The Abortion Debate: A Qualitative Content Analysis of Public Reactions to a TikTok Video on the Overturning of Roe v. Wade

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Abstract

This qualitative analysis investigated public reactions in response to the overturning of Roe v. Wade. This consisted of a content analysis of 50 of the most recent comments from an NBC news video posted to the TikTok account for the *Today Show*. The analysis identified four findings, with an emphasis on the last finding. The results demonstrated that individuals felt strongly about the overturning: 1) reactions were either for or against the decision, 2) forty-two of the comments were reactions against the overturning while 8 were for, 3) general themes found among the 8 comments were happiness, celebration, unsympathetic and dismissive, and 4) the most apparent themes among the 42 comments were freedom of choice, individual rights, injustice, medical and societal implications, emotional and betrayal.

Introduction

Britannica defines abortion as the "expulsion of a fetus from the uterus before it has reached the stage of viability" (2022, pg. 1). Abortion can be spontaneous, resulting in a miscarriage, and this can be due to many reasons, some of which include disease, trauma, genetic defect or biochemical incompatibility of the mother and fetus. Similarly, an induced abortion can be performed for a variety of reasons, including to preserve the life, physical or mental well-being of the mother, to prevent the pregnancy from reaching full term due to rape or incest, to prevent the birth due to abnormalities, and to prevent birth for social or economic reasons (Britannica, 2022).

Abortion in the United States has been controversial historically, with abortion being allowed in some states, loosely restricted in others, and classified as a felony crime in others (Gale, 2022). However, with the passing of Roe v. Wade in 1973, abortions were widely legalized in many states under the Supreme Court and Due Process Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment, allowing women and girls the privacy, option, choice, and freedom to obtain an abortion for any reason. The previously listed reasons for pursuing an induced abortion were considered legitimate until June 24, 2022. On this day, the US Supreme Court made yet another controversial decision by revoking the constitutional right to abortion and overruling Roe v. Wade (McGovern, 2022). Now individual states determine whether they will allow abortions or not, and for what reasons. This means that 13 states now completely ban abortion through "trigger laws" that stated abortion would be banned within 30 days of Roe v. Wade being overturned, 5 states have a gestational limit ban, 8 have the ban blocked by state law, 10 make abortion legal but limited, and 15 make abortion completely legal (The New York Times, 2022). Additionally, in alignment with Britannica's definition of abortion and reasons for it, as stated above, the states with complete bans do not allow for abortion even in instances where there is rape or incest. The gravity and

repercussions surrounding the overturning of Roe v. Wade have sparked heavy reactions from society, which will be the topic of this study.

Current research has examined and discussed the implications of the recent Roe v. Wade decision on a larger scale, looking at the impact on women and society as a whole. Each piece of research examined touched on the history of abortion while also detailing the states in which the ban is active, the criteria under which abortion is restricted, and the extent of the ban under Roe v. Wade. In addition to this, Coen-Sanchez et al. (2022) discuss the bio-political, political, and medical implications of the ruling for the reproductive health of Americans. The authors state that the Supreme Court's recent decision allows the government to take control over the rights and reproductive health of women and gives particular sections of society the power and preference over others by influencing their ability to make choices concerning their reproductive health (Coen-Sanchez et al., 2022). The medical repercussions of Roe v. Wade impose on the self-autonomy and agency of those impacted and influence their physical and psychological well-being, emphasizing the impact of illegal abortion in cases of rape, incest, ectopic pregnancies, complications, and other factors (Coen-Sanchez et al., 2022). Additionally, Sun (2022) identifies the effect of trigger bans on mortality rates, the health outcomes of criminalized abortions on women, and the public health issues that arise from the ban, while also expressing that reproductive freedoms require an interdisciplinary approach that takes into account healthcare providers, public health research, and policymakers in order to respect individual autonomy and improve health outcomes for everyone. Furthermore, Lazzarini (2022) discusses the implications of Roe v. Wade by also looking at Planned Parenthood of Southeastern Pennsylvania v Casey and reiterating that the judicial-legislative sector has a profound impact on the state's exercise over women and their health. Lazzarini discusses the political sphere of the US by examining how the ban on abortion at any stage and under any circumstance diminishes women's opportunities to participate in the nation's political, social, and economic life, while also discussing the importance of the availability of safe and legal abortion when it comes too non-consensual, complicated, or serious pregnancies. McGovern (2022) further

