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Katelin A. Smith

Appalachian State University, smithka21@appstate.edu

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Exploring Why Women Use #MeToo to Share Personal Experiences of Sexual Assault: A Qualitative Descriptive Study

Katey Smith

Appalachian State University

Abstract

In October 2017 millions of women shared their experiences with sexual assault and harassment via social media platforms as part of the #metoo movement. A surprising feature of the #MeToo movement was women's openness to share these experiences on public forums including Twitter and Facebook. Few studies have explored the factors that led women to share their personal experiences. This proposed project will use qualitative in-depth interviews to: 1) describe the motivations of women leading them to share their experiences with sexual assault and/or harassment, and 2) elucidate how sharing these experiences on social media impacts upon their recovery and social connections with communities of similarly-impacted women. This study utilized a snowball sampling method to recruit fourteen women who have used social media to share their experiences with sexual assault through my own personal social networks, including online group memberships and affiliation with Greek organizations on campus. These interviews were all conducted in person or over the phone, audio recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed for common themes. Women were interviewed from the U.S., Pakistan, Canada, and Singapore. The interviews highlight several reasons which lead up to one sharing an experience on a social media platform, including factors such as lack of family support or seeing social media as a mechanism to release emotions in a new way. The results clarify why women might feel more

comfortable sharing a potentially traumatic experience via online social media platforms rather than in-person between social confidants.

Keywords: Sexual assault, Sexual harassment, Social Media, Qualitative In-depth interview

Introduction

Social media platforms facilitate the formation of online communities and personal connections across multiple contexts including work, friendships, national organizations, LGBTQ+ groups and minority groups. Social movements gained momentum through the use of media influence to extend education and information to a larger portion of the population. The #MeToo movement, which attracted a large number of followers in 2017, is illustrative of the role that technology can play in progressing social movements. Technology and media influence have allowed the #MeToo movement to flourish and share the stories of many women who were silenced before this movement.

In 2003, the #MeToo movement was founded by Tarana Burke. Burke began this movement after counseling a young teenage girl who had previously experienced sexual abuse. This movement was created for young, black female teenagers who have previously or are currently experiencing sexual or domestic violence. Individuals of color are much more likely to experience sexual assault and much less likely to report any harassment or abuse. Predators often know this and will target young black females due to the fact that they are more likely to be overlooked in today's society and less likely to report the attack. Black Feminism interprets this injustice through the lens of intersectionality, which recognizes the unique barriers that are implemented for both black individuals and female identifying individuals.

The #MeToo movement did not expand significantly until October 2017 when Alyssa Milano tweeted the phrase “If you’ve been sexually harassed or assaulted write #MeToo as a reply to this tweet.” This post was a reaction to the Harvey Weinstein scandal where many women in the entertainment industry shared their personal experiences with Harvey Weinstein and the immense pain that he caused them through his sexually violent behavior. The Tweet went viral instantly with more than 1.7 million reactions in less than ten days of being posted. Following Alyssa Milano, many celebrities participated in advocating for this movement and encouraging women to share their own personal stories with sexual trauma.

Few studies have been conducted surrounding the motivations and outcomes of an individual choosing to share a traumatic experience online. The internet allows individuals to choose where their story is told and who it will be directed to. Being able to choose the audience and the platform is more appealing to some survivors of sexual violence rather than having to attend in person counseling or support groups. For some victims, online communities of internet users have become what could be described as a “safe space” to share a personal experience. The formation of online communities through closed groups and online chats assists with networking those who have experienced similar traumas.

Online communities that have been created for victims of sexual violence typically have criteria and rules which apply to the online space that is being dedicated to positive conversation. These rules ensure that there will be no risks or danger with sharing a personal experience but that the space is provided to only offer support and advice from those who have been in similar circumstances. These spaces consist of closed Facebook groups, Facebook Messenger chats, Instagram chats, Twitter DM chats and various other forms of private social media platforms. These differ from public posts and are often more appealing to those considering sharing their

story because of the ability to choose the audience. This ensures that the victim does not have to share the specific post with coworkers, employers, family members or whoever else the victim might not wish to share an experience with.

