "sexual assault," "military," "military sexual trauma," "news," and "cases." The threshold of three news articles per case was used to define a publicized case of MST. I also looked for changes in legislation on MST around the time of the analyzed reports and included those in the timeline.

Results

For this research I examined portions of the *Workplace and Gender Relations Survey Report of Active Duty Members* that were published for 2006, 2012, and 2018. I analyzed the parts of the reports that discussed sexual assault–the executive summary, portions of the introduction that discussed sexual assault, and chapter 2, as this chapter was dedicated to sexual assault in all three reports. For the analysis, I used a priori codes related to the organizational impression management taxonomy created by Mohamed, Gardner, and Paolillo (1999). Open coding was also used to look for themes within these reports and to detect any changes in themes between the reports. The results from the a priori and open coding were then compared against a timeline of heavily publicized cases of MST (Figure 1). Cases that were covered by three separate news outlets were considered heavily publicized. This timeline also includes major developments regarding sexual assault awareness and victim rights movements that influenced public discussion and policy changes.

I will first report the results from the a priori codes based on the organizational impression management taxonomy (Mohammed, Gardner, and Paolillo 1999). I will then describe the patterns that emerged through open coding. I will identify trends within both forms

of coding in relation to the timeline of events within the sexual assault awareness movement, publicized cases of military sexual trauma, and changes in legislation. The interpretations and implications of the findings will be included in the discussion portion of this paper.

Direct Assertive Tactics

Exemplification

Exemplification tactics were the most common direct and assertive tactic used throughout these reports. These tactics are used to create an image of moral worthiness, integrity, and social responsibility. "Fund-raising campaigns by the United Way which highlight the moral worthiness and social benefits that accrue from the charitable causes the organization supports" (Mohamed et al. 1999: 118) is an example of exemplification. The 2018 report made frequent impassioned statements emphasizing the Department of Defense's commitment to eradicating MST. Exemplification was often used prior to presenting statistical data. Exemplification was used 7 times in the 2018 report and 3 times within the 2006 report. The 2012 report did not use any exemplification tactics. The following statements are examples of exemplification from the 2006 and 2018 reports, emphasizing the DoD's moral commitment to addressing MST while creating an impression of social responsibility.

"The Department of Defense (DoD) is committed to providing a safe workplace environment for all its members" (Department of Defense 2006: 1).

"Professional and social retaliation for reporting unwanted sexual contact can negatively affect career and morale" (Department of Defense 2006: 57).

"Trust in the military system is paramount to encouraging survivors of sexual assault or sexual harassment to come forward and to maintain good order and discipline" (Department of Defense 2018: xii).

"The DoD strives to create an environment where military members feel comfortable and safe reporting asexual assault or attempts to a military authority. The Department recognizes that Service members are most likely to report unwanted behaviors when they have trust in the military system and are confident that they will not face retaliation, from peers or supervisors, for doing so" (Department of Defense 2018: 10).

"To continue to improve upon efforts to prevent and respond to sexual assault in the military, it is necessary to understand the factors that contribute to sexual assault" (Department of Defense 2018: 25).

Organizational Promotion

Institutions use organizational promotion to project an image of competency, effectiveness, and skill. This was the second most used direct and assertive tactic throughout all three reports. Organizational promotion increased over the years with a strong increase of organizational promotion in the 2018 report. Organizational promotion was used twice within the 2006 report, twice within the 2012 report, and twenty-one times in the 2018 report. Some statements of organizational promotion were directly related to the Department of Defense and their effectiveness. The following quotes are examples of organizational promotion from all three reports. The DoD used these statements to create an impression of dedication and effectiveness by their organization in eradicating MST.

"DoD has worked hard to reduce sex discrimination, sexual harassment, and sexual assault in the military by developing policies and programs to eliminate these unlawful, gender-related behaviors" (Department of Defense 2006: 39).

"The Department of Defense (DoD) continues to emphasize sexual assault and sexual harassment response and prevention in the military" (SAPRO 2012: 1).

"The Department of Defense has invested substantial effort into encouraging victims of sexual assault to report their experiences; for example…" (Department of Defense 2018: 93).

"The DoD continues to diligently pursue policies and programs that support its goal of eliminating sexual assault from its ranks…" (Department of Defense 2018: 16).

Other statements of organizational promotion were indirectly related to the Department of Defense. They either promoted the effectiveness of the Workplace and Gender Relations Survey, a tool created by the Department of Defense, or the use of restricted reporting. Restricted reporting was codified by the Department of Defense in the 2016 Annual Code of Regulations regarding national defense. Restricted reporting allows military members to submit a confidential report detailing their sexual assault that will not trigger an investigation. Instead, military members receive healthcare treatment and access to victim services (Department of Defense 2021). This form of organizational promotion only appeared in the 2018 report.

"The 2018 WGRA offers critical insights regarding the estimated prevalence and characteristics of sexual assault, sexual harassment, and gender discrimination…" (Department of Defense 2018: 6).

"The ability to estimate annual prevalence rates is a distinguishing feature of this survey" (Department of Defense 2018: 6).

