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Social media disclosures of sexual violence in Iceland

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Introduction

Sexual violence victimisation is common across the Nordic countries (Kloppen, Haugland, Svedin, Mæhle, & Breivik, 2016). This type of victimisation relates to a range of maladaptive outcomes, including high levels of depressed mood, anger and anxiety (Asgeirsdóttir, Gudjonsson, Sigurdsson, & Sigfusdóttir, 2010; Peleikis, Mykletum, & Dahl, 2004; Sigurvinsdóttir, Asgeirsdóttir, Ullman, & Sigfusdóttir, 2017) and greater risk for suicidal and otherwise self-injurious behaviour, delinquency and substance use (Asgeirsdóttir, Sigfusdóttir, Gudjonsson, & Sigurdsson, 2011; Sigfusdóttir, Asgeirsdóttir, Gudjonsson, & Sigurdsson, 2008, 2013). Sexual violence is therefore an important public health problem with potentially life-altering effects. Disclosures of sexual violence are a vital part of the recovery and well-being of survivors of sexual violence.

Evidence from the United States suggests that disclosures of violence have important implications for survivors, both in terms of the decision to disclose and the reactions people receive from others (Tener & Murphy, 2015; Ullman, 1996a). Little is known about disclosures and social reactions in the Nordic countries, however. The introduction of social media has also given survivors a new way of sharing their experiences, such as traumatic events; these developments have yet to be explored adequately in the literature. In this chapter we examine Icelandic social media disclosures of sexual violence as well as explore the disclosure process, including determining why survivors disclose and studying the reactions they receive from others. Our findings from this study are exemplified from this post from a survivor: ‘The day I talked about it, not just with those closest to me, but with the entire internet, was the day I finally became free’.

We have chosen to employ the term ‘survivor’ of sexual violence, rather than ‘victim’, because several authors have noted in the literature that this distinction is important to those involved, as well as to the surrounding community. A large body of literature has been devoted to this topic, from which we will provide a few examples in this chapter. In many cases, those who have experienced sexual violence reject the term ‘victim’ because they feel the word invokes stereotypes of someone who is weak and passive, which does not fit with their experience or sense of self (Donovan & Hester, 2010). One example includes rape survivors in

Bosnia-Herzegovina, who prefer to be called ‘survivors’ because, in their view, survivors can get family support, avoid personal guilt and seek justice against perpetrators. Victims, on the other hand, try to hide violence and feel guilt, shame and bodily pain (Skjelsbæk, 2006).

Other community members also distinguish between these terms: An experimental study of rape vignettes showed that participants perceived a raped woman more positively when she was termed a ‘survivor’ rather than a ‘victim’ (Papendick & Bohner, 2017). The English-speaking participants in the study (which also included speakers of other languages) also found the term ‘survivor’ to be appropriate, especially when raped women applied this term to themselves. Given that we wish to emphasise the agency of survivors in disclosing their experiences on social media, and we do not wish to shame and blame them, we prefer the term ‘survivor’, even though we recognise that some may feel the word unnecessarily invokes ideas of life-threatening violence.

Disclosure of sexual violence

Disclosing sexual violence means to tell another person about an event or events, either formally or informally, and to do so either by self-motivation or following an invitation to tell (Ullman, 2003). Disclosures are crucial because without them, violence remains hidden, which makes it impossible to mobilise resources to help survivors and perpetrators. Survivors are more likely to disclose if they feel that doing so will benefit themselves or others and if they believe that societal norms would characterise the event as abusive (Tener & Murphy, 2015). Survivors are most likely to disclose to those they trust, such as friends and family members (Tener & Murphy, 2015). For example, one study found that young female rape survivors most commonly disclosed to friends first, followed by parents, other adults, partners and family members. Only 5.8% of the women told a professional about the event first, although slightly over half did at some point receive post-rape services (Bicanic, Hehenkamp, van de Putte, van Wijk, & de Jong, 2015).

