

# EVALUATIVE LANGUAGE IN THE (RE)PRODUCTION AND RESISTANCE OF DISCOURSES OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE ON X (TWITTER)

## EL LENGUAJE EVALUATIVO EN LA (RE) PRODUCCIÓN Y RESISTENCIA DE DISCURSOS SOBRE VIOLENCIA SEXUAL EN X (TWITTER)

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**PATRICIA PALOMINO-MANJÓN**

Centro Universitario de la Defensa de Zaragoza

ppalomino@unizar.es

<<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6548-8022>>

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### Abstract

This paper investigates the role of evaluative language in the (re)production and resistance of discourses concerning sexual violence on X (formerly Twitter). Drawing on Appraisal Theory (Martin and White 2005) as the analytical framework, the present paper identifies linguistic patterns that either reinforce or challenge patriarchal ideologies, practices and gendered power dynamics in society. Using allegations of sexual assault made against Brett Kavanaugh during his confirmation proceedings to the United States Supreme Court in 2018 as a case study, the analysis illustrates that evaluative language was used to (re)enact opposing discourses and (re)negotiate traditional rape scripts and experiences of sexual violence. The findings also reveal the interplay between conflicting narratives —perpetrator vs. victim-survivor— on X and how communication on this platform shapes and reflects societal attitudes toward sexual violence and aggression against women in both North American society and institutions.

**Keywords:** X (Twitter), evaluative language, Appraisal Theory, sexual violence, online feminism.

### Resumen

Este artículo investiga el papel del lenguaje evaluativo en la (re)producción y resistencia de discursos sobre violencia sexual en X —antes Twitter—. Basándose en la Teoría de la Valoración (Martin and White 2005) como marco analítico, este trabajo identifica patrones lingüísticos que refuerzan o desafían las ideologías y

prácticas patriarcales, así como las dinámicas de poder de género en la sociedad. Utilizando las acusaciones de agresión sexual de Brett Kavanaugh durante su proceso de confirmación ante el Tribunal Supremo de los Estados Unidos en 2018 como estudio de caso, los resultados ilustran que el lenguaje evaluativo se usa para (re)crear discursos opuestos y (re)negociar narrativas tradicionales sobre violación y experiencias de violencia sexual. Los resultados también revelan la interacción entre narrativas opuestas —perpetrador vs. víctima/superviviente— en X y cómo la comunicación en esta plataforma da forma y refleja las actitudes sociales hacia la violencia sexual y la agresión contra las mujeres tanto en la sociedad como en las instituciones estadounidenses.

**Palabras clave:** X (Twitter), lenguaje evaluativo, Teoría de la Valoración, violencia sexual, feminismo digital.

## 1. Introduction

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Sexual violence has become a simultaneously public and private issue after the emergence of digital platforms, even though it was traditionally viewed as a private matter (Bou-Franch 2013). Research on online aggression against women has examined the use of various digital platforms to spread discourses derived from rape culture, which are used to deny the existence of such violence (Bou-Franch 2013; Bou-Franch and Garcés-Conejos Blitvich 2014). More precisely, the microblogging platform X —formerly Twitter— has been singled out as the most sexist and (sexually) aggressive social media platform (Jane 2017; Mendes et al. 2018). Several studies have shown that Twitter is employed to (sexually) threaten women (e.g. Hardaker and McGlashan 2016; Frenda et al. 2019), as well as to victimise victim-survivors<sup>1</sup> (e.g. Stubbs-Richardson et al. 2018) while portraying perpetrators as the real victims.

Despite this negative view of X, the platform has also given victim-survivors a relatively safe space to contribute to digital feminism. X's most popular function, the hashtag (#), is used as a tool for socio-political resistance and to form online communities, even if users never interact directly or know each other (Zappavigna 2012, 2018). X users challenge traditional rape myths and scripts by offering support and validating personal narratives of sexual violence (Loney-Howes 2018), which has been key to the establishment of the fourth wave of feminism (Blevins 2018). Therefore, it is unsurprising that the study of online networked feminism on X is gaining momentum in linguistics and discourse analysis (e.g. Morikawa 2019; Bouvier 2020; Jones et al. 2022; Palomino-Manjón 2022, 2024).

Even though research has focused on both digital (sexual) violence against women and feminist resistance on X separately, there is much less information of a linguistic nature on the different discourses concerning misogyny and (anti)feminism when these coexist within the same digital platform. Therefore, this paper examines the discourses and ideologies of gendered violence on X and the evaluative resources used to enact such discourses and ideologies.

The present paper is divided as follows. Section 2, which follows this introduction, begins by outlining the literature on gender and digital communication, especially from a critical perspective on gendered violence. The paper then introduces the case study employed to carry out the research. Section 3 presents the analytical framework used to examine evaluative language and continues by explaining the data and procedures carried out during the analysis. Section 4 goes on to discuss the findings of the study. Lastly, Section 5 summarises the main findings of the analysis, discusses the paper's implications for the study of violence against women on digital platforms, and provides some concluding remarks.

## **2 Literature Review**

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### **2.1. Gender and Digital Communication**

The rise of new technologies anticipated more democratic communication, as social factors such as gender, race and class would be invisible to Internet users. However, research from a variety of fields, including linguistics, media, sociology and psychology (e.g. Herring 1999; Jane 2017; Stubbs-Richardson et al. 2018) has suggested that digital platforms are used to harass and intimidate women, thus bringing attention to pre-existing gender differences in the offline world.

Since the early stages of research on digitally mediated communication, scholars focusing on gender inequality have pointed out that women and other socially marginalised groups, such as people of colour and LGBTQIA+ communities, are often the targets of sexism and hate speech, which, in turn, reflects a (white, heterosexual, able-bodied) male-dominated Internet culture (Jane 2017). As previously mentioned, X is considered an aggressive platform towards women, since it hosts communities —sometimes formed in the manosphere (see Jaki et al. 2019)— that encourage hostile and misogynistic attitudes, thus enforcing toxic masculinities (Jane 2017; Mendes et al. 2018). Linguistic research has shown how X is used to send death threats (e.g. Hardaker and McGlashan 2016) and to perpetuate victim-blaming and sexist attitudes (e.g. Stubbs-Richardson et al. 2018; Frenda et al. 2019), hindering women's participation in digital communities and degrading and dehumanising female users.