"The Department has invested substantial effort into encouraging victims of sexual assault to report their experienced; for example, the DoD has established a restricted reporting process that allows Service members to receive support and treatment following an assault without disclosing the details of the event of the identity of the alleged offender" (Department of Defense 2018: 93).

"Restricted reporting was an extremely valuable option to Service members" (Department of Defense 2018: 93).

"...the results also suggest that gains made to encourage reporting have been sustained and that the option to file a restricted report–a promising practice for its likely contribution to more Service members gaining access to the resources and support they need to recover–is highly valuable to victims of sexual assault" (Department of Defense 2018: 16).

Indirect Defensive Tactics

Burying: Topic/Focus Shift

Burying is an indirect defensive tactic. Organizations use this tactic when they wish to "obscure a positive link to an unfavorable other" by not addressing that such a relationship exists (Mohammed, Gardner, and Paolillo 1999: 124). Burying in the form of shifting focus to the victim rather than the perpetrator is present throughout all three reports. Statistical data reporting on the prevalence of sexual assault was presented from the perspective of the victim throughout all three reports.

Whenever sexual assault was the topic of the sentence, the victim was the focus, either minimizing the presence of a perpetrator or erasing their presence entirely. In addition to this topic/focus shift, further burying was used through the phrase "...indicate they experienced…" shifting the focus further onto the respondent's answer regarding their experience rather than the experience itself. This formula was used regardless of the gender of the victim.

"Service members were asked…whether they had experienced unwanted sexual contact ...)
without their consent or against their will" (Department of Defense 2006: 16)

"Of the 6.1% of women who experienced USC:

– 32% indicated experiencing unwanted sexual touching, – 26% indicated experiencing
attempted sexual intercourse, anal or oral sex...." (Department of Defense 2012: 14)

"In 2018, 6.2% of DoD women (an estimated 12,927 survivors) and 0.7% of DoD men
(an estimated 7,546 survivors) experienced a sexual assault in the past 12 months" (Department
of Defense 2018: 26)

The use of topic/focus shift did decrease between the three reports examined. Each complete sentence with topic/focus shift counted as one code. In 2006, topic/focus shift was used 178 times. In 2012, it was used 126 times. In the 2018 report, topic/focus shift was used 55 times.

Burying: Passive Voice

Passive voice is a grammatical construction that places the action of a sentence onto the object rather than the subject. In the sentence, "the car hit the dog," the action of the sentence has

been placed on the driver of the car as they are responsible for the action. When stating "the dog was hit," the role of the true actor, the driver of the car, has been erased by placing the responsibility for the action upon the dog. In comparison to topic/focus shift, passive voice was used far less. Of the sections examined, passive voice was only present in the definition of unwanted sexual contact in the introduction of the 2012 report. "...the term 'unwanted sexual contact' means intentional sexual contact that was against a person's will or which occurred when the person did not or could not consent…" (Department of Defense 2012: 1). Passive voice was used within a measure of construct for the 2012 report. Otherwise, passive voice was not used in the portions of the reports examined. The DoD preferred to present the data using active voice while still burying the role of the perpetrator through topic/focus shift.

Direct Defensive Tactics

Organizations use direct defensive tactics when they wish to protect their impression from negative influences that would disrupt or damage the image they have created. They can do this by accepting varying levels of responsibility or by reasoning with negative disruptions. To protect their impression, the Department of Defense used disclaimers within the 2006 and 2018 report.

Disclaimers

Organizations will give a disclaimer before a potentially damaging action or statement to minimize or avoid any damage to their positive impression. This direct and defensive tactic was used three times in the three reports examined, once within the 2018 report and twice within the 2006 report.

In the 2006 report, the Department of Defense used disclaimers while discussing military member's experiences with reporting their sexual assault. The first disclaimer was given shortly after the report summarized how many military members had reported their sexual assault to an organization or authority. This summary was broken down by gender, pay grade, and branch of military service.

While this disclaimer came after the summarization of the 2006 survey results detailing how often reports were made, it came prior to summarizing the specifics of which authority or organization the report was made to, and whether military members experienced positive or negative outcomes after reporting their sexual assault.

> *"Unwanted sexual contact encompasses a range of behaviors that vary in severity, which may factor into the decision to report such experiences. However, research on civilians indicates that even the most egregious of these behaviors, completed sexual assault (e.g., rape), is often unreported"* (Department of Defense 2006: 90).

The second use of disclaimers by the Department of Defense occurred prior to the discussion of negative outcomes experienced by military members after reporting their sexual assault. The 2007 report first presented the positive outcomes.

> *"Among women who experienced unwanted sexual contact and reported it (restricted, unrestricted, or not sure of report type), about half (41-58%) indicated they were offered some form of services, such as sexual assault advocacy, counseling, medical/forensic services, or legal services"* (Department of Defense 2006: 54).

This data was further broken down for women by branch of service and pay grade. According to the survey, results for men were not reportable.

When reporting on the negative outcomes for military members who reported their sexual assault, the Department of Defense offered the following disclaimer prior to the discussion of statistics.

