Virtual support communities: supporting survivors of sexual assault

Acknowledgement of Country

I wish to acknowledge the traditional owners, the Boon Wurrung/Bunurong people of the Kulin nation, as custodians of the land on which I sit (Phillip Island, Victoria). And as a student of Curtin University, I acknowledge the traditional owners, the Wadjuk people of the Nyungar Nation on which the Bentley Campus sits, and the Wongutha people of the North-Eastern Goldfields, where the Kalgoorlie Campus is located. I pay my respects to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander members of these communities and to their elders past, present and emerging.

Warning

This paper contains content about sexual assault that may be upsetting for some readers. Please use discretion.

Abstract

This paper examines how virtual support communities that use and exist on social media platforms have the potential to have a positive impact on the well-being of sexual assault survivors. Traditional support services present barriers that prevent survivors from seeking support. By harnessing the affordances of social media to create individualised networked communities, survivors gain anonymous low-cost peer support and controlled virtual spaces for belonging, self-disclosure, being heard and justice.

Keywords: *community, social media, virtual support communities, sexual assault, survivors, self-disclosure*

Introduction

Virtual support communities (VSCs) have the potential to have a positive impact on the emotional well-being of survivors of sexual assault. Digital technologies and the affordances provided by social media platforms offer new ways to form and organise support communities in a virtual space. In creating *real* communities, survivors develop a sense of belonging. VSCs that use and exist on social media platforms present contemporary spaces where victims of sexual assault (survivors) can access support, disclose traumatic experiences and achieve a sense of justice by 'being heard'. Survivors support each other by creating individualised networks that benefit from the affordances of *persistent contact* and *pervasive awareness*. Survivors embrace social media by creating and interacting through Facebook support groups and online forums such as Reddit. These VSCs may bridge gaps in the inadequate social supports offered by traditional community structures and mainstream support services, thus have the potential to increase the emotional well-being of survivors.

Terms of Reference

For this paper, I refer to 'well-being' as a subjective notion, i.e., how people *experience* events in their lives is as equally important as the circumstances themselves (Organisation for

Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2011, p. 265). Survivors are the best judges of how satisfied they are in life and whether they experience more positive or negative emotions (OECD, 2011, p. 265). Sexual assault is defined as an act of sexual violence including "physical contact, or intent of contact, of a sexual nature against a person's will, using physical force, intimidation or coercion" (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS] 2011; Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [AIHW], 2019a, as cited in AIHW, 2021, p. 2). Sexual assault is also a form of sexual abuse that occurs to children under the age of 15; in children under the age of 15, sexual assault also includes "forcing a child to watch or hear sexual acts, taking sexualised photos of a child, and sexually explicit talk" (ABS 2011; AIHW 2019a, as cited in AIHW, 2021, p. 2; AIHW, 2021, p. 11).

Discussion

Survivors without access to adequate support services may suffer in terms of their emotional well-being. In 2016, almost 2 million Australians had suffered a sexual assault since the age of 15, and more than 200,000 Australian adults had experienced sexual assault in the previous year (ABS, 2016, as cited in AIHW, 2021, p. 1). Sexual assault is a serious welfare and health issue that has devastating impacts on victims and their family's well-being. As well as physical injury, survivors may suffer a myriad of long-term mental health outcomes that can negatively impact their daily lives. These include overwhelming feelings of shame and guilt, sleep disorders, feelings of isolation, fear and avoidance of the outside world, depression, anxiety, an inability to trust others, drug and alcohol addiction, eating disorders, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), self-harm and suicide (AIHW, 2021, p. 2; Bautz, 1998, p. 3; Brown et al., 2019, p. 2). Support is much needed to decrease depression and loneliness and increase self-esteem and well-being (McKenna & Bargh, 1998; Linville, 1985; Verbrugge, 1983, as cited in Shaw & Gant, 2004, p. 169; Shaw & Gant, 2004, pp. 159 & 168). Yet, only around a third of survivors seek help from legal, medical or crisis support services (Munro-Kramer et al., 2017, p. 298). Survivors are influenced by the cost and availability of support (Victorian Centre Against Sexual Assault [CASA], 2015, pp. 20-22), misperception (i.e., not knowing the experience constituted sexual assault), stigma, and feelings of guilt and shame (Munro-Kramer et al., 2017, p. 298). Many survivors find it difficult to disclose their abuse and delay disclosure or don't disclose at all (Sinclair & Gold, 1997; Quadara, 2008; as cited in Andalibi et al., 2016, p. 3906), and this non-disclosure has negative impacts on well-being.