Despite this, research has also shown that language can help victim-survivors of (cyber)abuse and their allies to resist and challenge digital practices and ideologies derived from rape and patriarchal cultures. For instance, Dynel and Poppi (2020) examine the rhetorical strategies used by Stormy Daniels when she was mentioned in hateful posts relating to her job (i.e. pornographic film actress). Additionally, the platform also allows individuals like her to connect with other users who share similar experiences. Victim-survivors take advantage of X's widespread popularity to engage in online feminist activism to bring attention to (verbal) sexual violence. Linguists have analysed how the use of specific linguistic patterns, especially evaluative language, helps victim-survivors to share self-narratives of sexual violence (e.g. Jones et al. 2022; Palomino-Manjón 2022, 2024).

X has become a tool to engage in online feminist activism and has contributed to the development of a 'call-out culture' (Lawrence and Ringrose 2018) in which sexism, misogyny and rape culture are challenged. However, it has also brought attention to victim-survivors and left them "vulnerable to criticisms, threats, and harassment from trolls who are often participating for the sole purpose of antagonising feminists" (Blevins 2018: 94). Therefore, it is evident that X has evolved into a platform where diverse and opposing discourses and ideologies coexist. Bearing in mind the aim of this paper, the following subsection introduces the case study, which will guide the research questions.

## 2.2. AsJ Kavanaugh's Sexual Assault Allegations

Following Associate Justice (AsJ) Anthony Kennedy's retirement announcement on 27 June 2018, the President of the United States at the time, Donald Trump, nominated former Judge Brett Kavanaugh to fill the vacancy on the Supreme Court of the United States (SCOTUS). On 30 July 2018, Senator Dianne Feinstein received an anonymous letter in which a woman explained that she had been sexually assaulted by Judge Kavanaugh in 1982. The writer of the letter also reached out to *The Washington Post's* lawyer, Debra Katz, who recommended she take a polygraph test so that she could not be accused of lying.

Since the press tried to reveal her identity, the accuser, college professor Dr Christine Blasey Ford, went public in an interview with *The Washington Post* on 16 September 2018. In the interview, she described the encounter with Kavanaugh and a friend of his, Mark Judge. She recounted that, when she was 15, the two men attempted to rape her, pinning her to a bed while trying to remove her clothes. As both men were heavily intoxicated, she managed to escape and lock herself in the bathroom. On 27 September 2018, Dr Ford and Judge Kavanaugh testified in a televised hearing. Republican senators attracted

attention when they accused the Democratic Party of tarnishing the nominee's reputation with false allegations. In the end, charges were not pressed against the accused, and the Senate ultimately confirmed Kavanaugh as Associate Justice on 6 October 2018.

Dr Ford faced harassment and (death) threats from Internet users for speaking out against AsJ Kavanaugh, especially on the microblogging platform X. She was also accused of being part of a political strategy to bring down his nomination as well as Trump's administration. However, she stated she had no regrets and hoped her testimony would empower other women to upend traditional rape narratives and patriarchal societal structures.

It is against this backdrop that the present paper takes AsJ Kavanaugh's confirmation process and sexual allegations as a case study to examine the different discourses surrounding gendered violence on X, including the linguistic and evaluative patterns that contribute to the negotiation of both Dr Ford and AsJ Kavanaugh's identities. Therefore, the research questions that guided this study are the following:

RQ1: What evaluative resources did X users employ to signal different gender ideologies and patriarchal discourses during AsJ Kavanaugh's confirmation process?

RQ2: To what extent can these resources be employed to perpetuate or challenge gender (in)equality, patriarchal practices and sexual violence?

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### **3. Analytical Framework and Methodology**

#### **3.1. Appraisal Theory**

Appraisal Theory (Martin and White 2005) was used as the analytical framework to identify linguistic evaluative patterns and discourses around sexual violence, perpetrators and victim-survivors. This framework was developed to examine the social function of language within Systemic-Functional Linguistics and is employed to examine how authors of a text use evaluative language to express their position and stance towards "both the material they present and those with whom they communicate" (Martin and White 2005: 1). The theory has also been proven to be an effective tool for analysing and categorising discourses and language (Bednarek 2008) and to understand how online communities are built (Zappavigna 2012, 2018). Appraisal Theory is divided into three meaning domains: ATTITUDE, GRADUATION and ENGAGEMENT. This paper focuses on ATTITUDE and GRADUATION (see Table 1).

Affect			
Happiness	<i>cheer</i>	Unhappiness	<i>misery</i>
	<i>affection</i>		<i>antipathy</i>
Security	<i>quiet</i>	Insecurity	<i>disquiet</i>
	<i>trust</i>		<i>distrust</i>
Satisfaction	<i>interest</i>	Dissatisfaction	<i>ennui</i>
	<i>pleasure</i>		<i>displeasure</i>
Inclination	<i>desire</i>	Disinclination	<i>non-desire</i>
Surprise	<i>positive</i>	Surprise	<i>negative</i>
Judgement			
Social esteem	<i>normality</i>	Social sanction	<i>veracity</i>
	<i>capacity</i>		<i>propriety</i>
	<i>tenacity</i>		
Appreciation			
Reaction	<i>impact</i>	Composition	<i>balance</i>
	<i>quality</i>		<i>complexity</i>
Valuation			
Graduation			
Focus	<i>sharpen</i>	Force	<i>intensification</i>
	<i>soften</i>		<i>quantification</i>

Table 1. Appraisal Theory categorisation (adapted from Martin and White 2005; Bednarek 2008)

ATTITUDE concerns the use of evaluations to express emotional reactions, judgements of behaviour and the worth or aesthetics of things. It is further subdivided into three domains: AFFECT, JUDGEMENT and APPRECIATION.

AFFECT is used to express “positive and negative feelings: do we feel happy or sad, confident or anxious, interested or bored?” (Martin and White 2005: 42). AFFECT can convey the emotions of the producer of a text or a third party, and it can be implied or directly conveyed depending on the expression of explicit emotional states (e.g. *happy*, *sad*, *worried*) or the physical behaviours of the person experiencing the emotion (e.g. ‘rushed breath’ or ‘to shake uncontrollably’)

(Martin and Rose 2007). In addition, emotions can also be conveyed through metaphors (e.g. *cold as ice* or *dull like the dead*). AFFECT is further subdivided into four subcategories, namely (Un)Happiness (*misery, antipathy, cheer* and *affection*), (Dis)Satisfaction (*ennui, displeasure, interest* and *pleasure*), (In)Security (*disquiet, surprise, confidence* and *trust*) and (Dis)Inclination (*fear* and *desire*).