Numerous barriers to disclosure exist, including gender. For example, male survivors are less likely to disclose than female survivors (Bicanic et al., 2015; Hébert, Tourigny, Cyr, McDuff, & Joly, 2009). Age is another barrier; children may wait months or even years to disclose after the first abusive event (Hébert et al., 2009; Jonzon & Lindblad, 2004). In a Swedish study on female survivors of childhood sexual abuse, for instance, two-thirds of the respondents only disclosed in adulthood (Jonzon & Lindblad, 2004). Adult disclosures can be self-motivated or prompted by others (Tener & Murphy, 2015), such as by being asked or encouraged by a therapist (Alaggia, 2004) or other people in a relevant social network. Hence, the decision to disclose in adulthood is usually intentional, and survivors may go through times of self-dialogue about if, when and how it is best to disclose (Del Castillo & Wright, 2009; Tener & Murphy, 2015). Survivors’ age therefore affects whether and how they decide to disclose.

Another barrier to disclosure is the survivor’s fear of other people’s negative reactions, as well as negative consequences following disclosure. For example,

survivors may fear not being believed, hurting others or being rejected by family or friends (Tener & Murphy, 2015). Survivors can also see disclosing violence as ‘coming out’, or admitting to having a concealable stigmatised identity – information that is typically devalued by society but that is not obvious from one’s appearance. To assume this type of identity can be a complex decision, because it may result in either receiving social support or being rejected by others (Pachankis, 2007). Ullman’s (2000) social reactions framework, which we draw on in this chapter, examines how others react to disclosure and categorises those reactions into positive and negative reactions. Positive reactions include providing emotional support and tangible aid, while negative reactions involve blaming the survivor for the violence, taking control away, distracting the person (for example by drawing attention away from the violent event), treating the person differently than before the disclosure or acting in an egocentric manner. Research from the United States (Ullman, 1996a, 1999) has shown that relationships affect reactions, as friends, relatives and rape-crisis counsellors are the most likely to provide positive reactions, but negative reactions are more common among physicians and police officers. Reactions to disclosures (especially negative ones) relate to a range of maladaptive outcomes, such as depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), the abuse of alcohol and substances and negative well-being (Orchowski, Untied, & Gidycz, 2013; Sylaska & Edwards, 2014; Ullman, 1996b). Survivors are therefore most likely to disclose to those they predict will be supportive, and they may be justified in fearing social reactions, because they can significantly affect their well-being.

Disclosing violence is a challenging process that involves gradual steps towards a comprehensive disclosure (Draucker & Martsolf, 2008; Hébert et al., 2009). The first reaction may determine whether the survivor decides to continue disclosing. Some scholars also believe that the final stage of disclosing involves sharing the story with a wider audience, such as the media (Draucker & Martsolf, 2008). Despite the prevalence of disclosures and the reported deleterious consequences of negative reactions for individuals and society, very limited Nordic research has been conducted on disclosures and their social reactions. The exception is a qualitative study from Norway in which both survivors and professionals were interviewed; the results confirmed the importance of the social context and the current lack of understanding of that context (Østby & Stefansen, 2017).

Social media disclosure of sexual violence and social reactions

Disclosure researchers to date have focussed on in-person disclosures, where a survivor discloses to one person (or a small group), who then reacts in some way. This disclosure can happen once or multiple times. Recent digital advances, however, have opened new ways of disclosing violence by allowing survivors to do so on the Internet, for example using social media. Sharing one’s story with a wider audience has become easier than ever before (Draucker & Martsolf, 2008). The online context may therefore shape the process of disclosing. Disclosing online may have unique characteristics because of the medium itself, such as being able to

instantly communicate with large groups, thus making the disclosure more public than traditional disclosures (Andalibi, Haimson, De Choudhury, & Forte, 2016). Online disclosures may also allow for survivor anonymity, which is not possible with in-person disclosures. Online disclosures more readily allow for social reactions from strangers, which before the onset of social media were mostly made possible in very specific contexts, such as in court cases.

