'Today I Speak': Exploring How Victim-Survivors Use Reddit

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Abstract

Digital platforms, such as Twitter, Facebook and online communities on reddit, are increasingly used by victim-survivors across the world to post about their experiences of sexual violence. Emerging research suggests a variety of reasons why victim-survivors discuss their experiences online. This article contributes to this developing area of research by exploring the underlying motivations for victim-survivors using an online rape survivor community on reddit.

This article questions how and why victim-survivors of sexual violence engage with digital technologies through content analysis of narratives posted to a public rape survivor forum on reddit. Overall, the study found that there are three primary motivators prompting survivors to access online communities: to find a supportive community; to seek advice; and for storytelling. The article uncovers some of the broader implications of online storytelling, suggesting that this is an important framework to consider online disclosures of sexual violence. Online communities like /r/rapecounseling might be conceptualised as spaces where counter-narratives of sexual violence are collectively shared.

Keywords

Sexual violence; cyber justice; victim survivors; reddit; digital technology.

Introduction

Sexual violence is a pervasive form of violence against women (World Health Organization 2013: 10). In Australia, one in five women will experience sexual violence in their lifetime, with similar figures evident across the United States (US) and the United Kingdom (UK) (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2017; Breiding et al. 2014; Ministry of Justice, Home Office and Office for National Statistics 2013). Internationally, criminal justice systems have routinely failed to address the needs and best interests of victim-survivors of rape and sexual assault, who often have negative experiences, especially during the processes of police investigation and trial (Clark 2015; Daly and Bouhours 2010; Lievore 2003). Negative experiences, along with the high attrition rates of sexual violence cases in the criminal justice system, perhaps partly explain why instances of sexual violence remain underreported globally (Daly and Bouhours 2010; Lievore 2003). However, while most victim-survivors are unlikely to report their experiences of sexual violence in a formal justice setting, there is an increasing trend of survivors talking about their experiences online.

The discipline of criminology is, arguably, yet to properly explore how and why victim-survivors are using digital platforms in the aftermath of sexual violence. Digital technologies and 'new media' provide different ways for victim-survivors to connect with one another (Burrows and Summers 2011). For example, twitter hashtags such as #BeenRapedNeverReported allow victim-survivors to collectively and publicly share why they did not report sexual violence (Ferreras 2014). Some criminologists have begun to explore these ways that victim-survivors use digital platforms, especially in the form of public activism and 'digilantism' (Fileborn 2014; Salter 2013).

However, victim-survivors are also accessing digital platforms in more 'private' ways, by using online rape survivor communities. Subreddits, Facebook groups, forum websites such *Pandora's Aquarium*, Tumblr accounts like *Project Unbreakable*, among others, allow survivors to connect to seek support amongst peers (Andalibi et al. 2016; Burrows and Summers 2011; Galli 2014; Powell and O'Neill 2016). Online disclosures in these 'private' or anonymous contexts may be occurring for differing reasons than those suggested by criminological research on victim-survivor use of digital platforms to date. As such, this article explores the motivations for victim-survivors to disclose their experience in a private context, building upon the limited criminological knowledge of this phenomenon.

In this article, I firstly provide an overview of literature that has sought to understand online communities, victim-survivor online disclosures, and potential motivations for sharing experiences of sexual violence online. Then, I briefly describe the methodology of the article: a content analysis of a rape survivor community on reddit called /r/rapecounseling.[1] In the findings and discussion section, I focus on three emergent themes suggesting why victim-survivors use the community. My analysis reveals that victim-survivors are motivated to access reddit for support and community; to seek advice; and, importantly, for storytelling. I argue that online communities can be integral to survivors' voices and stories being recognised. I suggest that further research and analysis is needed to fully understand how storytelling through digital platforms impacts victim-survivors of sexual violence.

Literature review

Speaking out online: Literature about the benefits of online communities

Research into online platforms has consistently questioned the divide between virtual and real. Rather than seeing these as distinct spheres of experience, scholars are increasingly blurring online/offline engagement (McGerty 2000; Jones 1999). Online communities exist within social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook where users have a profile page and can connect to other users through private and public messages and groups. Online communities also exist in the form of chat rooms, online message boards, forums and blogging communities. Reddit is an example of a social networking platform where users interact in smaller online communities

known as subreddits. Online communities are increasingly the topic of research across a variety of academic disciplines.