Literature Review

Feminist Theory and Black Feminist Theory

Society is currently experiencing a third wave of feminism which began in the 1990s. Feminist theory refers to the ideas and experiences of daily life through the perspective of a woman. Feminist theory is aligned with the Feminist Social movement which advocates for equal rights and the equal treatment of women. Women experience inequality within the labor force, the housing market, and various other sectors of everyday life. Statistics on sexual assault suggest that this holds true for women's bodily autonomy as well. While men that can also suffer from sexual abuse, women are much more likely to endure a sexual or domestically violent attack. Black Feminist Theory approaches the Feminist Theory from the perspective of a Black woman and describes the various barriers that Black women experience due to the intersectionality of being black and a female. People of color are much less likely to report a sexual assault and are also less likely to have their cases investigated compared to their white counterparts. Dr. Patricia Hill Collins introduces the idea of Intersectionality in terms of the 'matrix of domination' which refers to the idea that one's position in society is based on many contiguous standpoints rather than just one standpoint. This means that a Black woman will experience abuse differently because she will experience oppression from being African American but also because she is female. Collins also discusses the ways that black women are viewed differently in society in her famous work titled "Black Sexual Politics." In this work she explains that black women are seen as being more promiscuous and sexually open. This idea has

previously been used to justify the assaults of black women, saying that they ‘asked’ for it or were encouraging this kind of behavior through expressing sexual freedom.

Activism

Activism can be defined as the practice of, or orientation toward, taking action, often implying the context of a social or political movement. Although activism emphasizes collective action, an individual and his or her actions may be considered “activist” depending on their relationship to larger struggles. (Nepvux 21) Activism is often interchanged with the word advocacy or advocate meaning to push for social change or policy which will benefit a specific minority group or encourage the dismissal of inequality. Activism has become increasingly relevant in recent years due to many pressing social injustices being ignored or deemed irrelevant by those who are in great positions of authority. Feminist Activism plays an important role in the expansion of the #MeToo movement. Feminist Activists acknowledge how sexual violence is ravaging and targeting a specific demographic within this country. Activism can promote education and conversation around sexual violence, consent, and many other important concepts regarding safe, sexual behaviors.

Online Social Activism

Online Social Activism, including Hashtag Activism, can be explained as *participatory culture* which considers online interaction as a mechanism for individuals to create social support and connection with one another (Ciszek, 2013) and constitute a driving force of civic engagement (Burgess & Green, 2009). Hashtag activism as a form of participatory culture enables individual users to form groups around particular topics and events (Xiong, Cho, and Boatwright 2019). The #MeToo movement exemplifies this concept. The #MeToo hashtag calls for civic engagement through sharing a personal story to connect among others who have shared

a similar experience. Hashtag Activism has been used alongside other social movements including #Blacklivesmatter and #takebackthenight. Through the Internet, these movements can reach a larger portion of the population.

Methods

Fourteen one-on-one, qualitative interviews were conducted by the author to explore the reasons and motivations behind women's use of #MeToo to share experiences of sexual assault and harassment.

Interviews were conducted with women 18 years of age or older. While males do experience sexual trauma, this study specifically focuses on women who have experienced sexual harassment or abuse and have shared that experience online. Women were recruited using a snowball sampling method through the researcher's personal social networks, online group memberships and affiliation with Greek organizations on a large regional state university campus in the Southeastern U.S. Flyers were utilized in the recruitment process to promote the study. All study procedures were approved by the Institutional Review Board at the sponsoring university.

Most participants were recruited through an online Facebook page aimed towards women who needed a space to share their personal experience with sexual assault. To enter this specific space, one is required to fill out a questionnaire that includes questions pertaining to the individual's ability to positively contribute to the page as well as their ability to respect the privacy of the page. The individual must be accepted into the specific online community by the creator of the page. All of the posts within this community are closely monitored to ensure the safety of all members. The author posted a description of her study on this page to invite participants and recruit them for interviews.

Data Collection

These interviews were either conducted in person or over the phone as well as audio recorded. The interviews were then transcribed verbatim and analyzed for common themes. To analyze the data the researcher developed a thematic analysis through coding the transcriptions of each interview. The interview guide was split into four sections: demographic survey, prior knowledge or experience of the #MeToo movement, personal experience with sharing sexual abuse story, and the differences between sharing an experience online rather than in person. The questions really dove into the thoughts and connections surrounding the movement before proceeding into the direct motivations. This was to explore the idea that there could be a relationship between prior knowledge of the movement and sharing a personal experience. This would then imply that the movement is encouraging more women to come forward based on the comfort of others sharing as well. The interviews had many common responses between them and produced five themes relating to the motivations of one's decision to share a personal experience with sexual assault online.