discusses the health outcomes and healthcare inequalities to be seen as a result of the overturning. They mention that denying legal access to abortion is an attack on the dignity and rights of women and girls, that the ban could increase pregnancy-related deaths, allow for an increased risk of criminalization of pregnant people/those who help them, and increase deaths caused by unsafe abortion and the number of children abused in foster care systems.

As we can see, the concerns and consequences surrounding abortion and Roe v. Wade are exponential and multi-faceted. Current and most recent literature has examined the real-life implications of criminalized abortions using a broad lens. However, no previous literature has centered around public reactions to the Roe v. Wade decision. Therefore, the present qualitative study contributes to the current literature in a new way, by analyzing public reactions to the overturning of Roe v. Wade, using TikTok, in an effort to uncover people's opinions and responses to this decision.

Method

Sample

The sample for this content analysis included 50 of the most recent comments out of a total of 1,135. The comments were posted in response to the NBC news video posted on the TikTok account of the *Today Show*, titled "Women outside of the Supreme Court react to Roe v. Wade being overturned". This video was posted on June 24, 2022 and can be found using the following link: https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMFq7mUyx/

Sample Selection

TikTok was chosen as it is one of the most popular social media platforms currently. It is also one of the main ways that current events and newsworthy events get circulated, and brought to the attention of individuals. TikTok is easily accessible, a free public platform, and contains a large number of users engaging in discussions. Specifically, the *Today Show*'s TikTok account was used because it contained a video of an NBC news interview that captured the live, emotional reactions of 4 women, 2 for and 2 against the overturning, right outside the Supreme Court. Compared to the countless other videos of reactions on TikTok, the NBC video was the one free of biases or

favoring one side over the other. The NBC video was also taken on the exact date of June 24, 2022, rendering it the most relevant and recent.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Since this analysis focuses on the reactions to the overturning of Roe v. Wade, the first 50 comments with a clear distinct reaction were selected. This means that any comment, within the first 50, with a reaction, whether it was for or against, was included. Comments which contained only emojis, unidentifiable, inappropriate, or unrelated/general statements, or tagging of other accounts were excluded from the sample. Secondary replies underneath the main comments were also excluded as they contained unrelated debates and sometimes went off-topic.

Units of Analysis

The units of analysis for this study consisted of the words and phrases used in the first 50 relevant comments, made in reaction to the overturning of Roe v. Wade. Overall key terms or phrases examined in the comments included the mention of Roe v. Wade, abortion, Supreme Court, pro-life or pro-choice, rights, body, choice, life, women, and pregnancy.

Settings and Materials

The content analysis was conducted in the principal researcher's home. Access to Wi-Fi, as well as a smartphone, was required to collect the data, as the video and comments were posted on TikTok. As TikTok is a public platform, an account was not necessary to search, retrieve and locate the video and associated comments.

Coding Procedure and Scheme

The first 50 comments were individually examined and coded for key words, phrases, or ideas pertaining to the Roe v. Wade decision and to the original NBC news video. Once coded, the relevant comments to the overturning of Roe v. Wade and the specific video were then assessed for public reactions and the extent of those reactions. All relevant comments were revisited to find any common or reoccurring themes. Comments with no relevancy to the Roe v. Wade decision/video, subsequent replies under primary comments, comments that were deemed unrelated/inappropriate, comments with no clear reaction, and non-English comments were

not taken into account. The prominent themes identified within the 50 relevant comments, along with their associated direct quotes, are organized in Tables 1 and 2 and can be found in the result section.

Design

A content analysis was used to identify prominent and recurring themes contained in the public reactions to the overturning of Roe v. Wade, with an associated video of the decision posted to TikTok. The themes were identified from the first 50 comments stated in the section underneath the TikTok video.