Researchers increasingly treat online communities in the same way as real-world communities (Preece, Maloney-Krichmar and Abras 2003). Just as in the real world, online communities are made up of social norms, values and behaviours (Herring 2004). Users might choose to participate (or not participate) in online communities to varying degrees. For instance, online communities may be comprised of public and non-public members, people who post to the community, and people who 'lurk'. Those who participate actively online (through posting to discussions and chatting with other users) will have different experiences to those who are passive (who simply read others' discussions and content). Nonnecke, Andrews and Preece (2006) found that the experiences of 'lurkers', while not entirely negative, are likely to be less positive when compared to members who actively post to an online community.

Online communities, particularly peer support communities for illnesses (including various cancers, HIV/AIDS, depression and chronic diseases), have been subject to extensive research. This research indicates that participating in an online group is empowering and reduces loneliness (van Uden-Kraan et al. 2009). In some communities, high-frequency users have to do more emotional work than those less active in order to meet the needs of other users (Winefield 2006). Other studies measure the role of anonymity, empathy and psychological impacts of online support communities, all indicating that higher participation in online communities led to better health outcomes and the facilitation of social support (Coulson, Buchanan and Aubeeluck 2007; Coursaris and Liu 2009; Mo and Coulson 2008, 2013). Contrastingly, pro-anorexia online communities have been criticised amongst researchers for encouraging eating disorders by offering community and friendship to vulnerable participants (Boero and Pascoe 2012). Haas et al. (2011) refer to these communities as online negative enabling support groups, which encourage harmful behaviours in their members. Despite this critique of online communities, research overwhelmingly suggests that access to online support provides positive outcomes to users. Perhaps these positive outcomes attract victim-survivors to discuss their experiences in online communities.

From disclosure to digilantism: Why are victim-survivors accessing digital platforms?

Although this is an under-researched area, scholars have suggested a few ways that victim-survivors of sexual violence use digital platforms. The first of these is to disclose their experiences (Moors and Webber 2013). Sexual violence researchers acknowledge that victim-survivors commonly experience negative responses to disclosure, such as not being believed, being blamed or to having their experience questioned and invalidated (Herman 2005). Perhaps victim-survivors might disclose online because they want to have their story heard or to find a community that can offer support (Powell 2015a). Victim-survivors have written about their experiences on personal blogs or, for example, shared their stories with online communities such as 'Project Unbreakable' on Tumblr (Fawcett and Shrestha 2016; Powell 2015a, 2015b). This Tumblr community is a space for victim-survivors to share images, typically of themselves holding a paper sign detailing narratives of their abuse, without naming the perpetrator.

Secondly, criminologists suggest that disclosing online could be described as online activism or 'cyber justice', whereby victim-survivors are using informal spaces to raise awareness around sexual violence and rape culture (Powell 2015b; Sills et al. 2016). Fileborn (2014) notes that, for street harassment, a type of sexual violence for which formal responses are often limited, online initiatives such as Hollaback! provide victim-survivors with a way to share their experience while contributing to an activist project. She also notes that, by sharing about their experiences online, victim-survivors might be meeting their 'justice needs' of having a voice, being believed, being heard and having control over their experience (Fileborn 2014). Sexual violence researchers have long suggested that victim-survivors have specialised justice needs (Herman 2005; McGlynn

2011; McGlynn, Westmarland and Godden 2012). Some criminologists have begun to explore how victim-survivors might fulfil these justice needs through digital platforms (Fileborn 2014; Powell 2015b; Salter 2013).

However, research simultaneously suggests that victim-survivors may be using digital platforms for revenge (Salter 2013). Hai-Jew (2014) notes that online 'vengeance culture' encourages the hacking and sharing of private information, the distribution of revenge pornography or the sharing of violent videos. Nevertheless, for victim-survivors, this 'vengeance culture' can manifest through online naming and shaming of perpetrators (Filipovic 2012; Powell 2015b; Salter 2013). There are instances, such as the Savannah Dietrich case in the US, where a victim-survivor used Twitter to name her rapist in response to an inadequate verdict given by the criminal justice system (Henry and Powell 2016; Salter 2013). Increasingly, there are instances where victim-survivors are naming their perpetrators, both in closed groups on Facebook or publicly through the media (Cohen and Ryan 2017).

