

Blogging about sexual assault

Blogging about sexual assault: A thematic analysis

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Abstract

Purpose - This paper examines the role of blogging (writing online weblogs) in facilitating healing following sexual assault.

Design/methodology/approach - To explore how blog writing may facilitate healing and recovery, thirty blog posts written by survivors of sexual assault were analysed using thematic analysis.

Findings - The analysis revealed three themes; the aftermath of abuse, the need for support, and helping others. In accordance with past research, bloggers frequently did not receive the supportive reaction to a face-to-face disclosure that they desired. Instead, blogging provided a safe environment in which victims could deal with the ongoing challenge of coping with, and recovering from the abuse. Moreover, blogging enabled victims to use their negative experience to educate and support others going through a similar experience, therefore allowing the bloggers to achieve some positive growth.

Practical implications - The results suggest that blogging and reading blogs may be beneficial to victims of sexual assault. Therefore, the findings support the recommendation of blogging by professionals working with victims of sexual assault.

Originality/value - The study presents the first analysis of blogs written by victims of sexual assault to facilitate their healing.

Key words Sexual assault; blogging; victims; recovery; social support, coping

Paper type Research paper

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The term 'sexual assault' refers to any form of sexual act committed against another individual without his or her consent, or against individuals who are unable to give valid consent (Karanfil et al., 2013). The significant and persistent negative consequences of sexual violence include interpersonal difficulties and immediate complex emotional reactions such as self-blame, helplessness, shame and isolation (Moors and Webber, 2012). Sexual victimisation can also lead to clinically significant psychological distress, including posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and various anxiety disorders (Walsh et al., 2010; Littleton et al., 2012). Studies exploring the long-term impact of sexual abuse have reported significant variations in coping and symptomology across individuals. Around 20% to 40% of sexual abuse survivors report little to no symptomology in adulthood (Finkelhor et al., 1990). Symptom appearance may be affected by the nature and severity of the abuse, the relationship of the survivor to the perpetrator, and the coping strategies utilised by the individual (Walsh et al., 2010). With up to one-third of females in the US being a victim of sexual assault in childhood (Walsh et al., 2010), and 473,000 adults experiencing sexual assault each year in the UK (Home Office, 2013), understanding how best to facilitate coping amongst sexual assault victims is of paramount importance. Technological advances have created new avenues for survivors to express their experiences on online blogs, although research has not fully explored the function and effect of these technologies upon victims' recovery (Yeager, 2012).

Various theories of coping exist, but the Approach Versus Avoidance coping model provides a useful understanding of how coping strategies can affect recovery following sexual violence (Merrill, et al., 2001). According to this model, approach coping involves attempts to directly address and integrate painful material, which allows the individual to regulate stress and negative emotions adaptively. Conversely, avoidance coping involves protecting oneself from the negative emotions associated with the distressing event by distancing oneself from the stressor (Roth and Cohen, 1986). Thus, it is unsurprising that Santello and Leitenberg (1993) found avoidance strategies such as thought suppression and substance abuse to be associated with greater psychological distress when compared to approach-oriented coping. Whereas avoidance coping may be effective at

minimising distress in the short-term, long-term coping typically requires the integration of painful experience into existing schemas (Wright et al., 2007). Long term coping entails survivors directly addressing and ascribing meaning to the traumatic incident, thus it is unsurprising that in a review of the relevant research literature Walsh et al. (2010) found survivors of abuse to be reluctant to adopt this approach. This explains why many individuals do not consistently implement a single approach and may often repeatedly alternate between approach and avoidance coping (Cantón-Cortés and Cantón, 2010; Walsh et al., 2010).

Disclosing sexual violence is a complex decision for survivors (Kogan, 2004) and negative responses are likely to reduce an individual's willingness to disclose their victimisation to others (Sudderth, 1998). Reactions such as victim blaming, disbelief, and minimising the severity of the assault have all been reported (Crisma et al., 2004; Littleton and Radecki-Breitkopf, 2006; Mason and Lodrick, 2013). In fact, it is not only outright negative reactions that can be harmful, as Pruitt and Zoellner (2008) found a disinterested reaction to disclosure to be more harmful than an overtly negative reaction. Poor reactions may contribute to the low rates of reporting sexual assault to the police in the UK (11%) and America (62%) (Catalano, 2006; Home Office, 2010).