VSCs represent *real* communities that may positively impact the emotional well-being of survivors through a shared sense of belonging. For sociologists and anthropologists, a traditional community formed around spatially structured groups in towns or neighbourhoods or around cultural, political or religious minority groups. In contrast, historians and philosophers see community more as an ideology (Delanty, 2018, p. 3). Communities don't represent real *places.* Instead, they are imagined realities where "while most of their members will never encounter one other, each believes they all share some deep, transhistorical bond (Anderson, 1991, as cited in Wegner, 2002, p. xvi). And when communication is the 'essential feature of belonging', there is no difference between the reality of a traditional community and a virtual one (Delanty, 2018, p. 201). Furthermore, sexual assaults occur in physical community spaces; therefore, virtual community spaces may be more desirable for survivors (AIHW, 2021, pp. 8 & 9). Social media presents new ways to form 'communication communities' based on social bonds formed around belonging and sharing (Delanty, 2018, p. i). Communication communities may still share commonalities such as religion, gender, or lifestyle, but they are not constrained by the bounds of time and space or the need for face-to-face interactions. Rather than being lost in this more fluid and temporary form of community, there are new possibilities for people to attain a sense of belonging than typically achievable in traditional forms of community (Delanty, 2018, p. 201). Survivors can make connections and discuss their problems with each other via private groups on social media (e.g. Facebook) or on forums such as Reddit in specific threads called 'subreddits' (Andalibi et al., 2016, p. 3907). These individualised, confidential, and accessible communities provide safe spaces for self-disclosure and peer support (Shaw & Gant, 2004, pp. 158 & 169; Munro-Kramer et al., 2017, pp. 301-303). This 'culture of caring' help survivors feel less alone (Munro-Kramer et al., 2017, p. 300). The virtual turn enables connections between groups of people with shared experiences or traumas and a mutual need for specific kinds of support.

VSCs may positively impact the emotional well-being of survivors by providing spaces for a sense of justice through 'being heard'. More vulnerable survivors are more likely to communicate online, and they do so to tell their stories and have their experiences validated by a listening audience (Moors & Webber, 2013; Webber & Moors, 2015 as cited in O'Neill, 2018, p. 47). Survivors of sexual assault consider 'being heard' as an essential part of seeking justice. Considering the insufficient systems for victims to be heard and acknowledged in the mainstream justice system, online communities may offer some scope for justice (Clark, 2010; McGlynn, Westmarland & Godden, 2012; Ross, 2003 as cited in O'Neill, 2018, pp. 47-48).

Systemic failures to achieve a sense of justice can result in feelings of 'intense and justified anger' or "feelings of worthlessness or hopelessness, which impact the client's well-being" (CASA, 2015, p. 27). A simple acknowledgment of the injustice a victim has suffered may be the best therapeutic response in some cases (CASA, 2015, p. 27). Survivors illustrated their needs for being heard and the benefits of VSCs for their well-being. One wrote on a subreddit forum, "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" (O'Neill, 2018, p. 53). Another shared the positive effects of 'lurking' that empowered them to share their experiences, "… 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" (O'Neill, 2018, p. 54). As well as providing intimate spaces for being heard, VSCs offer survivors anonymity.

The anonymity of VSCs may increase access to support where survivors feel safer disclosing their experiences. Being anonymous may empower survivors to express or show aspects of themselves, usually constrained by guilt, shame or feeling self-consciousness about their physical appearance, particularly in times of distress (Shaw & Gant, 2004, pp. 159 & 168). Research has found that online forums "have created alternative spaces where disclosures that might have otherwise remained silent have a voice, and people can seek support" (Andalibi et al., 2016, p. 3913). Online forums provide anonymous spaces for 'considerable deep and detailed storytelling, emotional disclosure, and direct as well as indirect support seeking' (Andalibi et al., 2016, p. 3915). VSCs also offer survivors agency and control over their communications with others.