Results

Results from the analysis of the 50 comments indicate that people feel very strongly about the Supreme Court's decision to overturn the controversial Roe v. Wade case. The analysis found that the reactions and feelings towards this decision were seen within the context of being for or against the decision, with very few comments in the middle. It is unclear whether there were more women than men commenting or vice versa due to the uncertainty and anonymity of certain usernames and profile pictures. The second finding was that out of the 50 comments, 42 of them, more than half of the sample, consisted of comments and reactions against the overturning of Roe v. Wade, while the remaining 8 agreed with the overturning. The third finding was that although fewer comments were in agreement with the decision, they tended to be indicative of general themes relating to happiness, celebration, unsympathetic, and dismissive to the opposing side. A few quotes mentioned in relation to these themes can be found in Table 1. The fourth and most prominent finding was that a majority of the reactions against the overturning of Roe v. Wade, consisted of apparent themes, in order of prevalence, relating to 1) freedom of choice, 2) individual rights, 3) injustice, 4) medical and societal implications, 5) emotional, and 6) betrayal. Characteristics of these themes are discussed below, and examples of the comments can be found in Table 2.

Freedom of choice was the most prevalent theme found in the comments, referring to the ability of a woman to be able to choose whether or not she wants to have an abortion. This was indicative of people saying that a woman should have the freedom to be able to choose

what happens to her body and that people, referring to women, should be able to choose and have a say in the decisions that affect them, their bodies, and their health. Many of the comments reacted to the decision by repeating "my body my choice" (C1).

Individual rights consisted of comments that mentioned the violation of [women's] rights and privacy over their bodies and the halt of individual rights pertaining to the accessibility and general human right to abortions. Additionally, freedom of choice and individual rights were intertwined with each other in most of the comments.

Injustice was characterized by comments mentioning the unjust criminalization of abortion, resulting in the negative impacts on women and how the Supreme Court essentially *took* the safe option away.

Medical and societal implications referred to comments implying that the criminalization or inaccessibility of abortions would physically harm the mother or put her at risk should there be any complications with the pregnancy, allow for unsafe abortion practices and potential increases in mortality, and a rise in poverty levels and "unwanted babies" in foster systems (C2).

Emotional themes were characterized by feelings of anger and sadness. These emotions were persistent among comments that felt hurt or anger towards the overturning of Roe v. Wade as well as similar feelings to those who agree with the decision.

Betrayal was the last common theme noted in the comments and was characterized by individuals feeling like the country turned its back on them [women]. The criminalization of abortion produced feelings that the country does not "love me" and is not in support of women.

Table 1
*Themes and related comments **for** the overturning of Roe v. Wade.*

Themes	Comments
Happiness	"This is great" "Amen, don't hurt babies" "Prayers work"
Celebration	"Life wins" "Thank you Jesus" "It feels amazing"

Unsympathetic	"Crocodile tears from the first one"
Dismissive	"Don't get how 9 months of discomfort outweighs the life of a baby and NO ONE has ever explained to me why it does"

Table 2
*Themes and related comments **against** the overturning of Roe v. Wade.*

Themes	Comments
Freedom of choice	"My body my choice. Your body your choice. Don't take away my rights!" (C1) "…it comes down to our rights to choose regardless of anyone's opinion…" "…I feel like who the hell has the right to tell me what I can or cannot do with MY body!!!"
Individual rights	"My body my choice, my rights as a woman have gone out the door" "Some of these women are happy that their rights are being violated?"
Injustice	"How can people claim to be "pro life" if they think the mother's heartbeat/life doesn't hold the same value as an unborn fetus/child…its barbaric"
Medical and societal implications	"Make abortion unnecessary?! What about the mom who can't continue a pregnancy because it puts HER life at risk and she has other kids?!" "…it could be a lifesaving procedure! The blood will be on the supreme courts hands if a woman dies because she can't have an abortion" "The Republican Supreme Court wants all these babies to be born. And after? Odds are they'll be abused and die in poverty" (C2)