However, since Appraisal Theory is still considered hypothetical (Martin and White 2005: 46), this paper adopts Bednarek's (2008, 2009) refinements to the AFFECT subsystem. This change not only introduces a new type of emotion (i.e. *Surprise*), but also modifies the subsystems proposed by Martin and White (2005). Consequently, Bednarek's framework reorganises the original categorisation and expands it into five subsystems: 1) (Un)Happiness; 2) (In)Security; 3) (Dis)Satisfaction; 4) (Dis)Inclination and 5) Surprise (see Table 1).

JUDGEMENT involves the evaluation of human actions and behaviour not only from individuals but also from organisations and institutions such as governments, courts and legislative bodies. The framework distinguishes between evaluations of social sanction, which are based on a set of rules or regulations (i.e. how legal or moral someone's actions are), and social esteem (i.e. admiring and criticising someone's actions without legal or moral implications) (Martin and White 2005; White 2011). It is relevant for this study to note that JUDGEMENT can be negotiated in context. However, according to Martin and Rose (2007), legal lexis such as *victim, crime, perpetrator, guilty* and *innocent* cannot be separated from their evaluative role in specific contexts.

Lastly, APPRECIATION concerns the evaluation of aesthetics, human creations, situations and natural phenomena. People can also be appraised when describing their physical appearance.

Additionally, APPRAISAL can be conveyed explicitly or implicitly. Explicit evaluation, or attitudinal inscription, refers to the use of words or fixed phrases that carry positive or negative meaning even when removed from their context (White 2004, 2011). This contrasts with attitudinal tokens or invocation, in which no single item carries positive or negative value independently of its context. This distinction between attitudinal inscription and invocation becomes relevant when the boundaries between the ATTITUDE subsystems are not clear-cut (Bednarek 2009). For example, the terms *disgust* or *revolt* may convey JUDGEMENT and AFFECT simultaneously. Martin and White (2005) name these instances 'hybrid realisations', whereas Thompson (2014) suggests the concept 'Russian doll' to illustrate that one APPRAISAL resource can function as a token or indirect expression of another subsystem. Nevertheless, the authors agree that AFFECT should be considered the primary attitudinal value as it constitutes the basis of ATTITUDE.

On the other hand, GRADUATION is related to the intensification or weakening of someone's evaluations. It is subdivided into Focus (i.e. the graduation of non-scalable lexis) and Force (i.e. the varying degrees of intensity and quantity). Whereas Focus is used to make "something that is inherently non-gradable gradable" (Martin and Rose 2007: 46), Force refers to resources that intensify meaning, such as qualifiers (e.g. *very, extremely*) and attitudinal lexis, which includes degrees of intensity (e.g. *happy/ecstatic*).

Research that has applied Appraisal Theory to the analysis of digital communication has shown that the framework is an effective tool for examining how Internet users bond and build online communities based on shared values (see Zappavigna 2012, 2018). The theory has also been applied to the study of gender and sexuality and its potential to facilitate the creation of online feminist networks (e.g. Palomino-Manjón 2022) as well as to deride and abuse verbally (del Saz-Rubio 2024a, 2024b) and to spread anti-feminist and misogynist ideologies and discourses (e.g. Heritage and Koller 2020; Krendel 2020, 2023). This illustrates the versatility of the theory as a qualitative framework for understanding the different ways in which online interactions and communities form around topics relating to gender-based violence.

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### 3.2. Data

A corpus of X posts published during Kavanaugh's confirmation process was compiled, including specific hashtags concerning the confirmation process, namely *#KavanaughConfirmation* and *#NoKavanaughConfirmation*. These hashtags were selected for their structure, which suggests two contrasting views regarding his nomination.

Posts under the *#KavanaughConfirmation* hashtag were manually obtained using X's *TweetDeck* application, which allows for manual, advanced search functionalities using Boolean terms and filtering options, such as language, date, number of reposts, etc. On the other hand, posts containing the *#NoKavanaughConfirmation* hashtag were collected through Google Sheets's add-on *Twitter Archiver* (Agarwal n.d.), which automatically retrieves metadata about the tweets.

Posts and reposts in languages other than English were filtered out and excluded from the dataset. The complete dataset covers tweets published over 23 days: from Dr Ford's public statement (16/09/2018) to the day after Kavanaugh was publicly confirmed as an Associate Justice of SCOTUS (8/10/2018). In total, there were 112,428 tweets (N = 2,924,498 words). In addition, bearing in mind the methodological approach taken in this paper (i.e. corpus-assisted discourse analysis), X conventions such as hashtags (#), (manual) reposts and mentions (@) were removed using the software *R* (R Core Team 2020). This resulted in two corpora made up of 1,474,172 words (*#KC*) and 417,639 words (*#NoKC*).



3.3. Procedure

The present study adopts a mixed methodology that combines corpus linguistics tools and Appraisal Theory (Martin and White 2005). The corpora were analysed separately and then compared to identify the linguistic patterns and APPRAISAL resources used to (re)produce discourses concerning sexual violence.

The first step involved the analysis of the 100 most frequent words in each corpus (RQ1). The software *R* (R Core Team 2020) was used to obtain wordlists and frequencies. After carefully analysing the terms obtained in the analysis through the reading of their concordance lines, the terms were grouped according to discussion topics. For the sake of brevity, the analysis scrutinised only the most commonly occurring words related to social actors, gender and violence in both corpora.

The second analysis identified and computed the different evaluative resources employed by X users (RQ2). Based on the frequency analysis results, ten subcorpora were created around the search terms *Kavanaugh*, *Ford*, *women*, *men* and *sexual*. To avoid cherry-picking, a technologically randomised selection of 100 concordance lines of each search word was obtained using SketchEngine’s (Kilgariff et al. 2014) concordance tool (Baker and Levon 2015). This tool was also used to expand the concordance lines and retrieve complete tweets (Baker and Levon 2015; Jones et al. 2022). The resulting subcorpora comprised 100 tweets each (i.e. 1,000 X posts in total; see Table 2).