Telling others about one's experiences of sexual violence on social media may therefore be different from traditional in-person disclosures, but little is known about the characteristics of such disclosures of sexual violence. One study, however (Bogen, Bleiweiss, & Orchowski, 2019), has examined social reactions on Twitter under the hashtag #notokay in which women shared their experiences with violence. Bogen et al. (2019) examined comments made on sexual-violence disclosures and categorised them using Ullman's social reactions framework. The most common reaction was advocacy, where users challenged misinformation about sexual violence, as well as those who posted negative comments. Advocacy (which could also be termed 'activism') was not part of the original social reactions framework and may therefore be a key way in which disclosures differ online and in person.

Most of the available literature on social reactions was developed before social media emerged, so research is lacking on disclosing in that context. In this chapter, we explore and aim to further understand social media disclosures of sexual violence among Icelandic survivors. We will examine posts where survivors have self-disclosed sexual violence on social media. The goal is to understand these disclosures: when and how they happened, what they contain and how similar they are to traditional, in-person disclosures. We will also examine reactions to disclosures in a quantitative and qualitative manner to better understand what impact they may have had on survivors. We have used the social reactions framework to categorise reactions as either positive or negative. Other researchers will then be able to use this information to further study disclosures in other Nordic contexts, and in a more detailed way, in order to better understand how they shape the well-being of survivors and communities as a whole.

Method

Data collection

The data set for this project includes 397 self-disclosure posts collected from public social media sites posted between April 2015 and March 2017 (data collected in May and June 2017). All posts were written in Icelandic on either Twitter (166 posts) or Facebook (231 posts). The search strategy for Twitter posts was the use of keywords and hashtags associated with sexual violence in public accounts (*ofbeldi*, *kynferðisofbeldi*, *#daginnestir*, *#konurtala*, and *#þöggun*¹). Facebook data were drawn from a group called 'Beauty tips', which is a semi-public group for women (which had over 34,000 members as of June 2018) where all women who request to join are accepted. The group was originally formed for women to share

information on fashion, hair, and makeup, but in May 2015, it spontaneously became a venue for women to disclose sexual victimisation, with the number of members in the group subsequently exploding. The same keywords that were used in the Twitter search were used when searching the group's page. Once posts had been identified that contained any of these keywords, they were reviewed to determine if they contained the inclusion criterion, which was a self-disclosure of sexual violence (and not a general discussion of violence or a disclosure of someone else's experiences).

Data

Basic descriptive information was gathered from the posts. Most survivors were female (94.5%, when gender could be determined). When the timing of violence was mentioned, most were found to have taken place in childhood (84.5%); timing was mentioned in one-third of the posts. When perpetrator information was provided (as occurred in the majority of cases), most mentioned one perpetrator (97.3%), who was male in 97.5% of cases and most commonly was a current/former romantic partner (23.2%) or family member (15.6%). Examples of sexual violence ranged from harassment, being forced to watch pornography and being touched on the outside of one's clothes to more serious acts, such as rape, attempted rape, exploitation of intoxication or sleep or forcing the survivor to have sex with others.

In addition to sexual violence, some posts also contained experiences of physical violence (such as slapping, beating, choking, ripping hair and more) and psychological violence (breaking survivors down with name calling, mocking, brainwashing and jealousy, among other actions). Repeated incidents of violence were observed in 14.4% of cases. About one-third of the participants had previously disclosed to someone in person; many of these had been delayed disclosures (close to half the disclosures involved events in the past three years). The longest time that had elapsed since victimisation was 35 years, and the shortest was a few days.