"Just as Service members who report their experiences of unwanted sexual contact might experience positive outcomes, they might also experience one or more types of negative outcomes, such as ostracism, adverse gossip, or attempts to punish the reporting member instead of the offender…. Among women who experienced unwanted sexual contact and reported it, 30% indicated they were encouraged to drop the complaint/withdraw the report…. Seventeen percent indicated that action was taken against them because they made a report (Department of Defense 2007: 55).

This statement was given immediately before the Department of Defense reported on the negative outcomes of reporting sexual assault based upon the survey. As a disclaimer, this statement minimized any potential damage to their impression. The purpose of this disclaimer was to remind the reader of the positive outcomes before reporting on the negative ones.

In comparison, the 2006 report did not spend as much time reviewing the negative outcomes of reporting sexual assault. Additionally, they did not provide an overall statistic for military members who had experienced negative outcomes as they had with members who had experienced positive outcomes. Overall, 47% of military members experienced a negative outcome(s) after reporting their sexual assault.

In the 2018 *Workplace and Gender Relations Survey Report of Active Duty Members*, the

Department of Defense used a disclaimer in the introduction regarding their phraseology when

reporting on statistics of military sexual trauma. The Department of Defense explained the use of

the term "alleged" when presenting the findings within the Workplace and Gender Relations

survey. They state that this language is used because "the presumption of innocence applies

unless there is an investigation that substantiates the allegations and there is an adjudication of

guilt" (SAPRO 2018: 5). They also state that what is being presented within the report is "based

on behaviors endorsed by respondents' self-reports; therefore, conclusions on whether the events

reported occurred are beyond the purview of this survey" (SAPRO 2018: 5).

Table of A priori Codes

	2006 Report	2012 Report	2018 Report	
Exemplification	3		7	10
Organizational Promotion	2	2	21	25
Burying	178	127	55	360
Disclaimers	22		1	23
	205	129	84	

Open-Coding Themes

I identified two major patterns within the portions of the three reports examined

through open coding. These patterns existed within each report and throughout the three reports.

First, the Department of Defense changed definitions and terminology relating to MST. It was

not until 2018 that the definitions of sexual assault and consent within the reports reflected the

definitions established by Congress in the Uniform Code of Military Justice. Second, the Department of Defense's examination of sexual assault focused on individual experiences and risk-factors and rather than examining group culture.

Changing Definitions and Terminology

To effectively collect data, clear definitions of terms must first be established prior to data collection. These definitions are also important for the interpretation of the data. The DoD defined consent and sexual assault based upon the Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ) in the introduction of each survey. Also in the introduction, the DoD provided their own definitions of sexual assault and consent that were used for the purpose of the Workplace and Gender Relations Surveys. In the 2006 and 2012 survey, these definitions differed from the UCMJ.

In 2006, Congress amended Article 120 of the Uniform Code of Military Justice to reorganize and consolidate military sexual offenses (Department of Defense 2006: 3). Once revised, article 120 was known as *Rape, Sexual Assault, and Sexual Misconduct*. In this article, rape is defined as "a situation where any person causes another person of any age to engage in a sexual act by: (1) using force; (2) causing grievous bodily harm; (3) threatening or placing that other person in fear that any person will be subjected to death, grievous bodily harm, or kidnapping; (4) rendering the person unconscious; or (5) administering a substance, drug, intoxicant or similar substance that substantially impairs the ability of that person to appraise or control conduct" (Title 10 U. S. Code Section 920, Article 120). This definition is given in the introduction of the 2006 and 2018 report.

Since 2006, Article 120 of the Uniform Code of Military Justice has made a distinction between rape and sexual assault. In addition to defining rape, Article 120 in the UCMJ defined aggravated sexual assault as "causes another person of any age to engage in a sexual act by—

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threatening or placing that other person in fear (other than by threatening or placing that other person in fear that any person will be subjected to death, grievous bodily harm, or kidnapping); or causing bodily harm" (Title 10 U. S. Code Section 920, Article 120).

Instead of using either of these new terms, however, the 2006 report instituted a new construct measure for examining sexual assault–unwanted sexual contact. Unwanted sexual contact was measured by a single question asking military members if someone had "sexually touched them, attempted to make them have sexual intercourse but was not successful, made them have sexual intercourse; attempted to make them perform or receive oral sex, anal sex, or penetration by a finger or object, but was not successful; or made them perform or receive oral sex, anal sex, or penetration by a finger or object" (Department of Defense 2006: 5). Rape was not mentioned in the report. Instead, the term rape was replaced with "completed or attempted sexual intercourse".

This term was used again in 2012.

> *"Although this term does not appear in the Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ), it is used as an umbrella term intended to include certain acts prohibited by the UCMJ. For the purposes of the 2012 WGRA survey, the term "unwanted sexual contact" means intentional sexual contact that was against a person's will or which occurred when the person did not or could not consent, and includes completed or attempted sexual intercourse, sodomy (oral or anal sex), penetration by an object, and the unwanted touching of genitalia and other sexually-related areas of the body"* (SAPRO 2012: 1).