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Subcorpus	Number of X posts	Number of words
#NoKC-Kavanaugh	100	3,096
#NoKC-Ford	100	3,135
#NoKC-Men	100	3,309
#NoKC-Women	100	3,208
#NoKC-Sexual	100	3,383
#KC-Kavanaugh	100	3,102
#KC-Ford	100	3,078
#KC-Men	100	3,254
#KC-Women	100	3,423
#KC-Sexual	100	3,114
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,000</b>	<b>32,102</b>

Table 2. Information about the subcorpora examined in the APPRAISAL analysis

The tweets were analysed qualitatively to examine APPRAISAL resources. The identified resources were manually coded on a document and classified. After the coding of resources, the APPRAISAL values were quantified to identify the most frequent APPRAISAL (sub)system and the polarity of the evaluative resources. Then, these resources were grouped according to their potential to convey discourses relating to (sexual) violence against women in the different subcorpora.

Following Page (2022), an intra-analysis was conducted and measured using the test-retest reliability correlation coefficient (Pearson correlation). The results show that both analyses were highly correlated, with a correlation indicator of  $\geq 0.9$ , which indicates excellent reliability (see Table 3).

Subcorpus	Total occurrences (1st analysis, March 2022)	Total occurrences (2nd analysis, May 2022)
#NoKC-Kavanaugh	273	273
#NoKC-Ford	235	268
#NoKC-Men	333	334
#NoKC-Women	212	215
#NoKC-Sexual	265	267
#KC-Kavanaugh	255	255
#KC-Ford	241	241
#KC-Men	221	221
#KC-Women	210	210
#KC-Sexual	143	143
Corr. coef.	0.979964863	

Table 3. Test-retest reliability correlation coefficient

As stated by Page (2022), reanalysing APPRAISAL resources helped identify coding errors and re-code ambiguity in the resources. The subcorpus with the most significant changes in the coding was the *#NoKC-Ford* subcorpus, and all the changes were associated with ambiguous cases of implicit positive Veracity.

4. Analysis and Results

4.1. Frequency Analysis

An examination of the 100 most frequent words in each corpus was carried out to identify prevalent linguistic patterns. As illustrated in Appendix A and B, closed-class words accounted for over three-quarters of the total. The qualitative reading

of these words in context revealed that both the #NoKC and #KC corpora shared similar thematic categories (see Table 4).

Thematic category	#NoKC	#KC
Pronouns	<i>you, he, your, we, his, they, I, my, him, her, she, our, me, them, us, he's, I'm</i>	<i>you, I, he, they, your, his, her, she, their, my, him, me, our, I'm, the, us</i>
Gender pronouns	<i>he, his, she, him, her, he's</i>	<i>he, his, her, she, him</i>
Social actors	<i>Kavanaugh, women, Ford, FBI, Dr, Trump, men, GOP, people</i>	<i>Kavanaugh, women, he, Ford, people, judge, Brett, democrats, man, Dr, FBI, senate</i>
Legal field	<i>vote, court, investigation, supreme, SCOTUS, assault</i>	<i>vote, court, judge, supreme, senate, investigation, justice</i>
(Political) authorities	<i>FBI, Trump, SCOTUS, GOP, supreme, court</i>	<i>FBI, court, supreme, judge, senate, democrats, Brett, supreme, court, senate</i>
Gender and violence	<i>sexual, assault</i>	<i>sexual</i>
Miscellaneous	<i>thank, want, need</i>	<i>time, today, good, know, want</i>

Table 4. Classification of the 100 most frequent grammatically open-class words and gendered pronouns in the dataset

Thematic categories encompassed lexis concerning (gender) pronouns, social actors, politicians and authorities, terms related to the legal field, vocabulary related to gender and violence and miscellaneous words. Some terms overlapped in different categories, for instance, *Trump* as a social actor and authority, or *judge* as a title and an authority (e.g. *Judge Kavanaugh*), a verb relating to the legal field or as a social actor (e.g. *Mark Judge*).

In addition, the presence of gendered pronouns reveals that male social actors were more frequently discussed than female individuals. The male pronouns *he*, *his* and *him* and the pronoun plus verb *he's* appeared in both frequency wordlists. Male pronouns were more frequently used to refer to Kavanaugh, but X users also employed them to refer to the male senators who participated in the hearings and to then President Donald Trump. However, the qualitative analysis unveiled that the possessive *his* also referred to Dr Ford as part of the n-gram *his accuser*, thus rendering her identity as related to Kavanaugh (van Leeuwen 2008). This specific word sequence is particularly noteworthy, as explicit references to Dr Ford were scant in the list of the 100 most frequent words.

Social actors included not only individuals but also assimilated and collectivised actors (van Leeuwen 2008) such as political groups and organisations (e.g. *FBI*, *Senate*, *Supreme Court*, *SCOTUS*, *GOP*, *democrats*). The most interesting result is that *GOP* (i.e. Grand Old Party, the Republican Party) was more prevalent in *#NoKC*, whereas *democrats* only appeared in *#KC*, which suggests the ideological and political leanings of X users in each hashtag-specific dataset.

The frequency wordlists encompassed a range of male social actors, including general terms like *man* and *men*, as well as specific and individualised male figures such as *Kavanaugh*, *Brett*, *Judge* (Dr Ford’s second perpetrator’s surname) and *Trump*. In contrast, the female social actors included *women* and the surname *Ford*, which highlights the scarce presence of explicit references to Dr Ford. The presence of the singular noun *man* in the frequency list, while the noun *woman* was absent, suggests that men were often individualised, as opposed to women (Pearce 2008). Another shared category between both wordlists was lexis related to gender and violence. However, whereas the *#NoKC* corpus featured the words *assault* and *sexual*, the *#KC* corpus only included the adjective *sexual*.

Bearing in mind the aim of this paper, the five terms related to victims and perpetrators and sexual violence which were obtained from both corpora during the frequency analysis were selected for further scrutiny. The surnames *Kavanaugh* and *Ford*, along with the general gendered identities *women* and *man/men*, were chosen to investigate the negotiation of victim-perpetrator identities. Furthermore, the adjective *sexual*, which ranked among the top 100 most frequent words in each corpus, was also examined.