Methodology

When studying social media, it is important to realise the characteristics of the medium and how it can be approached. Our project has been informed by Rogers's (2013) notion of digital methodology; we believe that the Internet is not a realm inherently separate from the world. Rather, the online world acts as an extension of the 'real' world and exhibits continual interactions with traditional, in-person spaces. In this way, digital interactions can extend other types of communication and stimulate further interactions between members and networks of people (Rogers, 2013). We think this situation applies to online disclosures of sexual violence as well. Because the digital world can act as an extension of in-person spaces, disclosing on social media and in person can be thought of as intersecting circles, with certain commonalities and certain differences. For example, both involve telling one's own experiences and obtaining some form

of reaction from others. Disclosing in person, however, can allow one to attain richer reactions, such as non-verbal cues, that are usually unavailable online. Social media disclosures, on the other hand, take place in a more public venue and could therefore be thought of not only as personal expression but also as a way of making a statement on the topic. The identities of those who use social media can also be formed in both the online and offline worlds simultaneously (Rogers, 2013) – a situation with potential implications for how survivors see themselves and other survivors who are part of the same movement.

Because the data were collected from social media sites, the data have unique characteristics that differ from those used in traditional social-science approaches. This scenario creates both advantages and challenges. For example, one particular benefit for research is that, rather than relying on self-reported experiences and disclosures, researchers can examine how and when disclosures happen. In addition, the data may more closely present the viewpoint of survivors, as the disclosures are self-motivated and presented in their own words, rather than being framed by researchers. Using survivors' words directly can be an empowering act that prioritises the lived experiences of survivors and their view of themselves. Having said that, online spaces also have informal social rules that will also shape the disclosure process and the language that is used.

Different online platforms may also shape what survivors want to share with others and what they feel is contextually appropriate. The level of detail in posts will differ on the platforms we have included in this chapter, as Twitter only allows posts to be a maximum of 140 characters, but Facebook does not have a length limit. We treat all the posts as one type of material in our analyses, however, because we found powerful disclosures and descriptions on both platforms. Other limitations also include focussing only on public sites, as well as the users of these sites being more likely to be young and female. The data set may therefore under-represent the narratives of older women and of men, which reflects a generational norm in the use of technology and the disclosing of sexual violence, as well as a gendered norm in terms of self-disclosing sexual violence. When reading the analysis, it is important to keep in mind that the sample of disclosures is not representative of online disclosures in general. They offer an initial snapshot of what online disclosures include, as almost no information is available on this topic to date. Despite the characteristics and limitations of the data, we expect that these posts will tell us a great deal about online disclosures of sexual violence and how this topic could be studied in the future.

Ethical considerations

Social media research is developing quickly, so scholars have yet to agree on one single ethical standard or practice. The British Psychological Society (BPS), however, has published guidelines that we have followed in our work, called the 'Ethics Guidelines for Internet-Mediated Research'. The BPS explains that the four main principles for ethical conduct of research are: '1) Respect for autonomy, privacy and dignity of individuals and communities, 2) Scientific

integrity, 3) Social responsibility and 4) Maximising benefits and minimising harm' (British Psychological Society, 2017, p. 2). These principles apply to the use of Internet data in multiple ways, such as (1) the question of whether public or private data is used and whether identifiable data is collected, (2) the informing of participants about data collection and (3) the gaining of consent for collecting data, when appropriate.

In addition to the BPS, the study was designed with guidance from the Icelandic Data Protection Authority (IDPA). We have taken measures to conduct this study ethically, for example by limiting our analyses to public data. On Twitter, this meant only finding posts from public accounts, but on Facebook, we sought content from the semi-public Facebook group Beauty tips, which the IDPA has ruled may be considered public content because of the group's large number of members. Before we collected data from the group, we posted information on the site to say that we were planning to conduct this study; we gave survivors a week to remove their posts or asked them to contact us if they did not wish to be included (which no one did). The posts were then collected without any identifying information. The purpose of the analysis is to examine broad themes about disclosure, so there should be no risk to individual participants. When we have wished to anonymously quote specific survivors, however – such as in this chapter and in previous presentations – we have sought explicit permission from survivors. Those we have contacted have all given their permission, and some have specifically remarked that they felt respected and empowered by their words being presented and discussed publicly.