Research beyond the discipline of criminology suggests that some victim-survivors are using digital platforms for support and advice. This seems to be the purpose of online forum communities and 'question and answer sites' such as Yahoo! Answers or reddit, which provide a space where survivors can ask questions and anonymously seek support from peers (Andalibi et al. 2016; Moors and Webber 2013, 2015; Webber and Wilmot 2013; Webber 2014). Human-computer interaction researchers Andalibi, Haimson, Choudury and Forte (2016) studied online disclosures of sexual abuse on reddit using a mixed methods approach where they categorised disclosures and used statistical analysis across three subreddits. Their work found that victim-survivors use different levels of anonymity on reddit, which results in different types of disclosures. They suggest that increased anonymity allows victim-survivors to seek more support (Andalibi et al. 2016: 3914). Their analysis focuses on subreddits as a place for victim-survivors to seek support, while also commenting that 'uncovering reasons *why* one would disclose on reddit or other online platforms for the first time ever is an area for future research' (Andalibi et al. 2016: 3915, emphasis in original).

Further, Webber and Moors (Moors and Webber 2013; Webber and Moors 2015) conducted studies analysing victim-survivors' posts to Yahoo! Answers where a qualified sexual assault counsellor would provide responses to their questions. Analysis of these posts found that victim-survivors were disclosing experiences to seek advice and general emotional support, and that victim-survivors in more vulnerable positions were more likely to post online (Moors and Webber 2013; Webber and Moors 2015). These studies indicate that victim-survivors may be motivated by feelings beyond 'revenge' when accessing online communities. However, criminological research is yet to fully explore how victim-survivors use digital platforms, especially online communities. The limited research available on victim-survivors' access of online spaces has consistently revealed that further analysis of survivors' posts on forums, blogs and social media platforms is necessary.

Storytelling and survival: The justice of being heard

Looking beyond disclosure and 'digilantism', victim-survivors might also use various digital platforms to tell their story, to be heard and validated in their experiences. However, there is limited research exploring how online spaces are platforms for such storytelling, or how this is may be an overarching framework to consider online disclosures of sexual violence. Research suggests that, in other contexts such as war-time tribunals and transitional justice processes, testimony and bearing witness can provide victim-survivors with formal recognition and public denouncement of the wrongs and harms of sexual violence (Chare 2012; Greenspan et al. 2014; Hackett and Rolston 2009; Henry 2009, 2015). Storytelling is an interactive process which requires both 'willing storytellers and willing and able listeners' (Ross 2003: 326). This suggests that, for effective storytelling to occur, a victim-survivor needs to find their voice and have an

audience for their story. Research emphasises that victim-survivors of sexual violence want to be heard, and see this as part of the justice process (Clark 2010; McGlynn, Westmarland and Godden 2012; Ross 2003).

However, given the consistent limitations of formal criminal justice systems to 'hear' and acknowledge the stories of victim-survivors, there is scope to think about online spaces as contexts in which storytelling can occur (Lievore, 2003; Daly and Bouhours, 2010; Clark 2015). As Wånggren (2016: 407) notes, 'through sharing stories and ... other online communications, technologies increasingly become central ways for countering ... gender-based violence'. Online communication allows some victim-survivors to find their voice and have control over how they share their experience (Fileborn 2014; Moors and Webber 2013; Loney-Howes forthcoming; Powell 2015a). Loney-Howes (forthcoming) highlights that victim-survivors' anti-rape blogs allow for a less 'prescriptive' narrative of rape to emerge. Traditional responses to rape, such as through the criminal justice system or therapeutic interventions, tend to create 'rape scripts' and produce an unspeakability about experiences of sexual violence, while online spaces provide a way for survivors to take control over storytelling (Loney-Howes forthcoming). Loney-Howes (forthcoming) comments that speaking out online can act to 'shift the hegemonic rape script; to construct a new way of speaking and witnessing that goes beyond the frameworks through which rape and trauma are normatively articulated'. In this way, victim-survivor's storytelling online is both therapeutic and political (Loney-Howes forthcoming). However, there are also potential limitations of online storytelling, notably, that it may be hard to determine whether victim-survivors' stories are being heard. Fileborn (2014) notes potential ways that researchers could measure whether a victim-survivor's account is heard; for example, through quantifying 'likes' or comments on stories. She indicates that further research is needed to determine the impacts on victim-survivors when an audience does not engage with their stories (Fileborn 2014).