The selected lexis showed a similar normalised frequency per thousand words (ptw) in both corpora (see Table 5), which shows that they were not only patterns of potentially frequent topics of debate in each corpus, but were also common when discussing the events of the confirmation process on X. Therefore, a qualitative analysis of these words in context is of special relevance to the objective of this paper.

Word	#NoKC	#KC
<i>Kavanaugh</i>	5.19	5.89
<i>Ford</i>	1.44	2.37
<i>men</i>	1.07	0
<i>man</i>	0	1.47
<i>women</i>	3.38	2.94
<i>sexual</i>	1.77	1.75

Table 5. Normalised frequencies per thousand words (ptw)

The following subsection (4.2) features the analysis of these terms in context, drawing on Appraisal Theory (Martin and White 2005; see Section 3). While it is true that the #KC corpus featured the singular male form *man* and the #NoKC corpus included the plural form *men*, both corpora contained the plural female noun *women*. Consequently, the plural form *men* was selected to compare the results to those of its female counterpart.

4.2. Evaluative Resources

4.2.1. Quantitative Analysis

As can be seen in Appendix C, more than half of the total occurrences of APPRAISAL in each subcorpus were negative JUDGEMENT, making up over three-quarters of the total resources in the #KC-Kavanaugh (80.39% 205 instances) and #NoKC-Kavanaugh (73.26% 200 instances) subcorpora. In contrast, negative JUDGEMENT accounted for fewer than half of the identified resources in the #NoKC-Ford subcorpus (48.51%, 130), despite being the most prevalent APPRAISAL resource in that subcorpus. This might be attributed to higher positive AFFECT and JUDGEMENT frequencies in the #NoKC-Ford subcorpus, with 34 (12.49%) and 72 (26.87%) instances, respectively. These results suggest a prevalence of negative evaluative prosodies to discuss the actions of the social actors involved in the confirmation process.

JUDGEMENT was the only APPRAISAL value implicitly conveyed aside from APPRECIATION in the #NoKC-Kavanaugh subcorpus, which yielded one instance of a hybrid realisation between AFFECT and APPRECIATION. Implicit JUDGEMENT resources were frequently found to express judgements of Veracity and Propriety through hybrid realisations and factual statements. However, explicit JUDGEMENT values were more common in all subcorpora than implicit realisations, as illustrated in Table 6.

Subcorpus	Explicit	Implicit	Total
#KC-Kavanaugh	161 (70.61%)	67 (29.39%)	228 (100%)
#NoKC-Kavanaugh	141 (58.51%)	100 (41.49%)	241 (100%)
#KC-Ford	161 (84.74%)	29 (15.26%)	190 (100%)
#NoKC-Ford	108 (53.47%)	94 (46.53%)	202 (100%)
#KC-Men	95 (54.29%)	80 (45.71%)	175 (100%)
#NoKC-Men	136 (55.74%)	108 (44.26%)	244 (100%)
#KC-Women	99 (57.89%)	72 (42.11%)	171 (100%)
#NoKC-Women	119 (63.98%)	67 (36.02%)	186 (100%)

Subcorpus	Explicit	Implicit	Total
#KC-Sexual	44 (37.29%)	74 (62.71%)	118 (100%)
#NoKC-Sexual	133 (64.88%)	72 (35.12%)	205 (100%)

Table 6. Explicit and implicit JUDGEMENT occurrences in the examined subcorpora

On the other hand, GRADUATION was frequently found to enhance ATTITUDE resources rather than to downscale them (see Table 7). Force was the most frequent resource across all subcorpora and was mainly used for booster evaluations. Force-Intensification, which took up more than half of the GRADUATION resources in all subcorpora, mostly involved repetitions of attitudinal lexis, superlatives and capital letters.

Subcorpus	Force	Focus	Total
#KC-Kavanaugh	39 (88.64%)	5 (11.36%)	44 (100%)
#NoKC-Kavanaugh	45 (97.83%)	1 (2.17%)	46 (100%)
#KC-Ford	36 (92.31%)	3 (7.69%)	39 (100%)
#NoKC-Ford	31 (100%)	0	31 (100%)
#KC-Men	36 (97.3%)	1 (2.7%)	37 (100%)
#NoKC-Men	35 (94.59%)	2 (5.41%)	37 (100%)
#KC-Women	52 (100%)	0	52 (100%)
#NoKC-Women	69 (97.18%)	2 (2.28%)	71 (100%)
#KC-Sexual	27 (79.41%)	7 (20.59%)	34 (100%)
#NoKC-Sexual	47 (97.92%)	1 (2.08%)	48 (100%)

Table 7. Use of GRADUATION resources in the examined subcorpora

Following this qualitative examination of these APPRAISAL resources, the next subsection analyses and delves into the different discourses identified in the corpora.

4.2.2. *Overview of Discourses of Sexual Violence*

The qualitative reading of APPRAISAL values revealed various discourses concerning sexual violence. However, they are not always clear-cut and occasionally intersect within the same X post, thus conveying more than one discourse at times.

Due to the nature of the event, Dr Ford’s and AsJ Kavanaugh’s identities were intertwined, since his portrayal as a perpetrator contributed to her depiction as a victim-survivor. It is worth highlighting that all subcorpora included more instances of posts that focused on the construal of AsJ Kavanaugh as a perpetrator, as shown in Example 1 below:

- (1) Post65/NoKC-Sexual: A nominee for the Supreme Court committed sexual assault [-JUDGEMENT;propriety] and the President is a pussy-grabber [-JUDGEMENT;propriety] (in his own words). *And Trump sits in the Oval Office* [-token of JUDGEMENT;propriety]. Gotta love [-AFFECT;unhappiness-antipathy] republicans! #NoKavanaughConfirmation<sup>2,3</sup>

As can be seen in Example 1, the representation of AsJ Kavanaugh as a perpetrator was commonly constructed by drawing parallels between Donald Trump and him. Both were depicted as perpetrators of sexual violence. In the example, the X user conveys Propriety to denounce the presence of authoritative figures as well as a lack of action to prevent perpetrators from occupying seats in U.S. institutions and politics.