Analysis

The analytical strategy for this project consists of coding and thematic analysis, which is an accessible and flexible method of identifying and organising themes in a data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The process involves familiarising oneself with the data, generating initial codes and searching for, reviewing and naming themes. The final step involves generating a narrative summary of the results (Riger & Sigurvinsdóttir, 2015). First, we used deductive provisional coding, in which we gathered descriptive information from the posts based on previously defined categories (Saldaña, 2015). Examples of codes we used were whether an in-person disclosure was mentioned, what types of social reactions were given (both in-person and online) and what violence characteristics were mentioned, such as types of violence and severity. The authors created the coding scheme after reviewing the data set, and then the third author applied the scheme to each post. Second, we used inductive provisional coding to identify themes that emerged from the data set. For example, survivors who had experienced a sense of community very clearly emerged from the data. Once these codes were applied, we created broader themes by aggregating codes on similar topics that reflected similar meanings. The themes presented in this chapter were formed in both an inductive and deductive manner and are related to disclosure (i.e. they are facilitators to disclosure and reactions).

The results section below broadly follows the process of disclosing violence. First, we focus on when the disclosures took place, then on what survivors described as facilitators and barriers, and finally on the reactions the disclosures elicited.

Results

Societal discussions of sexual violence: an opportunity for disclosure

One initial impression when examining the social media disclosures in the data set is that they occurred at very specific times, when a broader societal discussion of sexual violence was taking place. Figure 14.1 shows the number of posts over the time period of the study, from April 2015 to March 2017.

Figure 14.1 shows that the disclosures came in waves, with three clear spikes that coincided with public acts of activism. The first spike occurred in the summer of 2015, when the ‘Beauty tips revolution’ took place in May and June. These disclosures may have been motivated by seeing other survivors disclose, although the spike in disclosures also continued throughout July 2015. The Reykjavik ‘Slut Walk’, an event in which people protest sexual violence and shift the blame for violence from survivors to perpetrators, was held on 25 July 2015 for the fifth time. This type of survivor-positive event may therefore have facilitated some disclosures. The second spike in disclosures took place in November 2015, when large crowds gathered outside the main building of the Reykjavik Metropolitan Police to protest perceived leniency within a specific sexual assault case. The third spike took place in July 2016, when the Slut Walk was held for the sixth time. Between these time points, very few disclosure posts were published. These social media disclosures therefore seem connected to societal discussions of sexual violence and possibly by seeing other survivors leading by example.

Figure 14.1 Number of self-disclosure posts of sexual violence over time.

Disclosures

Survivors commonly explained in their posts why they had decided to disclose their experiences with sexual violence. The most common facilitator to disclosure was seeing others talk about their experiences, which was a major motivating factor to coming forward with their own stories. Here is one example (all translations in this chapter, from Icelandic to English, have been slightly edited for clarity and punctuation):

I'm so proud of you girls for telling your stories, because they've helped me get mine out and finally talking about it, and I encourage all women who've had to carry such a heavy burden to talk about it!

Another example illustrates that the survivor felt especially compelled to disclose after having seen a disclosure from a friend. It therefore seems important not just that survivors see someone else disclose but also that they feel some kind of personal connection (such as knowing the person or having had a similar kind of experience):

I've been looking at posts here from girls after this amazing revolution started and have been thinking how amazing it is for them!! I also thought that I'd never tell my story! Then I saw a post from one of my best friends, and it touched me, so I thought, why the hell am I keeping something secret and being ashamed for something that's not my fault?? So this is my story.

Survivors thus influenced others by telling their story in such a public manner, which they saw as a positive development. Another facilitator to disclosure was not only seeing others disclose but also feeling some kind of shared sense of community about the issue, which could reflect the fact that survivors saw how common violence is and that disclosures are typically met with understanding and support. Public discussions may therefore have contributed to an empowering sense of community between survivors:

I can barely describe how thankful I am for all of you. Countless stories have appeared on this site. These stories have helped me so much in the past few days. You are so strong, and now I'm going to be strong as well.