Data Analysis

Transcripts from the qualitative interviews were analyzed using Thematic Analysis. First, the author reviewed each transcript while coding the transcripts using words that appeared frequently throughout the interviews. Once highlighting all of the consistent terms, the author began breaking the various coded words into similar categories. The categories were then examined for close relationships and connections which led to the development of themes throughout the research. Common themes were identified across interviews. The author then began linking illustrative quotes to specific themes to clarify the message being implied through each theme.

Results

Five themes were identified from the interview transcript (1) the Internet facilitates sharing a traumatic experience (2) an online social movement has led to forming an online community (3) Many share their experiences to assist others in healing from their own (4) A lack of family support will cause victims to turn to the Internet as an outlet (5) online social movements contain unique features that really separate an online platform from a physical one.

Internet Facilitates Sharing a Traumatic Experience

Throughout the interviews participants described how that sharing an experience of sexual assault through the Internet is often easier than having to share an experience physically in person. There are a few explanations for this. Many participants said that the most appealing aspect of sharing a story online is the opportunity for additional time and preparation that sharing online allows. When constructing a post on any social media platform, one is able to elaborate and emphasize which parts of the story should be deemed as the most important. Unlike a counseling appointment which is typically scheduled for a specific time range, sharing, and constructing an experience online does not have a time limit. The experience can be altered before posting to ensure that the experience will be presented in the exact way that the victim intended. One participant stated:

Before it was really difficult to share it in person, I feel like yeah it is easier to share online because you can't see my emotions through online text, and I can take a while to type this message out but when I am talking to a person there might be pauses and there might be times when I need to collect myself but I just can't because I don't have time.

Many women also chose to just use the hashtag instead of sharing an entire detailed description of their experience with sexual violence. The fear of others' reactions can often steer victims

from sharing their own experience to avoid creating an uncomfortable environment. This is not a barrier when sharing the experience online. Another participant mentioned:

Absolutely, to share it in person I have learned creates a level of shame or guilt or regret for not taking some kind of perceived action and doing things face to face you can see things in people's eyes that maybe thoughts they cannot control, people can't control their face sometimes. That helps, the Internet and Facebook helps.

Online Social Movements Have Led to Online Communities

Many interviews included extensive discussions about the women's involvement in the #MeToo movement. The #MeToo movement is unique in the way that most social action relating to the movement has been performed online through social media posts, closed social media groups and pages specifically created to provide resources to victims. Most of the participants for this study were recruited through a closed Facebook group which was created solely for victims of sexual abuse to share their own personal stories in a safe environment. This is an example of an online community. The purpose of this online community is to provide support and advice in a private space. This allows for discussion between individuals who have experienced similar trauma as well as allows victims to explore other women's healing process. The women were also asked what it truly means to be involved with the movements. The main forms of involvement included supporting other survivors, sharing information and resources, and educating others on the topic of sexual violence. One participant explained her involvement as:

Being aware of it, being supportive of it. Listening, learning to listen to people about their experiences when they come out. A great example is an old friend of mine from junior high and I reconnected and in our personal discussions we talk about different things and I recently learned something that she went through. I was able to be supportive and I

think give some appropriate therapeutic advice on the experience and not being alone.
Things I've seen on the #MeToo page.

Women Share Their Own Experiences to Help Others

When questioned on the motivations that led up to one sharing a personal experience with sexual abuse or harassment, “to help others” was a consistent answer. Sharing an experience can show others that they are not alone in this unfortunate circumstance. This allows victims to feel as if they can make some light out of their sexual abuse by educating other victims about their options for dealing with the assault. Some victims will admit that they did not share their own experience until they saw someone do it before them. This has created somewhat of a positive domino effect where many women are gaining the courage to come forward. By posting a personal experience, many of the participants stated that their purpose is to raise awareness and hopefully assist in preventing future attacks. One participant stated:

I recently found out that the guy who raped me became an Uber driver and I didn't want someone else to experience what he did so I decided to speak out about what happened to me so that people would be aware.