- (2) Post82/KC-Kavanaugh: The Brave [+JUDGEMENT;tenacity] woman who lying [-JUDGEMENT;veracity] #SCOTUS nominee #BrettKavanaugh tried to rape [-JUDGEMENT;propriety] just *came out with her story* [+token of JUDGEMENT;tenacity] she has *also* [+GRADUATION;force-intensification] taken a lie detector test which shows she was being truthful [+JUDGEMENT;propriety] *Will #kavanaugh volunteer a lie detector test too* [-token of JUDGEMENT;veracity] #KavanaughLied [-JUDGEMENT;veracity] #KavanaughConfirmation

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Example 2 describes Dr Ford as a determined woman for coming forward with her story through a discourse of feminism. The use of the adjective *brave* is linked to the evoked Tenacity resource *came out with her story*. This is due to the fact many feminists and allies of feminism consider the telling of stories of sexual violence as an act of boldness (Clark-Parsons 2019; Palomino-Manjón 2022, 2024). This contrasts with the portrayal of AsJ Kavanaugh, which emphasised falsehood and negative discourses by using Veracity and Propriety values. In this example, Kavanaugh is constructed as a perpetrator as he is positioned as the agent of the negative Propriety resource (*tried to*) *rape*. Hence, Dr Ford is presented as the object of the crime and, therefore, portrayed as a victim.

Discourses of falsehood were frequent in all corpora as they intertwined with discourses of political violence. Dr Ford and AsJ Kavanaugh were both portrayed as victims of a political process since many X users considered they were being manipulated as pawns by both the Republican and the Democratic Parties for their political gain. However, the discourses differed when referring to the accused and the accuser, as can be observed in Examples 3 and 4 below:

- (3) Post7/NoKC-Ford: So it's all a lie [-JUDGEMENT;veracity] and a sham [-JUDGEMENT;veracity] [+GRADUATION;force-intensification]. There was NEVER [+GRADUATION;force-intensification] any intention

of a fair [-JUDGEMENT;propriety] hearing for Dr. Ford. You disgust [-AFFECT;dissatisfaction-displeasure] me, @SenateMajLdr, @lisamurkowski @SenatorCollins @JeffMerkley -Fuck you all [-AFFECT;dissatisfaction-displeasure]. #TakeBackTheSenate #IStandWithChristineBlaseyFord [+token of JUDGEMENT;veracity] #NoKavanaughConfirmation #BlueTsunami

- (4) Post100/KC-Kavanaugh: Such a FAKE ATTEMPT [-JUDGEMENT;veracity] [+GRADUATION;force-intensification] to dishonor [-JUDGEMENT;propriety] a very [+GRADUATION;force-intensification] smart [+JUDGEMENT;capacity] and very [+GRADUATION;force-intensification] fine [+JUDGEMENT;normality] *man Judge Kavanaugh* [-token of JUDGEMENT;propriety], Diane Feinstein *YOU* [+GRADUATION;force-intensification] employed a *CHINESE SPY* [+GRADUATION;force-intensification] 4 20 yrs [-token of JUDGEMENT;propriety] *YOU* [+GRADUATION;force-intensification] are the threat [-JUDGEMENT;propriety] to America *not Judge Kavanaugh* [+token of JUDGEMENT;propriety] #KavanaughConfirmation

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Dr Ford was often portrayed as a victim of politicians. For instance, Example 3 illustrates how some users expressed disapproval of the outcome of the hearing. This user employs Veracity resources (*lie* and *sham*) to evaluate the confirmation process and then proceeds to provide an ethical condemnation of the GOP and the Republican senators by questioning the course and the credibility of the hearing. As opposed to this, the user in Example 4 evaluates the allegations of sexual assault as deceitful and a political strategy to discredit and ruin AsJ Kavanaugh's reputation through an intensified use of Veracity resources as well as several Propriety values. Then, they provide a positive appraisal of AsJ Kavanaugh through the use of Social Esteem (i.e. Capacity and Normality) to create a positive discourse prosody. This helps the user to depict Senator Feinstein as an unethical politician and a political perpetrator, while they present AsJ Kavanaugh as a political victim.

Discourses of political violence also constructed North American women as victims of the patriarchal system that prevails in the country's institutions. These posts intertwined with feminist discourses frequently, as illustrated in Example 5 below:

- (5) Post39/NoKC-Men: @peterdaou THEY. HAVE. NO. CONSCIENCE [-JUDGEMENT;propriety] [+GRADUATION;force-intensification]. They gaslighted [-JUDGEMENT;propriety] Ford so bad [+GRADUATION;force-intensification], that as a victim I worry [-AFFECT;insecurity-disquiet] that she is questioning [-AFFECT;insecurity-disquiet] *all of her memories of the event* [-token of JUDGEMENT;capacity]. *That is what we do was survivors* [-token of JUDGEMENT;capacity]. *BECAUSE. MEN. AND. WOMEN IN. POWER. REFUSE* [-AFFECT;disinclination-non-desire]. *TO. BELIEVE.*



US. [-token of JUDGEMENT;propriety] [+GRADUATION;force-intensification]  
#NoKavanaughConfirmation #VoteThemOut #MeToo

Example 5 above contains a disclosure of sexual assault which builds Dr Ford's identity as that of a political victim. The user employs judgements of Propriety, strengthened by different GRADUATION resources, to denounce the behaviour of male senators during the hearing and portray them as political perpetrators. The user also denounces rape myths and victim-blaming attitudes used against Dr Ford that make victim-survivors question their memories, which deepens their traumatic wound (Palomino-Manjón 2022). This is conveyed with implicit negative Capacity to refer to victim-survivors, as well as negative AFFECT and implicit negative Propriety to blame the use of such patriarchal discourses by North American authorities and institutions.

Lastly, all subcorpora were found to include two opposing discourses: feminism and male victimhood. Moreover, discourses of feminism were divided into discourses of empowerment and discourses of emotional pain.