In the 2018 report, The Department of Defense discontinued the use of the term "unwanted sexual contact" to measure instances of sexual assault. This term was replaced with

"sexual assault offenses." Sexual assault offenses were defined as "a range of behaviors prohibited by the UCMJ and include penetrative sexual assault (completed intercourse, sodomy [oral or anal sex], and penetration by an object), non-penetrative sexual assault (unwanted touching of genitalia), and attempted penetrative sexual assault (attempted sexual intercourse, sodomy [oral or anal sex], and penetration by an object)" (Department of Defense 2018: v.).

In addition to revisions to the definition of sexual assault, the 2006 National Defense Authorization Act also clarified the Uniform Code of Military Justice's definition of consent. Per Article 120 of the UCMJ, consent is defined as

"words or overt acts indicating a freely given agreement to the sexual act at issue by a competent person. An expression of lack of consent through words or conduct means there is no consent. Lack of verbal or physical resistance or submission resulting from the accused's use of force, threat of force, or placing another person in fear does not constitute consent. A current or previous dating relationship by itself or the manner of dress of the person involved with the accused in the sexual conduct at issue shall not constitute consent. A person cannot consent to sexual activity if—under 16 years of age; or substantially incapable of appraising the nature of the sexual conduct at issue due to mental impairment or unconsciousness resulting from consumption of alcohol, drugs, a similar substance, or otherwise; or mental disease or defect which renders the person unable to understand the nature of the sexual conduct at issue; physically declining participation in the sexual conduct at issue; or physically communicating unwillingness to engage in the sexual conduct at issue"

(Department of Defense 2006: 3).

Like the term sexual assault, this definition is also provided in the introduction of the

2006 and the 2018 report. Consent is not a measure of construct within the 2006, 2012, and 2018

Workplace and Gender Relations Survey; the survey does not measure whether a victim

consented through survey questions. Thus, it is not explicitly defined by the Department of

Defense in relation to the survey itself. Implicitly, consent is referenced throughout the three

reports through survey questions which are referenced within the reports. The results of these

specific questions are then interpreted within the report.

To measure unwanted sexual contact, survey respondents were asked if "someone had

attempted to have sex with them without their consent…" or if "someone had sex with them

without their consent…" (Department of Defense 2006:15). It was also measured by asking if

victims experienced "attempted or completed sexual intercourse" (Department of Defense 2006:

16; SAPRO 2012: 14). This inconsistent interpretation of consent based upon pre-established

definitions by the UCMJ occurred in the 2006 and 2012 reports. When surveying for "coercive

behaviors," the Department of Defense asked victims "if the offender used some form of

coercive behavior to acquire their consent" (Department of Defense 2006: 37). This is in direct

contradiction to the definition of consent set forth by Congress in the Uniform Code of Military

Justice; according to this definition, consent cannot be "acquired" under clearly defined

circumstances.

Victim-Centered Risk Factors

In addition to rates of sexual assault, the *Workplace and Gender Relations Survey Report*

of Active Duty Members measures other factors related to the sexual assault or rape of military

members. Per the Department of Defense, this is done to estimate rates of sexual assault, assess

military climate, and track any potential progress in decreasing rates of sexual assault. Within the

reports themselves, however, many of these factors focus solely on the victim and their experiences leading up to or following their sexual assault or rape. The questions themselves are often framed from the perspective of the victim.

The victim's use of drugs and alcohol was consistently measured throughout all three reports. Like previous questions, the survey question is included within the text of the report. The results of the question are then presented and discussed by the DoD using textual analysis. In the 2006 report, military members were asked "did the incident occur when your judgment was impaired by alcohol, when you were so intoxicated you were unable to consent, when the offender was intoxicated, or after the offender used drugs to knock you out?" (SAPRO 2006: 36). The possible impairment and lack of ability to consent of the victim is the primary focus of this question; any lack of judgment on the part of the perpetrator was not discussed. Instead, the survey merely asks if the perpetrator was intoxicated.

A focus on the victim's use of drugs and alcohol remained within the 2012 and 2018 report, though the questions were phrased with less emphasis on the impairment of the victim. Military members were asked "to identify whether they or the alleged offender were drinking alcohol at the time of the event" (Department of Defense 2018: 33).

In 2018, the Department of Defense began tracking any sexual assaults of military members prior to entering the military. Per the Department of Defense, this was done "to provide adequate resources to support survivors of sexual assault, it is also necessary to monitor prevalence rates of sexual assault prior to and after joining the military" (Department of Defense 2018: 38). Any explanation regarding why this is a necessity was not given.

Also new to the 2018 report was a series of questions monitoring the experiences of lesbian, gay, and bisexual service members. The stratification of sexual orientations of service members is summarized in the report. However, the responses of these service members in relation to their sexual assault and/or rape were not included. A simple, non-explanatory excuse for this omission was given. "A full discussion of the unique experiences of LGB Service members with unwanted gender- related behaviors is not included in this overview report. However, the results clearly suggest that consistent with the findings of the 2016 WGRA, LGB Service members remain a vulnerable population" (SAPRO 2018: 40).