This review has highlighted the small body of research that is exploring how and why victim-survivors of sexual violence engage with digital platforms, suggesting that it could be to disclose their experience, for activism, for justice or for revenge. Research into online communities suggests that they are overwhelmingly positive for people who use them to seek support. While some scholars have discussed victim-survivors' online storytelling, there is a gap in literature that specifically explores rape survivor communities. This article builds upon the work of these scholars that explore victim-survivors' use of online platforms and, in my analysis, I consider storytelling as an important overarching framework to consider victim-survivors' motivations to post online.

Methodology

This article presents findings of a content analysis of original posts made to /r/rapecounseling, a publicly accessible rape survivor community on reddit. /r/rapecounseling is an online community where victim-survivors of sexual violence share posts, ask questions and receive support. Towards the end of 2017, over 7,000 reddit users followed the subreddit, which typically receives new posts daily. The platform reddit is a popular online community or 'social news site' that allows users to communicate in 'threaded conversations' on a variety of topics (Choi et al. 2015). Reddit users interact via posts and comments to forum-style communities, known as 'subreddits', which encompass a vast spectrum of topics. These spaces are typically public; however, users with accounts, who mostly remain anonymous, can vote or comment on posts.

Typically, public online content can be analysed without formal ethical approval. However, research involving vulnerable groups like victim-survivors raises ethical concerns. For example, it was important in this research that victim-survivors' disclosures remained anonymous, despite their posts being publicly visible. Some victim-survivors indicated that their online disclosure was the first and only place they had discussed their experience of sexual violence. Because of these considerations, I sought ethics approval from RMIT University's Human Ethics Advisory

Network to analyse posts made to /r/rapecounseling. Like other studies that have researched reddit, I removed the usernames, dates and times, and some of the words of posts to try to ensure that victim-survivors are anonymous (Andalibi et al. 2016).

I analysed 200 original posts made to the subreddit over one calendar month in 2016. The sample size represents the posts that were made to the community over the time-span of that month. Subsequently, 24 of these posts were removed from the analysis because they were made by family, friends, partners or researchers, rather than victim-survivors. As such, a purposive sampling method was used, where 176 posts were analysed, where the author of a post had specified or implied that they were a victim-survivor of sexual violence (Morse 2004). Content analysis was limited to the original posts made, and not the comments made by other users of /r/rapecounseling.

Posts vary in size, from one word, to lengthy entries detailing experiences of sexual violence and its aftermath. Posts were collected using N-Capture, and coded using N-Vivo 11 by means of an inductive coding approach, whereby codes were derived directly from the data, rather than coding according to a prescribed framework or by making assumptions about the text (Saldaña 2013). Conducting content analysis of these codes allowed preliminary themes to emerge that suggest reasons why survivors are using /r/rapecounseling. Researchers have used content analysis to explore the different types of content that victim-survivors of gendered violence post to various online platforms (see, for example, Ahrens 2006; Andalibi et al. 2016; Clark 2016; Dixon 2014; Moors and Webber 2013; Powell 2015b; Salter 2013; Webber 2014; Webber and Moors 2015; Webber and Wilmot 2013).

Through content analysis, I was also able to determine certain details about some of the users posting to /r/rapecounseling that may provide context to the findings and discussion to follow. As noted above, all users in this space were anonymous but some gave details about themselves to contextualise their posts. Such details include countries of residence, which were primarily the US, Canada and the UK. Some victim-survivors would specify their gender; however, a majority did not indicate this. Some would nominate age and sexuality. However, because many victim-survivors did not specify all of these details, it was difficult to make generalisations about the data. Because of this, I have chosen to use the gender neutral 'they' pronoun when referring to individual victim-survivors' posts in the following section.