- (6) Post99/NoKC-Men: Women are strong [+JUDGEMENT;capacity] and truly [+GRADUATION;force-intensification] unpredictable [+JUDGEMENT;normality]. Mechanistic [-JUDGEMENT;propriety] old men [-JUDGEMENT;propriety] [+GRADUATION;force-intensification], not all men, are weak [-JUDGEMENT;capacity], *insecure* [-AFFECT;insecurity-disquiet] [-token of JUDGEMENT;capacity] and scared [-AFFECT;insecurity-disquiet] [+GRADUATION;force-intensification] of strong [+JUDGEMENT;capacity] women. *November we show them what we are made of, we will not give-up* [+token of JUDGEMENT;tenacity]. #NovemberIsComing #ProtectOurCare #NoKavanaughConfirmation

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Example 6 shows the discourse of empowerment surrounding women in the subcorpora. The X user begins by expressing positive Capacity (*strong*) and Normality (*unpredictable*)<sup>4</sup> to depict women as powerful social actors. Furthermore, the user defines an out-group of men surrounded by negative prosody associated with conservatism, sexism and misogyny as the cluster *old men* is used to convey negative Propriety values (Palomino-Manjón 2024). In addition, the adjective *mechanistic*, which defines a patriarchal ideology that considers men as the foundation of society and human nature (Hultman and Pulé 2018), also amplifies the negative depiction of this out-group of men. Finally, they evoke positive Tenacity to portray women as determined to bring an end to Trump's Republican administration.

A second feminist discourse was concerned with emotional pain. AsJ Kavanaugh's confirmation to SCOTUS caused concern and fear among some female users

because of his conservative views. Their distress and sadness were evident in AFFECT resources, as shown in Example 7 below:

- (7) Post71/KC-Women: This is beyond [+GRADUATION;force-quantification] maddening [+GRADUATION;force-intensification] [-AFFECT;dissatisfaction-displeasure],sad[-AFFECT;unhappiness-misery],unbelievably[+GRADUATION;force-intensification] disappointing [-AFFECT;unhappiness-misery] and *a* wake up call[-AFFECT;surprise]for women all around the globe[+GRADUATION;force-quantification]. #wematter #KavanaughConfirmation

The X user in Example 7 employs different AFFECT resources to convey unease, anger and emotional distress. This is conveyed through feelings resources of Misery (*sad, disappointing*) and Displeasure (*maddening*). Additionally, these emotions are intensified with GRADUATION values (*beyond, unbelievably* and *maddening*), emphasising the emotional discomfort experienced by the user.

As expected from networked feminism in social media, the subcorpora #NoKC-Sexual and #KC-Sexual also featured personal narratives of sexual violence. The employment of AFFECT values allowed victim-survivors to express their traumatic experiences to other users.

- (8) Post17/NoKC-Sexual: Not really going to explain all the sexual assault [-JUDGEMENT;propriety] that I've gone through but I blamed myself [-AFFECT;dissatisfaction-displeasure] for years [+GRADUATION;force-quantification]. I was ashamed [-AFFECT;insecurity-disquiet]. I told no one for so long because I didn't know who to trust [-AFFECT;insecurity-distrust]. It never goes away nor will it ever [+GRADUATION;force-quantification]. Its a life long [+GRADUATION;force-quantification] pain [-AFFECT;unhappiness-misery] I will live with. #NoKavanaughConfirmation

The user in Example 8 employs different AFFECT resources to express their trauma. Among these, Dissatisfaction-Displeasure is found to convey a self-blaming attitude. AFFECT is also used to communicate feelings of Insecurity to express shame (Disquiet) and fear of trusting others (Distrust) regarding the crime. All these values are intensified with Quantification resources (*for years, it never goes away nor will it ever* and *life long*), which shows the long-term damage that sexual violence causes to victim-survivors.

In contrast, the subcorpora #KC-Men was heavily shaped by a discourse of male victimhood, depicting men as victims of feminist movements and, particularly, the #MeToo Movement. The user in Example 9 promotes a discourse of fear through an Insecurity-Disquiet value (*safe*), which, in turn, results in a negative JUDGEMENT of Propriety of the #MeToo Movement and elites. Additional implicit negative

Propriety is presented to blame the movement for victimising men, as well as to accuse the elites (i.e. politicians, the press) for exploiting it to further deprecate men.

- (9) Tweet78/KC-Women: *Men are not safe* [+AFFECT;insecurity-disquiet] *anywhere* [-token of JUDGEMENT;propriety]. *The #MeToo movement has successfully launched the “Men are Evil* [-JUDGEMENT;propriety]” *narrative* [-token of JUDGEMENT;propriety] *and there are enough dishonest* [-JUDGEMENT;veracity] *politicians and media on the left to pump up this narrative* [-token of JUDGEMENT;propriety]. A out of control [+GRADUATION;force-intensification] [-JUDGEMENT;propriety] MeToo movement is bad [-JUDGEMENT;propriety] for both men and women [+GRADUATION;force-intensification]. #KavanaughConfirmation

Overall, the analysis of evaluative language revealed highly frequent use of negative prosodies to convey discourses of sexual violence and to depict the different social actors involved in AsJ Kavanaugh’s confirmation process. A dominant pattern of negative evaluative prosody which prevailed in all subcorpora was frequently employed to construct discourses of violence, truth and falsehood in the context of the confirmation process. Negative evaluations were primarily conveyed through JUDGEMENT resources to condemn social actors’ morality and ethics and denounce their dishonesty during the hearings. Emotional expressions also contributed significantly to creating negative prosodies, since a range of AFFECT lexis was employed to show anger, fear and sadness as the confirmation process unfolded. Notably, the recurrent use of GRADUATION resources helped intensify and strengthen these evaluations and display widespread discomfort and emotional distress among (female) X users and victim-survivors of sexual violence.

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## 5. Conclusion

The present research aimed to examine the use of evaluative language in the (re) production and (counter) resistance of discourses of sexual violence and patriarchal practices and ideologies on X. The use of such resources was expected to construct discourses that condemned rape culture and gendered power structures in North American society. To do so, the sexual assault allegations against AsJ Kavanaugh during his confirmation process to SCOTUS were taken as a case study.

Overall, the results indicated the coexistence of opposing discourses on X during the confirmation process. On the one hand, the subcorpora obtained from the #KavanaughConfirmation corpus featured hegemonic discourses that denied and invalidated Dr Ford’s testimony, which in turn allowed the spread of anti-feminist and victim-blaming discourses. These reflected the power imbalance that persists in the *offline* world (Herring 1999) and resulted in the dismissal of Dr Ford’s allegations by both Republican authorities and X users.

On the other hand, X users employed counter-hegemonic discourses to resist (online) patriarchal discourses and practices by demystifying the rape scripts and myths (Loney-Howes 2018) that invalidated Dr Ford's experience of sexual assault. This also resulted in the sharing of personal narratives by victim-survivors to support her testimony (Jones et al. 2022; Palomino-Manjón 2022). These results suggest that the hashtag *#NoKavanaughConfirmation* also served as a form of networked feminism, even if it was not exclusively designed for this end.