Two trends were identified in the 2006, 2012, and 2018 *Workplace and Gender Relations Survey of Active Duty Members* through open-coding. The DoD had an inconsistent use of the sexual assault and consent. This was explicitly done by changing the terms used within the surveys when examining sexual assault. Implicitly, the DoD exhibited an interpretation of consent that differed from their established definition of consent. When measuring aspects relating to respondent's MST, the DoD focused on victim-centered measures such as drug and alcohol use and prior sexual assaults.

Timeline of Changes

The following timeline of sexual assault movements within mainstream society as well as sensationalized cases of MST has been created for the purpose of my research.
This timeline focuses on 2000-2018, or the scope of the reports being analyzed by my research.

- **2001: National Sexual Violence Resource Center announces First National Sexual Assault Awareness Month Campaign.** In addition to highlighting previous work done by the NSVRC, the first Sexual Assault Awareness Month established teal as the official color of sexual assault victims (Sullivan & Thomas 2020)

- **2002: Center of Disease Control and the World Health Organization releases The World Report on Violence and Health.** This report was the first to approach violence as a global health issue. In addition to other forms of violence, this report provided an overview of sexual violence, analyzed risk factors of sexual violence, and discussed the impact of sexual violence on victims. (World Health Organization 2002; Sullivan & Thomas 2020)

- **2003: Sexual Assault at United States Airforce Academy.** An anonymous email reporting sexual assault at the United States Airforce Academy in Colorado Springs was sent to the secretary of the Air Force, the Air Force chief of staff, several congressmen, senators, and various news outlets. A work force was established to assess recent reports of sexual alongside. Previous reports of sexual assault were also reviewed. It was found that in 2003, 12% of women working at the United States Airforce Academy were victims of rape or attempted rape. 70% were victims of sexual harassment. 22% experienced pressure for sexual favors (Schemo 2003)

- **2004: Department of Defense (DoD) creates the Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Office**. The Department of Defense created the Joint Task Force For Sexual Assault and Prevention to assess the pervasiveness of sexual assault in the military and implement programs and policies to serve its victims. It became clear that a stronger and more authoritative entity was needed, resulting in the creation of the Sexual Assault Prevent and Response Office. "The Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Office (SAPRO) now serves as the Department's single point of authority for sexual assault policy and provides oversight to ensure that each of the Service's programs complies with DoD policy (Department of Defense, n.d.)

- **2005: Congress expands the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA).** VAWA is considered the first federal law created to end the violence against women. This law has been reformed several times since its creation. As it stands, VAWA is the primary protection against crimes such as stalking, sexual violence, and sexual assault. This law also provides women with access to services. (Sullivan & Thomas 2020.)

- **2009: President Obama declares April as Sexual Assault Awareness Month.** In addition to declaring an official Sexual Awareness Month, President Obama requested that citizens begin creating policies that address sexual assault in their workplace and schools (Office of the Press Secretary 2009).

- **2009: Department of Defense releases a report analyzing how military sexual trauma has been addressed since the creation of the SAPRO Office.** This report analyzed the effectiveness of current programs and policies serving the victims of sexual assault. It also made suggestions on how to increase accountability, better serve victims, and increase prevention (Sullivan and Thomas 2020)

- **2012: Rape and Sexual Assault is reported at Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio, Texas.** Reports of sexual assault at the Lackland Air Force Base were made in 2011. Forty-three women attending basic training stated that they had been sexually assaulted by their instructors. In total, 17 male instructors were accused of rape, sexual assault, and sexual harassment. Seven men were referred to the court-martial, including Staff Sergeant Louis Walker who was eventually sentenced to 20 years in jail for rape, aggravated sexual assault, and aggravated sexual contact. This sentence was considered the strongest sentence that had been given in response to sexual assault in the miliary (Forsyth 2012).

- **2017: Grassroots Me Too goes viral as #metoo.** The Me Too movement was founded in 2006 by Tarana Burke. The movement was created to provide resources and support to sexual assault victims. In 2017, the Me Too movement went viral as #metoo and became a global phenomenon that raised awareness of the prevalence of sexual assault (Me Too 2022).

- **2018: #TIMES UP Movement was founded by 300 women in entertainment.** The TIMES UP movement was created to address sexual violence in the workplace. A legal fund was created to support the legal prosecution of sexual violence. Sexual assault and harassment in the military is included in the scope of the TIMES UP movement (TIME'S UP 2020)

The narrative on MST presented by the Department of Defense changed in two ways. I analyzed these changes by interpreting the results of both forms of coding in relation to the timeline monitoring increased awareness of sexual assault through publicized cases of military sexual trauma or victims' rights movements. Certain narratives slowly changed throughout the reports. Other narratives within these reports changed based on if the report was released shortly after a case of publicized MST or if the report was released after progress had been made in by a victim's rights movement.

Direct assertive tactics–tactics that focus on creating an impression for an intended audience–were used more often in reports that coincided with increased awareness of sexual assault either through victims' rights movements or the implementation of new policy designed to decrease sexual assault. Data collection for the 2006 survey occurred one years after the Violence against Women Act was expanded and two years after the Sexual Assault Response and Prevention Office was created. Data collection for the 2018 report occurred one year after the #metoo movement reentered public discourse and eight months after the creation of #timesup.