Emotional	"This is so wrong!! The people that agree with this and think this is great news are sick in the head!!" "I am so beyond disgusted with the females who think they are entitled to an opinion regarding other women's bodies. It's disgusting" "I am so done with the state of the world. It's heartbreaking. Rise up women, its time"
Betrayal	"A betrayal is exactly what it is! #mybodymychoice" "I feel exactly like the 1st woman. I feel betrayed"

Discussion

The content analysis in this study was conducted for the purpose of analyzing public reactions to the overturning of Roe v. Wade, with reference to an NBC news video posted to TikTok, showcasing an interview of 4 women, right as the Supreme Court finalized their decision. The present study explored the nature of the reactions posted in the comment section under said video, in order to determine what people were saying in regards to Roe v. Wade. Upon examining 50 of the most relevant comments, the following 4 findings were discovered: 1) the reactions were mainly either for or against the overturning of Roe v. Wade, 2) within the 50 comments, 42 were against the decision while 8 were in agreement, 3) general themes in agreement with the overturning were happiness, celebratory, unsympathetic and dismissive and 4) the comments against the overturning were the most prominent, with common emerging themes of freedom of choice, individual rights, injustice, medical and societal implications, emotional, and betrayal.

The findings identified in 1 and 4 specifically showcase the significant divide among the public in terms of their reactions and thoughts, reiterating the notion that this decision was and is controversial. Furthermore, the findings allude to the observable impact this decision has on the public while also reiterating the notions made by the current literature. According to Coen-Sanchez et al. (2022), the decision to revoke the right to seek an abortion affects the reproductive lives of women in America, especially under the bio-political, political, and medical lenses. Women have a direct threat to their constitutional rights to abortion, to the

safety of their bodies should an emergency happen such as obstetric complications, and to [women and children's] socio-economic stability (Coen-Sanchez et al., 2022). This echos public opinion found in this study of women feeling that their "…rights are being violated…", that abortion could be a "…lifesaving procedure…" and that babies will be "…abused and die in poverty" Additionally, Sun (2022) notes the effect of the abortion ban on mortality rates, public health outcomes and reproductive freedoms. These notions fall in line with the public concerns over women's lives and health risks, freedom of choice over their bodies, and concern for public health, found in this study (see Table 2). Furthermore, Lazzarini's (2022)discussion of the importance of accessible abortion in terms of complicated or serious pregnancies is reiterated in this study's findings, specifically the medical implications identified in Table 1. Lastly, denying abortions to women results in the loss of dignity and rights, increased pregnancy-related mortality, and more children abused in foster care systems, as stated by McGovern (2022). This strongly reinforces the notions held within the first 4 themes and associated comments contained in Table 1.

Limitations

There are several limitations to this study. First, due to the high number of comments associated with this video, the sample size was restricted to the first 50 comments, representing a very small fraction of overall comments made in reaction to the video. The comment section also has various secondary comments and unrelated comments consisting of account tagging, emojis, general/vague statements, and inappropriate comments, which hinder the ability to find noteworthy reactions. Additionally, due to TikTok consisting of millions of users, the platform has countless videos surrounding Roe v. Wade and abortion that are available to be searched through hashtags, the search bar, and filters. This limitation leads to the possibility of potential videos that would be better than the one chosen in this study, however, it would be impossible to go through all available videos to see which one would be the best. Also, TikTok allows videos and comments to be deleted at their discretion, and users posting the videos and comments can also delete them at any time. Furthermore, the *Today Show* and NBC News were the primary outlets used for data collection,

however, there may be more suitable outlets available to examine.

Given that Roe v. Wade has been overturned after nearly 50 years of legalization, therefore making it fairly recent, future research may benefit from examining the ongoing effects of this decision, such as through content analysis or public-centered research. Additionally, future research should investigate the implications of the overturning, at the societal level, examining specific communities and cohorts to examine how they are directly affected by this decision. Technologies, ideologies, opinions, and movements have changed since 1973, therefore making it noteworthy to adapt to this and focus research on today's society.

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