In addition, the study of these online interactions not only contributed to examining gendered discourses surrounding X but also provided insights into its users' online identities and ideologies. These identities were constructed based on the discourses they employed to express support or opposition to the social actors and political groups involved in the process through the (re)production and defiance of feminist and patriarchal discourses (van Dijk 2006; Bou-Franch and Garcés-Conejos Blitvich 2014). While each group of supporters used negative values of JUDGEMENT, those advocating for Dr Ford's testimony were characterised by their use of a greater number of positive JUDGEMENT resources as well as different values of AFFECT to foster a more supportive and empathetic stance.

36 Nevertheless, the generalisability of these results is limited. Whereas this study provides relevant perspectives on the use of specific discourses to negotiate, (re) produce, challenge and sustain patriarchal discourses and gendered asymmetry in society, the results cannot be representative of all discourses concerning (sexual) violence on X, as the corpus was limited to a relatively small sample of North American society.

Notwithstanding these limitations, this paper highlights the complex role of X in shaping and spreading discourses of sexual violence and rape culture. The findings reflect social dynamics in which the combination of anonymity and easy access to the Internet (Herring 1999) enables conflicting discourses to coexist on the same platform. While some users find support and a platform to share their experiences, others display dismissive and hostile behaviours that contribute to perpetuating a pervasive rape culture in society. This illustrates the potential and limitations of X as a space for feminist and social activism.

## Notes

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1. The terms 'victim' and 'survivor' are considered as two ends of a continuum that carry negative and positive connotations, respectively. Consequently, this paper takes the merged term 'victim-survivor' to refer to the people who have been the object of any type of gender-based violence.

2. Explicit Appraisal resources are underlined, whereas implicit resources are highlighted in italics.
3. Examples do not include usernames to ensure authors' anonymity and avoid the traceability of the original message. Grammar, spelling and punctuation have not been altered.
4. Although Martin and White (2005) categorise unpredictable as a value of Non-normality, the context in which this adjective appears helps convey a positive evaluative prosody.

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Appendix A: Frequency list for the #NoKC corpus

#NoKC corpus					
Rank	Word	Frequency	Rank	Word	Frequency
1	the	15364	51	right	1096
2	to	11482	52	out	1094
3	and	7775	53	him	1091
4	you	7717	54	sexual	1083
5	is	6868	55	from	1051
6	of	6580	56	why	1047
7	this	4901	57	one	1038
8	for	4559	58	her	1029
9	he	4286	59	like	1025
10	in	3971	60	now	1007
11	not	3609	61	investigation	1000
12	that	3606	62	it's	997
13	on	3440	63	know	995
14	are	3353	64	can	993
15	it	3274	65	please	969
16	kavanaugh	3178	66	their	963
17	be	2989	67	there	958
18	your	2559	68	would	955
19	no	2551	69	people	937
20	we	2495	70	she	913
21	his	2450	71	our	909
22	have	2091	72	ford	879
23	women	2069	73	when	861
24	with	2052	74	more	853
25	will	1961	75	fbi	853
26	all	1878	76	assault	833
27	they	1875	77	me	793
28	do	1870	78	dr	757
29	if	1840	79	time	741
30	vote	1808	80	get	738
31	was	1770	81	never	728
32	who	1727	82	trump	726
33	what	1690	83	them	717
34	so	1613	84	us	690
35	about	1612	85	want	667



#NoKC corpus					
Rank	Word	Frequency	Rank	Word	Frequency
36	an	1421	86	supreme	663
37	at	1320	87	gop	661
38	i	1298	88	men	655
39	has	1291	89	did	648
40	my	1285	90	because	627
41	just	1258	91	need	613
42	as	1215	92	any	612
43	how	1211	93	he's	608
44	should	1194	94	even	603
45	up	1193	95	thing	596
46	or	1174	96	i'm	595
47	by	1138	97	say	594
48	court	1138	98	too	582
49	don't	1132	99	scotus	582
50	but	1128	100	thank	574

APPENDIX B: Frequency list for the #KC corpus

#KC corpus					
Rank	Word	Frequency	Rank	Word	Frequency
1	the	79881	51	she	5010
2	to	50076	52	out	4990
3	a	39392	53	how	4920
4	and	32611	54	their	4803
5	is	32384	55	it's	4766
6	of	31273	56	my	4580
7	you	22833	57	don't	4461
8	in	21032	58	when	4430
9	this	20624	59	can	4409
10	for	20317	60	court	4353
11	i	18892	61	should	4178
12	that	16366	62	ford	4159
13	on	16087	63	get	4127
14	be	13439	64	one	4102
15	it	13096	65	would	4038
16	are	13076	66	people	3982
17	not	12156	67	why	3744
18	have	10465	68	more	3663
19	kavanaugh	10326	69	him	3631
20	he	9915	70	know	3568
21	will	9571	71	right	3528
22	with	9193	72	there	3521
23	we	9037	73	time	3469
24	they	8759	74	judge	3458
25	if	8442	75	me	3429
26	all	8253	76	supreme	3393
27	what	8101	77	our	3385
28	was	7735	78	i'm	3249
29	your	7411	79	senate	3138
30	vote	7403	80	fbi	3112
31	as	7326	81	today	3066
32	no	7315	82	sexual	3065
33	about	7196	83	been	3008
34	his	6703	84	investigation	2990
35	so	6701	85	brett	2938

#KC corpus					
Rank	Word	Frequency	Rank	Word	Frequency
36	who	6510	86	democrats	2861
37	just	6422	87	them	2838
38	has	6150	88	think	2828
39	at	6050	89	us	2810
40	but	6044	90	did	2789
41	now	5737	91	over	2779
42	do	5691	92	these	2757
43	an	5661	93	going	2697
44	like	5562	94	want	2626
45	her	5551	95	justice	2600
46	by	5523	96	because	2580
47	or	5348	97	man	2579
48	from	5220	98	good	2522
49	women	5152	99	dr	2501
50	up	5106	100	after	2489

**APPENDIX C:** Percentages of instances of APPRAISAL resources in each subcorpus.