Direct defensive tactics–those that protect an organization's impression after it has been created–were also used more often in reports that coincided with increased awareness of sexual assault either through victims' rights movements or the implementation of new policy designed to decrease sexual assault. Similarly, no attempts at disclaimers were made within the report that coincided with a publicized case of MST.

Direct assertive tactics decreased in the reports that coincided with publicized cases of MST. Reports of sexual assault and rape at the Lackland Air Force Base were made one year before the data collection started for the 2012 Workplace and Gender Relations Survey of Active Duty Members. The Air Force began investigating these allegations five months before the Department of Defense began data collection for the 2012 survey.

The presentation of the survey data also changed after a publicized case of military sexual trauma. The 2006 and 2012 reports presented the data similarly; these reports provided a written analysis of the survey results which was supported by a bar graph or pie chart. However, the 2012 report presented the survey results relying heavily on bar graphs and pie charts while using abbreviated bullet points. All three reports were accessed from the same data source, the Sexual

Assault Response and Prevention website. No explanation is given within the 2012 report for this change in data presentation.

Indirect defensive tactics were the most used organizational impression management tactics in all three reports. The usage of this tactic decreased over time with a significant decline in the 2018 report. This strong decline occurred after increased awareness of sexual awareness through the #metoo movement, although several events resulting in increased awareness occurred during this time.

The Department of Defense also integrated definitions of sexual assault and consent that are more consistent with the definitions in the Uniform Code of Military Justice after the #metoo movement. While the 2006 and 2012 report used the term "unwanted sexual assault," the 2018 report adopted the term sexual assault offenses. The Department of Defense also removed any phrases that contradict the UCMJ's definition of consent, such as "acquire consent."

The Department of Defense maintained a focus on victim-centered risk factors throughout all three reports examined; however, additional measures were introduced in the 2018 report. The Department of Defense began surveying lesbian, gay, and bisexual members on their experience with MST. They also started measuring any sexual assaults that occurred prior to a military member's service.

The Department of Defense did change their narrative on sexual assault throughout the 2006, 2012, and 2018 Workplace and Gender Relations Survey Reports of Active Duty Members. Interpretations can be made on when these changes occur when compared to the timeline of increased public awareness of sexual assault through publicized cases of MST and progress in victims' rights movements. The Department of Defense focused on creating a positive impression of their organization in reports that followed an increase in the public's

awareness of sexual assault through victims' rights movements. By using organizational promotion and exemplification, the Department of Defense projected an image of competency and morality. Though they actively defended their impression throughout all three reports, this was their sole focus in the report that followed a publicized case of MST

Discussion

This study used content analysis through qualitative and quantitative data to examine the DoD's narrative of MST in the 2006, 2012, and 2018 *Workplace and Gender Relations Survey Reports of Active Duty Members*. A narrative of projected morality, competency, and effectiveness was established using a priori coding examining the DoD's use of organizational impression management tactics while discussing MST. The use of certain impression management tactics could indicate an acceptance of rape myths and victim-blaming by the DoD which could deter the creation of effective policies that address MST. Open coding was also used to analyze patterns within these reports. These results of the a priori and open coding were then measured against a timeline tracking an increase in public awareness of sexual assault through publicized cases of MST and victims' rights movements.

The explicitly stated purpose of the *Workplace and Gender Relations Survey of Active Duty Members* is to estimate rates of sexual assault in the military, assess military climate, and evaluate the progress of current Department of Defense programs that are intended to decrease rates of sexual assault (Department of Defense 2006; Department of Defense 2012; Department of Defense 2018). The *Workplace and Gender Relations Survey of Active Duty Members* is designed to survey the victims, is framed from the perspective of the victim, and uses measures that relate to the victim. Clearly, the DoD attempts to distance itself from the perpetrator by focusing solely on the victim and on victim-centered risk factors of sexual assault. However, by

focusing on the victim the DoD avoids addressing aspects of military culture that contribute to military sexual trauma.

When reporting on sexual assault statistics, the DoD presents the data from the perspective of the victim using phrases like "the victim experienced sexual assault…." This grammatical construction is shifting focus away from the perpetrator and upon the victim. In 2018, the DoD stated they maintain the perpetrator's innocence because nothing has been proven; yet this presentation is concerning when other terms and phrases are used that place blame on the victim which indicates an acceptance of rape myths by authors of the study.

The DoD also uses measures within the *Workplace and Gender Relations Survey of Active Duty Members* that relate to the victim which are then presented within the reports. This includes prior sexual assault of the victim and use of drugs and alcohol. Prior sexual assaults can increase an individual's chance of being sexually assaulted again, but it is unclear how this measure contributes to the mission statement of the Workplace and Gender Relations Survey. It would be difficult to evaluate the progress of intervention programs through these measures, as is one of the intended purposes of these surveys, aside from a decrease or increase in rates of MST.

The use of drugs and alcohol does not influence an individual's likelihood to report their MST (Mengeling et. al. 2014), it does coincide with an increase in rates of military sexual trauma (Turchik & Wilson 2010; Castro et. al. 2014). Yet, when military members are asked about their drug and alcohol usage, the questions mention the impairment of the victim and its interference with their ability to consent. This is concerning given that people who prefer that sexual assault is discussed from the perspective of the victim are more likely to accept rape myths. This implicit acceptance of rape myths combined with a lack of focus on the aspects of military culture that contribute to MST could be contributing to increasing rates of MST.