Survivor agency and control are important when gaining support using the individualised networks and affordances provided by VSCs. Survivors have a strong need for individualised care and express their desire to make use of technology to tailor their needs (Munro-Kramer et al., 2017, pp. 301-302). Rather than users adapting to the "expectations for social life to what dominant technologies can offer" (Dotson, 2017, as cited in Hampton & Wellman, 2018, pp. 643-644), user behaviour drives the affordances of social media and convergent technologies. Therefore, to satisfy survivors, the VSCs we create must respond to their needs (Katz et al., 1973, pp. 520-521). Some survivors find private Facebook groups, where group administrators screen prospective members, provide safe and supportive spaces (Barta, 2020, pp. 116 & 189). Facebook affordances also allow restrictive privacy settings and muting or blocking other users when needed (Barta, 2020, pp. 189-190). Survivors can join closed Facebook groups or create

groups of their own. Members must be invited into the group, and the privacy of shared information is under strict control. One survivor described how the affordances of VSCs provided more agency over her Facebook group, "I created a private Facebook group just for [a therapy group] that you can't even search for. It doesn't exist unless I invite you." (Barta, 2020, p. 189).

VSCs can positively impact the emotional well-being of survivors through the social media affordances of *persistent contact* and *pervasive awareness*. Survivors of sexual assault may significantly benefit from persistent contact. Whereby platforms such as Facebook enable users to remain 'friends' or members of a group over long periods; even after a life-changing event such as moving to another country or having children (Hampton & Wellman, 2018, p. 647)—or when survivors retreat from face-face interactions to deal with symptoms of trauma. The affordances of social media platforms make persistent contact easier to achieve through low cost and simple person-to-network postings (Hampton, 2016, pp. 110-111). Social networks, expanded through social media, are individualised communities that connect people with similar interests or shared experiences, rather than just through traditional parochial, work or familial associations. Pervasive awareness enables a new form of community connectedness, especially significant for survivors who struggle with socialisation (Hampton & Wellman, 2018, p. 648). Pervasive awareness occurs due to the ambient nature and simplicity of persistent contact through social media (Hampton, 2016, p. 103). It is an outcome of our person-to-network broadcasts about important (or trivial matters) in our everyday lives, such as posting a photo or conveying an opinion. As a result, this affordance gives 'subtle knowledge' of our friends' presence online (Hampton & Wellman, 2018, p. 648). Unlike the deliberate act of surveillance, pervasive awareness is more passive. It may include people who lurk in survivor groups, read others' comments, or gain information that they may decide to act upon later (Hampton, 2016, p. 113). Pervasive awareness enables survivors to benefit from the community through feelings of belonging and interacting with the outside world. A VSC provides attentiveness and connectedness when members of the group regularly post their experiences and feelings and respond to one another's posts. Survivors create pervasive awareness by posting about their experiences or asking questions. Their fellow survivors' feedback provides a reciprocal awareness that creates closeness and bonding (Lu & Hampton, in progress, as cited in Hampton, 2016, pp. 112-113). Research has shown that people who self-disclose, and those who receive disclosure, form closer and stronger relationships (Collins & Miller, 1994, as cited in Hampton, 2016, p. 116). Even if the survivor doesn't contribute to the group's feed, they benefit

from reading what others share and gain comfort in knowing a platform exists to share or disclose in the future. Persistent contact and pervasive awareness act as forms of informal community 'care' for survivors, and this may increase well-being while at the same time allowing survivors to maintain control over the level of contact they have with others (Hampton, 2016, p. 103).

Conclusion

Survivors of sexual assault who are reluctant to access traditional forms of healthcare or support may instead choose to gain support online. Virtual support communities used for communication and belonging increase connectedness and socialisation for people who experience emotional or psychological support barriers. Virtual support communities provide low cost, individualised, accessible, and supportive social conditions to create safe, controlled and confidential spaces for survivors to disclose and seek support and thus have the potential to increase the emotional well-being of survivors.

#community, #social media, #virtual support communities, #sexual assault, #survivors, #self-disclosure

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