I'm sitting here with tears in my eyes after reading the stories here. Dearest girls, we need to stick together and bring attention to this very serious and important topic. You are heroes!

Some survivors even described that this sense of community had helped them disclose in person:

I've never been so proud to be an Icelandic woman as I am today. Because of you, I finally had the guts to tell my parents the whole truth.

This sense of community was also reflected in the vocabulary people used in the posts, with the Icelandic equivalent of words such as ‘bravery’, ‘pride’ and ‘hero’ featuring prominently; in these descriptions, brave survivors were those who were willing to talk about their experience publicly. The group therefore saw some individuals as leading by example and being positive role models to others. This is a new dimension to disclosing that may be unique to disclosing online:

Thank you, girls, for beginning to talk and sharing. You are incredibly brave. I’m going to be brave like you.

This sense of community and solidarity in some cases even assumed an almost military-style language, which may have reflected the activism inherent in disclosing online:

I’m so proud of this revolution and will stand with this revolution and everyone who’s told their story here until the bitter end.

These facilitators were very salient to the survivors, but the survivors also mentioned that they no longer experienced the barriers to disclosure that had previously held them back from telling their stories. Shame was the most significant barrier to disclosing and had significantly affected the lives of many survivors. This shame had kept survivors from talking about violence, but the fact that they no longer felt that way was one of the strongest themes found in the data set. They hence felt that talking about violence could counteract the negative effects of shame, especially when done in a way that would not blame survivors:

My whole life I’ve thought that it was my fault that it happened, because I got myself into the situation, but I know that that’s not true.

I’ve never talked about it, because I always thought that the guilt and shame were mine, but today I know better!

Many survivors also stated that the survivor sense of community had helped them ‘give the shame back’ to the perpetrator:

Thank you for sharing your stories. It’s great to feel this solidarity in breaking the silence and giving back the shame.

Reactions to disclosures

As shown previously, survivors reported experiencing a sense of community when they disclosed sexual violence. These stories are powerful, but the use of social media platforms also allows us to examine and even quantify the survivors’ reactions to disclosures. At the time the posts were made, Facebook and Twitter only had the click option of ‘liking’ a post (today the options on Facebook represent a variety of

feelings, such as anger, sadness, and more). The number of likes per post can be used as an indicator of how many people want to show the survivor some kind of support. The number of likes for the posts ranged from 0 to 2,300, with a median number of likes of 98. The number of comments ranged from 0 to 256, with a median number of reactions of 11. This was a much higher number of reactions than could be expected when disclosing in person. The comments to the posts were overwhelmingly positive, if superficial. For example, many of the comments simply included a heart emoji or a few positive words about the survivor. In our material, we did not find a single negative reaction (although it is possible that someone could have made and then deleted a negative comment).

To provide some context for these reactions, we also examined the posts for reactions that survivors reported receiving in person from others. The positive in-person reactions were diverse, such as the rejection of the perpetrator by friends and family as well as romantic partners being patient with survivors who struggled with sexual activity following acts of violence. In fact, some survivors reported that reactions from others had helped the survivors define and frame the violent event itself and to seek help:

I immediately called my friend crying my eyes out and then hadn't fully realised that I'd been raped. I just felt terrible – felt dirty and completely broken down – but thankfully she realised straight away that I'd been raped, helped me see that, and told me to go straight to the emergency room.

Although the online reactions found in this data set were only positive, survivors generally receive a mixture of positive and negative reactions when they disclose in person (Sigurvinsdóttir & Ullman, 2015). In line with previous studies, the survivors examined in our material who had received negative reactions to in-person disclosure described how these reactions had affected them negatively:

When I talked about it [the violence] a few years later, others called me a liar because I hadn't fought back...I decided to just shut up and try to protect my reputation.

Negative reactions can also affect the seeking of help following violence:

I was going to press charges, but the first police officer I talked to said, 'But he is, after all, your boyfriend'. I walked out and never again tried to press charges – my soul was completely broken.