Findings and discussion: What brings survivors to /r/rapecounseling?

The data suggest that there are three key motivators that were leading victim-survivors to post to the subreddit: the need of a supportive community; to seek advice or help; or for storytelling.

Needing a supportive community

Many victim-survivors posted to /r/rapecounseling seeking emotional support and to be heard by a community of peers. This is reinforced by the findings of other studies into online communities for people with chronic illness, cancers or mental health issues (Mo 2016; Mo and Coulson 2013, 2014; van Uden-Kraan et al. 2009). However, unlike some members of those communities, many victim-survivors of sexual violence describe being unable to disclose their experiences in their 'real lives'. For some, there is a sense of vulnerability and the fear of ramifications in revealing their stories, even when it is anonymous:

> I'm really scared to post this but I really need help. I am so afraid to ask anyone in
> real life, been so afraid to even voice this. I've been feeling very alone and isolated
> because of it. (139)

As with other online communities, the anonymity of /r/rapecounseling acts as a safety net, allowing survivors to discuss their real-world vulnerabilities. Some victim-survivors expressed

fear around their families finding out, while others were fearful of responses by perpetrators. Further, victim-survivors feared victim-blaming, whether it be from friends, family or the broader community, and preferred the anonymity and safety of reddit as a result. This indicates that online communities such as /r/rapecounseling are a supportive space and essential to survivors who feel isolated.

However, some victim-survivors posted in /r/rapecounseling for support despite having also disclosed to a real-life support network. This is perhaps because, for some, the process of disclosing to a loved one had been complicated, difficult and resulted in not receiving the support they expected:

> I've literally never opened up this fully about it, not even my fiancé as I said, to anyone since it started 22 years ago. I told him one night, some basics. He [started] to cry, and it was the first time I'd ever seen him cry like that. It made me feel awful, I felt mad at him, that he thought he had any right to cry about it, after all it didn't happen to him. Then I felt guilty for that feeling, and awful I'd even feel such a selfish thing. It was a mess, emotionally, so I've never brought it up again. (199)

For this victim-survivor, their disclosure to a loved one led them to stop discussing their experiences at all. Research suggests that victim-survivors' first experiences of disclosing sexual violence is important and determines whether they will continue to seek professional help or report to an authority (Clark and Quadara 2010). As is reflected in the following post, when victim-survivors are not believed, it can further enhance the trauma of their experience:

> How the fuck am I supposed to trust people and be open? … How am I supposed to try to get over it and be open if it my openness does nothing but hurt me? (172)

As with the earlier stories represented here, this victim-survivor found it difficult to seek support in the real world, but this was caused by the 'hurt' experienced when disclosing.

Spaces like /r/rapecounseling allow victim-survivors to find a community without forcing them to be open about their name or real-world identity, which for some victim-survivors has the potential to have serious consequences. Anonymity and privacy is important for victim-survivors who, for whatever reason, feel they cannot discuss their experiences of trauma publicly or to a professional sexual violence support worker. For those who are socially isolated or still experiencing an abusive relationship, online communities may be the only spaces where they are able to feel supported or heard:

> I have never told this to anyone so I decided Ill post it here in reddit cause I'm anonymous here and felt like getting it off my chest. (150)

For this victim-survivor, anonymity was a key attraction of the subreddit; it provided them with the security they needed to be able to share their story. This victim-survivor also needed an audience to receive their story, so they could 'get it off their chest'. This emphasises the importance of these spaces in allowing rape narratives to be heard (Herman 2005; McGlynn, Westmarland and Godden 2012). Similarly, other victim-survivors would express gratitude to those in /r/rapecounseling who took the time to read their stories:

> I'd like to pre-emptively thank this sub for reading. Prior to this post, I hadn't told a soul. (187)

Victim-survivors would often thank the community for reading what they had posted, or apologise if they felt what they had written was too lengthy or triggering for the reader. This

perhaps emphasises the importance of these communities to their users, who treat each other with mutual support and consideration.