One point that was acknowledged by many women throughout this research is the introduction of trigger warnings to all posts containing details of an assault or harassment. There is a bit of controversy on the use of trigger warnings within the closed page because many believe that you are aware of the stories which will be shared within the closed group but there are some who say that some specific experiences which are shared can be very triggering for the individual, making the group less of a positive safe-space. However, most do demonstrate support for the idea of including a trigger warning on a public post due to the fact that it could be unexpected by one's personal network on their social media accounts.

Lack of Family Support Leads Women to Online Sharing

There are many reasons that a victim of sexual assault may decide against sharing their story. Fear, shame, and guilt are often mentioned when explaining the barriers to sharing one's experience. Being that most attacks involve someone who already has a prior relationship with the victim, many victims fear sharing their story due to the status or reputation of the attacker. If the attacker is a family member the situation will become greatly more complex. A common experience that was consistent through most of the interviews was that many victims did not receive adequate support from their family members or close friends causing these women to search for other outlets. Some women did not feel comfortable sharing their experience with a family member and instead searched for an alternative outlet. Most participants emphasized that most of their support came from complete strangers within the closed Facebook group rather than from close family or friends. Some explained this was because they perceived their families as unsupportive when they asked them not to share their experience to preserve family ties or simply because they did not believe them. Among the women interviewed in this study, this was often the case when the assault involved another family member. One participant shared why she felt she cannot reveal her experience publicly:

Again, just feeling like in another stage of my personal healing and growth. What of the things I battled with and continue to battle with is my abuser is a family member and so I was not able to shut him out of my life, even now as much as I feel support in my ability to do that, like I wouldn't be alone and besides whatever family dynamic that would create, I still haven't done that, but I am working hard to do that.

Online Social Movements Have Unique Features

There are a few distinct characteristics held by online social movements which separate

them from social movements occurring largely face-to-face. The first characteristic an online social movement has is that the audience can be chosen. The platform on which the story or post is shared is completely up to the discretion of the victim. Throughout all of the interviews, it was consistent that people's in-person networks greatly differ from their online networks and connections. Online social movements do not typically consist of rallies or marches but are closely connected and often offer a great deal of information on face-to-face events that could be related to the movement. Individuals also seem to prefer online social movements due to the additional privacy that an online social movement is perceived to offer them.

Resistance to the #MeToo movement and the use of the Internet to share personal experiences of sexual assault include the idea that anyone can hide behind a computer screen. This allows for fake accounts to access personal stories through closed Facebook groups, even if they are monitored closely. The idea that one's story could potentially be accessible to others indefinitely does not sit right with some women. Indeed, some women believe that the lack of personal interaction can harm the healing process more than it can actually assist in it.

Discussion

This is one of the first studies to explore in-depth how women use online platforms to share their experiences of sexual assault and how these activities assisted them within their personal healing process. Women's' stories of sharing their experiences through the #MeToo movement helps to clarify the benefits and oppositions to an online social movements and communities. The motivations described in this study suggest that social media provides an outlet for many victims throughout their own healing process. There have been oppositions mentioned concerning the movement but mostly the movement has strictly benefitted those who chose to be involved. #MeToo has provided a voice to those who have been silenced due to fear,

shame, or guilt. Many women have grown to find the closed social media groups as a “safe space,” especially when compared to their own personal support networks, who may deny or act to suppress their stories. The ability to create and share one’s story allows the victim to take back control of the situation and present the information in as much or little detail as desired.

Additional research is greatly needed on this topic to illuminate how sharing an experience of sexual assault shapes the recovery process for women. The study limitations include the lack of male opinion and experience as well as the lack of previous research on social movements which seem to strictly flourish online. While the study did include international interviews, an increase of global opinion can assist in comparing which strategies of sharing an experience have seemed to prove most effective as well as outline the cultural differences which drive the social movements surrounding sexual violence. This study can directly benefit those who are unable to directly report their assault for various reasons such as mental health issues, family relationships or just the fear of authority in general. Sharing an experience online has shown to benefit individuals by providing an outlet to those who had no place to share before. This concept could potentially lead to the development of future online programs which assist in reporting sexual violence to law enforcement, social workers and specific organizations which assist with sexual abuse. Research should also further explore exactly where sharing an experience online can fit in a healing process and if it can be harmful to do this too early in one’s process.

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