It is difficult to say whether getting online reactions may serve the same purpose as in-person reactions, with the latter seeming deeper and more meaningful to the survivor. At the same time, harmful negative reactions did not seem to have taken place in the online context of this study. Another possibility is that disclosing online had prompted some in-person reactions that could have been either positive or negative; whether these online disclosures had also prompted

in-person reactions as well remains unclear. On the whole, online reactions' impacts on survivors require further examination.

Discussion

This study was an initial effort to examine social media disclosures of sexual violence, which are similar to in-person disclosures in that delayed disclosures are prominent (Bicanic et al., 2015; Hébert et al., 2009; Jonzon & Lindblad, 2004). Seeing others disclose on social media is a powerful motivator for people to disclose. This scenario may be unique to the online context because of the public nature of the disclosure. These participants presented disclosing on social media as a crucial part of rejecting the shame they had felt and that others had projected onto them.

Social media disclosures can also serve to build social support and a sense of community among survivors, both of which affect survivor well-being (Tener & Murphy, 2015; Ullman, 1999). Little is known about online communities of sexual violence survivors, although researchers have examined this issue for other topics. For example, receiving social support when self-disclosing mental health issues online is connected with fewer depressive symptoms and an increased quality of life (Rains & Young, 2009). In addition, online support groups for breast cancer patients have been effective in reducing perceived stress, depression and cancer-related trauma (Winzelberg et al., 2003). From the posts we examined, we cannot conclude that the survivors were positively affected by disclosing, but the salience of the social-support theme among the survivors is promising.

Societal discussions of violence may also facilitate online disclosures, which was visible from the timing of the disclosures. These time points, however, were characterised not only by discussions of sexual violence but also by very specific survivor-centred discussions that focussed on explicitly shifting blame from survivor to perpetrator. Discussing in this particular way, rather than having discussions of sexual violence in general, may therefore be the key ingredient to facilitate disclosure. The disclosure themes are also likely to converge. For example, societal discussions may be enough to motivate some survivors to come forward, while others will be motivated both by general discussions and by seeing others disclose. This situation is in line with previous research on in-person disclosures, where social norms regarding disclosure and violence are an important factor (Tener & Murphy, 2015).

The social media themes can be placed in a theoretical context by using the disclosure process model, where individuals self-disclose some kind of a concealable stigmatised identity to others (Chaudoir & Fisher, 2010). Being a sexual-violence survivor is such an identity, as the label is stigmatised and not obvious from one's appearance; in fact, many of the survivors in our study talked about online disclosures as a kind of 'coming out' process. The disclosure process model states that disclosing a concealable stigmatised identity may positively affect individuals and communities in the long term through three processes. First, not feeling able to share the experience with others can be taxing to the

individual and can claim cognitive resources; indeed, our data show that survivors felt relief associated with sharing their experiences. Second, disclosure can have positive effects because it can lead to social support, which was very much the case with the survivors in our study; they reported feeling strong online social support from others. Finally, disclosure can have positive effects because people who have disclosed have now changed the social information now available about them to the world, which can then allow for people to change their behaviour accordingly, for example by seeking out communities of support among those with the same identity. The survivors in our study seemed to have entered this kind of community simply by disclosing in this way (Chaudoir & Fisher, 2010). Even though the design of this study has not allowed for the health or well-being of the survivors to be assessed, the fact that the disclosure themes fit so well with previous research on positive outcomes is promising.