Emotional and psychological support was a key reason for many victim-survivors to post to /r/rapecounseling. Many indicated that their mental health was low which led to them asking for help on reddit:

> How do you get past this? How do you get rid of this horrible sinking feeling every time you see, hear or think about what happened or who did it? I don't think I can live my life any longer fearing that time. Please help. How do I help myself? (180)

> I want to stop seeing his eyes but I can't. I am terrified I am going to see them in my sleep again. I am downing wine because it is the only way I can calm down and try to turn my brain off … I don't know what I am trying to get out of posting this. I just need to say it to someone. (169)

These victim-survivors needed support in a time of personal crisis and stress, perhaps when it was not possible to approach a friend, family member or professional support. Perhaps they needed to be able access support in the moment, during a sleepless night. Importantly, technology allows survivors to access support at any time of the day. Victim-survivors also are also using /r/rapecounseling to affirm that others have experienced similar feelings and emotions in the aftermath of sexual violence. This too, was a form of seeking emotional support and validation in the community. Typically, this might be combined with asking a question or for advice, such as:

> I guess half of me is writing this now to know I'm not wrong to feel this way. Any advice? (75)

Other users of /r/rapecounseling would often express their solidarity through comments, which, as noted above, was beyond the scope of analysis in this article. However, it should be noted that, along with emotional and psychological support, giving and seeking advice is another important feature of /r/rapecounseling, and a key motivator prompting survivors to post.

Seeking advice on /r/rapecounseling

Many victim-survivors post to /r/rapecounseling seeking advice about how to cope with the varying impacts of sexual violence, or with practical issues in the aftermath of such an experience. For example, several victim-survivors sought advice on legal processes and how to report their assault, or how to write a victim impact statement:

> Is it too late for me to report this to the police? (21)

> I know nothing about law or courts. I have never been in any sort of legal issues. How can I prepare? Any advice would help. (114)

> What type of questions will be asked? And why does the fact that he has been charged not mean he's guilty? I find it all so confusing! … I have requested to have screens up so I wont be able to see him in the court room which is a small positive but still, I am so anxious about what's to come. So any advice/experiences no matter how small will be much appreciated, thank you! (67)

These excerpts highlight that victim-survivors sought advice around how to best navigate the criminal justice system. Other victim-survivors wanted to know more about others experiences in the aftermath of sexual violence, particularly in recovery:

> Does anyone have any advice for how to be less nervous all the time? … also does anyone have any advice for feeling less scared or angry when I see him? (42)

> :(How long is this supposed to take so I'm not bothered by it anymore? (195)

> I guess what I'm looking for here is advice on dealing with the rage. (86)

These victim-survivors, whilst clearly seeking support as well, also sought specific answers and strategies to help them cope with the emotional and psychological impacts of sexual violence. Many victim-survivors who posted to the forum had sought professional help through therapy, and this itself was something that they sought advice about:

> I am not sure I like [my therapist] and I don't really trust her yet. She keeps trying to talk about what happened that night, but I don't want to and I am having troubling remembering … Is it okay if I don't know how I feel and thus don't want to talk about it? (196)

> Anybody else feel more shame since getting therapy? (125)

For these victim-survivors, having professional support had not been enough, leading them to seek advice from an online community for a better response or for advice about to navigate relationships with their counsellor. Perhaps this indicates, as noted above, that having an audience of fellow victim-survivors to interact with is a significant motivator for some of those accessing /r/rapecounseling.

Similarly, many victim-survivors wanted to know if what they experienced during or in the aftermath of sexual violence was 'normal':

> Sometimes I wake up and feel numb all over my body and never feel like getting out of bed. In about 3 months it will have been a year since the day it all happened. How much longer will it take to feel normal again? Does anyone have tips that has helped them heal? (124)

> My reason for posting here is that I want to hear that my reaction was normal (from what I've read of other people's experiences the 'freeze-response' is pretty common), and that I didn't cause my sexual assault. This is what I needed to hear from an objective professional, but lately it feels like he's[therapist] saying the opposite. (160)