Despite rape being clearly defined by the Uniform Code of Military Justice in the National Defense Authorization Act of 2006, the DoD is reluctant to use this term. Instead, they created their own measure of construct, unwanted sexual contact. In the 2006 report, unwanted sexual contact was described in passive voice which has been associated in the literature with an acceptance of rape myths. It was not until 2018 that the DoD began using terminology that was more consistent with the UCMJ's definitions.

It is possible that the *Workplace and Gender Relations Survey of Active Duty Members* avoids the use of the term rape because people are less likely to say they were raped and might be more likely reporting that someone attempted to have "sexual intercourse" with them (Bohner 2001). However, using the term "attempted or completed sexual intercourse" still implies consent between the two parties and is framed from the perspective of the victim. The DoD appears to be reluctant to adhere to the UCMJ's definition of consent. As far back as 2006, the UCMJ clearly stated that consent cannot be acquired under certain conditions. Yet, in the Workplace and Gender Relations Surveys, the DoD used phrases such as "make the victim consent" or that "consent can be acquired through coercive behaviors."

Overall, based upon the portions of the reports examined, the DoD is not assessing military climate. Not only is this problematic as the root cause of MST, but it also neglects a crucial aspect of the explicitly stated mission statement of these surveys. Stating that the DoD is assessing military climate while only focusing on the measures listed above could be a form of impression management. If an assessment were to reveal that the hypermasculine and misogynistic group norms were contributing to high rates of MST, it would require a massive change in how the military functions. It is unlikely that the military would want to deemphasize physical prowess, strength, and violence as these attributes contribute to the overall goal of the

military (Barnao 2019). Therefore, they might be reluctant to assess this aspect of military climate in relation to MST because it would undermine other military practices that are valued by the DoD.

To institute a new set of cultural norms, one must break down an individual's pre-existing social identity per the definition of the total institution by cutting them off from society (Goffman 1961). Within the military, these cultural norms promote violence, physical prowess, and strength which are associated with hypermasculinity (Barnao 2019). If the isolating and hypermasculine nature of the military were found to be a contributor to high rates of MST, the DoD would have to completely change the process of socializing new members. As this process is effective in creating a group of like-minded and obedient individuals working towards a common goal, the DoD could be reluctant to make changes to this process which would be reflected in their lack of evaluation of military climate.

Bullying and hazing are also integrated into military climate and are common practices within the military and have become normalized and accepted as a part of military life (Barnao 2019). Certain forms of bullying and degradation are used by high-ranking officials on new military members to exert power over new military members, especially when members have just joined the military (Barnao 2019). Degradation of a commonly used tactic by higher-ranking military members when socializing new military members. Not only does this reinforce the rigid power hierarchy within the military, but it is useful in breaking down pre-existing social norms to be replaced with the hypermasculine and misogynistic groups norms associated with the military. Instead, within these surveys, they assess measures that focus on the behaviors of the victim while using organizational impression management tactics to project an image of dedication to minimizing MST to diffuse any real responsibility to this goal.

The DoD responded to increased public awareness of sexual assault through victims'
rights movements by increasing impression management strategies to project an image of
competency, morality, and dedication in their mission to decrease MST. This was done in lieu of
the creation of policies and programs designed to decrease rates of MST. These tactics increased
in 2018, shortly after the #metoo movement reentered public discourse. They praised the
effectiveness of preexisting programs and policies created to reduce MST, and the effectiveness
of the *Workplace and Gender Relations Survey of Active Duty Members* in estimating rates of
MST. The DoD particularly focused on the new options of submitting a confidential report of
MST through unrestricted reporting. It has been shown that service members who use this type
of reporting have more positive outcomes but are less likely to use this type of report (Mengeling
et. al.). Though they state that the unrestricted report option is helpful, there was no significant
increase in reporting from 2016 to 2018, when the option of unrestricted reporting was
introduced through an amendment to the Code of Federal Regulations (Department of Defense
2018).

There is a correlation between a change in the DoD's impression and increased public
awareness of sexual assault through victim's rights movements. In 2018, the DoD increased their
use of direct assertive impression management tactics to appear moral, emphasizing their
dedication to minimizing MST. They also changed their terminology within the Workplace and
Gender Relation Survey Report of Active Duty Members in the 2018 report. Data collection for
this survey began one year after the #metoo movement. They retired the term of "unwanted
sexual contact" and replaced it with "sexual assault offenses." This term is more consistent with
the definitions within the UCMJ. More importantly, this definition appears to be more socially
conscious and could better capture the prevalence of MST in active duty members.

Reversely, it is possible that the DoD increases efforts to defend its impression in response to publicized cases of MST. Data collection for the 2012 survey began one year after reports were made of MST at the Lackland Air Force Base and several months after Air Force officials began investigating these allegations. It is possible that the deviation in the presentation of survey data in the 2012 report is unrelated; however, it is worth noting that the 2012 report differs substantially from the 2006 and 2018 report, especially when all three reports were collected from the same source. While all three reports used tactics to defend their impression, the 2012 report focused solely on protecting their impression.