Reactions from others have an impact on survivors. This study has shown that online reactions were only positive, either as likes or positive comments, which is in accordance with the only other published study on online social reactions to date, where the majority of comments were positive, and the online community actively challenged negative comments (Bogen et al., 2019). Previous studies on in-person disclosures have shown that negative reactions are common, such as accusing the survivor of lying or blaming the survivor. Negative in-person reactions relate to overall well-being and poorer mental health, such as depressive symptoms, PTSD and the abuse of alcohol and substances (Orchowski et al., 2013; Sylaska & Edwards, 2014; Ullman, 1996b). Positive in-person reactions are typically beneficial, but this effect is more modest than for negative reactions (Sigurvinsdóttir & Ullman, 2015). The in-person reactions presented in this study tended to fall into extreme positive and negative categories, which could reflect that extreme reactions (either good or bad) were the most salient to survivors and were therefore what they included in their posts. Reactions can significantly affect survivors in many ways, for example by defining the experience itself and from the closest community taking a stance (or not) about the survivor and perpetrator. This situation speaks to the importance of contextual factors in survivors' recovery.

When we compared online and in-person reactions, we found that online disclosures received a greater number of reactions than those in person (Dworkin, Pittenger, & Allen, 2016; Littleton, Axsom, Breitkopf, & Berenson, 2006). In addition, we found all the online social reactions to have been positive, although many of the comments seemed superficial. When survivors disclose in person, they typically receive both positive and negative reactions (Sigurvinsdóttir & Ullman, 2015). Researchers should thus focus on finding very detailed information about online reactions and how disclosures have shaped subsequent in-person reactions.

The dataset clearly displayed cultural narratives and norms about sexual violence. In some cases, survivors mentioned these narratives so that they could explicitly challenge them. For example, some survivors described that others

had ‘slut-shamed’ them for their victimisation, and some had internalised their feelings of shame. The survivors mentioned these situations to point out how unfair and damaging this idea is, both in general and to individual survivors. In many cases, the survivors noted that the violence was not their fault, regardless of the circumstances. The survivors rejected the perceived cultural norm that survivors whose behaviour has not been impeccable were in some way ‘asking for it’. We may think of this overt rejection of victim-blaming and other destructive cultural narratives as taking an activist stance against sexual violence. For example, Keller (2012) has argued that young people increasingly use various online spaces for political purposes. Not only does this create diverse communities and content, but it also opens up the possibility of non-traditional activism. In this way, survivors can organise themselves around the survivor identity, rather than using traditional divides of gender, race, class and other groupings. This element of activism also differentiates between traditional and social media disclosures, as in-person disclosures rarely contain such clear rejections of stereotypes and narratives about violence.

The posts also reinforced other potentially detrimental cultural narratives, however. For example, the language of the posts was very gendered, with repeated use of the word ‘girls’ and one survivor being ‘proud to be an Icelandic woman’. Implicit in this language is the assumption that survivors of sexual violence are always female. Although statistics show that females are more likely to be victimised (Asgeirsdottir et al., 2011; Rajan et al., 2017), male survivors do exist, and they are somewhat excluded from this community of survivors. The digital aspect may also exclude older adults. The space that a community creates can therefore be very empowering for those within it, but such space does not seem to be available to everyone.

Because this research topic is so new, studies need to be conducted in the future to understand online disclosures and their impact; for example, the mental health implications of online disclosures and reactions remain poorly understood. In addition, no studies to date have examined how in-person and online disclosures and reactions shape each other, and whether people who disclose online will also disclose in person. In order to address these questions, a large longitudinal research project is planned in Iceland during the years 2018–2021 (Asgeirsdottir & Sigurvinsdottir, 2018).

Conclusion

This study has been an initial effort to examine online disclosures of sexual violence. Given the profound impact that survivors have described in terms of the importance of disclosing, and the impact of the reactions survivors have received, we believe that the results highlight how important the social context is to survivors. Since the time the data were collected for this study, online disclosures have exploded worldwide with the #metoo movement. We believe that gathering and analysing this type of information from Iceland may be useful to researchers in other Nordic countries who wish to study digital disclosure and supportive online

communities. Even though the details of the disclosures will vary between countries and cultures, we think that researchers may use the broad themes developed in this study as a guide for future studies on this topic.

Note

- 1 Translations of search terms: violence, sexual violence, #thenextday, #womentalk, #silencing.

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