These narratives highlight that, in the aftermath of sexual violence, victim-survivors' needs, including emotional reassurance, are not always met by formal structures that they access, such as therapy or the justice system. This is reflected in studies that have assessed victim-survivor justice needs (Herman, 2005; McGlynn et al. 2012). In a similar vein, numerous victim-survivors were uncertain about what 'counted' as sexual assault or rape and, as such, sought advice from the community. Some victim-survivors seemed to be struggling with understanding their experiences of sexual violence in the context of societal myths about rape; for example, whether rape can occur without physical violence or resistance, or be perpetrated by an intimate partner. One asked:

> Can I really call myself a rape victim if I didn't do EVERYTHING possible to prevent him from having sex with me? (46)

> He is my husband, I've had sex with him thousands of times, I just can't seem to see how that was rape. (131)

It seems evident that some victim-survivors accessing /r/rapecounseling were seeking affirmation of some kind as to whether they had or had not experienced sexual violence. In another example, a male victim-survivor discussed struggling to name his experience as rape because it was perpetrated by a woman:

> I don't feel like I can call it sexual assault even though the hotline and my fiancé say it was. I know men can be raped by women and I know it's never the victims fault, but I can't get myself to recognize that is true for me as well … I still feel like it's my fault. (163)

This perhaps indicates that a broader culture of victim blaming has a deep impact on survivors in the aftermath of sexual violence. Similarly, some victim-survivors also seemed to be seeking clarification around consent:

> I'm really struggling because I don't know if what he did was … really sexual assault. I feel like it was my fault because I was the one who was TRYING to get him into bed. And I didn't do anything. And I didn't tell him not to have sex with me when I was asleep until it happened twice. (139)

This person seems to blame themselves for not saying no to sex while they were asleep, which is, legally, a consent-negating circumstance. /r/rapecounseling users would often respond to posts where victim-survivors sought clarification about their experiences by providing information about consent and consent-negating circumstances. /r/rapecounseling users would pick up on issues such as self-blame and encourage each other to recognise that sexual violence is never a victim's fault. Again, this suggests that online communities can provide victim-survivors with knowledge and support in the aftermath of sexual violence.

Storytelling: 'I just really needed to get it out'

Finally, victim-survivors are posting to /r/rapecounseling to share their stories. This section analyses how victim-survivors refer to their posts as 'stories', and in doing so, construct /r/rapecounseling as a community for storytelling. Survivors would discuss the importance of writing their experiences and sharing them:

> I'm sorry this was such a long post, but I really wanted to type this out. It's been 10 years since I was raped, but I finally feel strong enough to put it into words. Baby steps. (148)

> It took me a while to write this but I finally did. I don't know if anyone will read this but I'm just proud I was capable of talking about it, through writing at least. (161)

For these victim-survivors, it is not only the story that the /r/rapecounseling community hears and validates but also the act of storytelling. As seen in the quote above, some victim-survivors would apologise for the length of their story. However, it seems that the acknowledgement of length does not negate victim-survivors' needs to share their stories in the first place:

> My story is long, fair warning … (41)

> Please listen to me. This will have a long explanation. (58)

> Thank you if you read this long, ridiculous ramble. I just really needed to get it out. (119)

Others noted that it had not been easy to post their story but, importantly, recognise that stories and the community as a whole gave them courage to speak:

> I've been reading this sub for a while, but I'm finally getting up the courage to try to talk about what happened to me and try to make sense of it. I'm sorry this is likely to be a long post. I'm going to change all names in this story. (63)

This victim-survivor has noted that their passive use (sometimes called 'lurking' in other literature) of /r/rapecounseling gave them the strength to understand their own experience and share it. Another victim-survivor was even more explicit in discussing the profound impact of other survivors' storytelling:

> ... because of you I have strength ... I see these people that are coming out with their stories and feel like I should do the same. Thank you, survivors. You are an inspiration. (72)

Storytelling on /r/rapecounseling is a way for victim-survivors to provide a testimony of their experience. While more informal than a tribunal setting, arguably online communities offer better outcomes for victim-survivors who share their stories. This is because the audience is comprised of supportive peers with similar feelings and experiences, rather than a broader public. This notion is further explored in the following section, where I posit that storytelling is a practice allowing victim-survivors to be recognised

Digital platforms as spaces for recognition, justice and testimony: Exploring the broader implications of /r/rapecounseling