There are several limitations of this study which could be addressed by future research. This study only examined portions of three Workplace and Gender Relations surveys–2006, 2012, and 2018. The other sections within these reports that focus on sexual harassment and gender discrimination should be examined. Reports outside of this timeline should also be examined to search for impression management tactics as well as changing definitions, terminology, and a focus on victim-centered risk factors. Additionally, examining additional reports could further identify any changes that occur in relation to the publicized events of MST and sexual assault awareness movements. Finally, the most recent Workplace and Gender Relations Survey should be examined to determine if the DoD's narrative on MST has changed in response to increased public awareness of sexual assault through publicized cases of MST and victims' rights movements between 2018 and 2021.

Since 2018, one highly publicized event of MST, subsequent activism, and a resulting new act titled "I Am Vanessa Guillen " was adopted by Congress. These could impact future workplace and gender relations surveys. As these events occurred outside of the range of the reports I examined, I did not include them in my timeline of events. However, based upon my

findings, it is likely these events will have an impact on the organizational impression of the DoD. In 2020, Vanessa Guillén, an Army Specialist, was killed at the Fort Hood Army Base in Texas. Before her death, Vanessa had told her mother that she was being sexually harassed by a fellow military member but was afraid to make a report. According to authorities, Army Specialist Aaron Robinson killed Vanessa with a hammer after she stated her desire to report the sexual harassment. (Aguilera 2020; Aguilera 2021). Vanessa's death led to a wave of online activism like #metoo. Thousands of servicewomen shared their stories of MST on social media. Since then, there has been an increase in viral cases of MST. In February 2021, a female Marine Corps Sergeant went viral after sharing details of her sexual assault on TikTok, a social media platform. Before it had been deleted, her video had 5 million views.

The 2022 National Defense Authorization Act proposed several changes that would affect military members when reporting their military sexual trauma. This amendment requires that any report of sexual assault or rape is handled and subsequently investigated by an independent counsel rather than the military member's chain of command 117th Congress 2022). This change in legislation could positively affect rates of reporting sexual trauma while decreasing negative outcomes of reporting if the Department of Defense is receptive to this change. An examination of the most recent Workplace and Gender Relations Survey is needed to assess if the Department of Defense adopts this new legislation in a prompt and effective manner, rather than merely refer to it as a form of impression management.

Conclusion

The Department of Defense uses organizational impression management tactics that create a positive impression of their organization for Congress, as they are the intended audience

for the impression. When responding to increased public discourse surrounding sexual assault through victims' rights movements, rather than creating effective policy and programs designed to decrease military sexual trauma, the Department of Defense increased organizational impression management tactics that promote an image of competency, morality, and social worthiness.

Throughout all three reports, the Department of Defense used linguistic avoidance to minimize the role of the perpetrator, focusing solely on the victim. This focus is emphasized in the factors that are measured in relation to military sexual trauma which could be a contributing factor to an increase in rates of military sexual trauma despite efforts of the Department of Defense. These factors focus mostly on the actions of the victim, such as their use of drugs and alcohol and any prior sexual assaults and do not assess military culture or toxic masculinity, the root causes of military sexual trauma.

It is likely that the Department of Defense projects a positive organizational image while focusing on the victim, thus ignoring the mission statement of the *Workplace and Gender Relations Survey of Active Duty Members* to assess military climate, because an actual assessment of military climate would indicate a hypermasculine and misogynistic environment that contributes to high rates of military sexual trauma. It could also indicate that the power structure within the military as a total institution would need to be evaluated. The focus on the victim also indicates an acceptance of rape myths by the Department of Defense which could also undermine the eradication of military sexual trauma.

These tactics increased over time, with a substantial increase following the increased awareness of sexual assault through the #metoo movement. It is outside of the scope of this research to establish a causal link between these two events; however, it is still worth noting.

When the public has increased awareness of MST through publicized cases of MST, the Department of Defense focused on defending their impression. Future studies should be conducted on the DoD's narrative of sexual assault in the military to explore the correlation between the increased usage of organizational impression management tactics and increased awareness of sexual assault through victims' rights movements and publicized cases of military sexual trauma.

It is likely that, with an increase in social media platforms, cases of military sexual trauma will reach the public eye more easily, as is already evident within the last several years. With two sensationalized cases of sexual assault within eighteen years, society has already reached that number within the last two years. If there is a causal link between the usage of organizational impression management tactics by the Department of Defense and publicized cases of military sexual trauma, the military is likely to respond to these cases to maintain a positive organizational impression.

Future research on sexual assault in the military should focus on military climate and the development of proactive rather than reactive policies and programs. This could be done by surveying all military members, not just victims of military sexual trauma. Though it has been shown that the military is a hypermasculine and misogynistic culture, future research could explore how the individuals internalize and exhibit these group norms. How much do military members buy into this culture? Do they perceive military culture as problematic? If they view them as problematic which could then inform the creation of programs designed to minimize military sexual assault through intervention.

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