In this article, I have, by analysing /r/rapecounseling, explored why victim-survivors are accessing digital platforms. I found that victim-survivors use /r/rapecounseling to gain support and a sense of community, to seek advice and for storytelling. However, theoretical implications arise from these findings. As noted in the discussion section above, many victim-survivors' access /r/rapecounseling for storytelling in a supportive community. Perhaps what underlies this is that victim-survivors need recognition of their experiences to feel validated and heard. Recognition allows subjects to pursue and achieve identity through mutual identification (or feedback) from other subjects. It is normative in the sense that recognition is something that occurs between subjects, and it is psychological in the sense that recognition improves a subjects' relationship to their experiences (Taylor 1997). Analysing /r/rapecounseling using a lens of recognition is ideal as it aligns with the idea that accessing an online community is a way for individual victim-survivors to create a collective identity. Perhaps victim-survivors empower themselves through recognition and validation of their experiences by their supportive peers. This is supported by studies highlighting survivors have justice needs, including being heard and being believed when they disclose their experience of sexual violence (McGlynn et al. 2012).

Furthermore, I have suggested that online communities like /r/rapecounseling allow survivors to share their story, and that this storytelling is a way to record and acknowledge survivors' experiences of sexual violence. Victim-survivors construct /r/rapecounseling as a place where stories can be shared and validated. Perhaps by constructing the community as a place that values storytelling, each individual post (regardless of its content and purpose) becomes part of a collective counter-narrative of sexual violence. Perhaps such online communities can be thought of as rejecting the expected 'rape script' of other formal structures like the criminal justice system (Loney-Howes forthcoming). Because of this, I see storytelling as a useful overarching framework to consider the act of sharing on an online rape survivor community. However, it must be acknowledged that there are implications of victim-survivors sharing their experience online. For example, as noted by Fileborn (2014), when a victim-survivor shares their experience online, they potentially lose control over it. Having control is an important need for victim-survivors in the

aftermath of sexual violence. Studies with rape and sexual assault victim-survivors who shared their testimony through formal tribunals suggest that giving testimony meant that their words could be misused in the media and by researchers (Ross 2003). Further research with victim-survivors is needed to determine if this is a consideration that they undertake prior to sharing their story.

Unfortunately, research is yet to determine the impacts and value of online communities like /r/rapecounseling from the perspective of victim-survivors. Future qualitative research should aim to uncover the views and voices of victim-survivors using online communities and other digital platforms. There are many further questions that this study raise to researchers in this area. For example, if survivors are posting online to fulfil a need for recognition, what happens if this need is not met? Taylor (1997) suggests that 'misrecognition', when a person does not receive the outcome or recognition anticipated, can be harmful. As such, research that is inclusive of victim-survivors should be undertaken to explore the impacts of sharing experiences of sexual violence online.

Conclusion: 'I think it's great that this space exists'

Victim-survivors of sexual violence have 'justice needs' that are often not met by the criminal justice system (Clark 2010, 2015; Herman 2005; Jülich and Buttle 2010; McGlynn 2011; McGlynn et al. 2012). These needs include having a voice, being heard and being believed. The limited literature in this area suggests that victim-survivors generally use digital platforms for support, disclosure, 'digilantism' and storytelling. As noted earlier in this article, key scholars have made important suggestions about the pursuit of informal justice (Fileborn 2014; Powell 2015a, 2015b; Salter 2013;). Analysis of an online rape survivor community on reddit called /r/rapecounseling confirmed that victim-survivors are motivated by a need for support, advice and storytelling. It is feasible to suggest that survivors accessing /r/rapecounseling may also be fulfilling broader 'justice needs', albeit through informal processes. The findings of this article support the notion that storytelling is an important way for survivors to be heard and validated. I argue that online communities are spaces that encourage storytelling and, in doing so, become spaces of collective counter-narratives of sexual violence. While I suggest that storytelling equates to justice-seeking behaviour in this context, further research is needed with victim-survivors who use these spaces to determine the impacts of online disclosure.

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[1] The /r/ prefix to a reddit page denotes that the page is a subreddit, thus, the full title of the rape survivor community analysed in this article is /r/rapecounseling. A subreddit is a community that exists within reddit; these exist on a wide variety of topics.

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