Whereas negative reactions discourage disclosure, positive reactions to sharing can protect against feelings of lowered self-worth following victimisation (Littleton and Radecki-Breitkopf, 2006), and consequently have the potential to aid recovery from sexual assault. 'Social support' refers to social interactions and relationships perceived by the victim as loving and caring, and which provide them with help and attachment (Hobfall and Stephens, 1990). Some research indicates that help-seeking and social support reduce psychological distress and facilitate recovery following sexual victimisation (Rickwood et al., 2005; Littleton and Radecki-Breitkopf, 2006). Walsh et al. (2010) found parental support to be particularly influential in reducing long-term psychological distress and promoting psychological resilience following childhood sexual abuse. According to the stress buffer model, social support buffers against the negative effect of stress on mental health (Olstad et al., 2001). Social support networks allow survivors to express emotions and have their negative beliefs, denial or distortion of the incident challenged in a safe and positive environment. According to Littleton and Radecki-Breitkopf, (2006) this can enhance the survivor's autonomy and self-confidence, and

ultimately has the potential to act as a defence against long-term psychological distress. Consequently, stress following negative experiences is often less damaging to those who have strong as opposed to weak social support networks (Murthi and Espelage, 2005) although the research is not conclusive on this issue (Olstad et al., 2001).

Following adverse experiences, some individuals achieve 'positive growth' in the form of improved relationships, a greater appreciation for life, spiritual development, or a greater sense of personal strength (Frazier et al., 2001). According to Linley and Joseph (2004), individuals who experience maintained positive growth following trauma are less likely to experience long-term psychological distress. Building on this, Frazier et al. (2004) found those who have stronger social support networks often feel they have greater control over their recovery process, which in turn enhances their belief that they have sufficient resources to deal with their abuse-related trauma. In fact, social support, using approach-orientated coping strategies, and having control over the recovery process have all been associated with positive growth following sexual victimisation (Frazier et al., 2001). Moors and Weber (2012) suggest that those who have received insufficient support in traditional face-to-face formats may gain the support they need in online environments.

Using online platforms to explore sexual victimisation

Victims' reluctance to disclose tends to be minimised in online settings (Webber and Wilmot, 2012) and so disclosure is higher online than offline (Riva, 2002). The anonymity afforded by the internet allows individuals to share painful experiences without fear of judgement (Smith, 2010). Hookway (2008) suggests that this anonymity also means that survivors are likely to write honestly and candidly about their experiences, meaning that blogs written by survivors are likely to include rich and highly personal accounts of sexual victimisation. Engaging online allows survivors to express their thoughts, hear the views of others, and gain valuable insight into, and validation of, their experiences (Burrows, 2011).

Support online can be gained through; online discussion forums, chat rooms, online groups, answer forums and blogs (Burrows, 2011; Moors and Webber, 2012). A limited number of empirical studies have explored the use and function of online support groups for survivors of sexual violence (Smith, 2010; Burrows, 2011; Moors and Webber, 2012). Smith (2010) found that online disclosure was undertaken to

achieve healing and support due to the difficulty of discussing sexual violence in face-to-face settings. In support of this, Burrows (2011) found that forum messages posted by survivors are concerned primarily with companionship and sharing experiences, as well as seeking and providing information. Yeager (2012) suggests this sharing process is important for victims to construct new and alternative stories of their abuse, and ultimately to help them in the process of recovery. Furthermore, the online forums may provide victims with the validation and supportive relationships that they may not receive in their offline social relationships (Yeager, 2012). In general, the limited research suggests that discussing their victimisation experiences online may be beneficial to survivors of sexual assault.

Weblogs or blogs are personal websites that contain a series of archived posts that are reverse-chronologically ordered and are commonly written by a single author (Herring et al., 2005). They are 'self-narratives' that are often composed of private or intimate content (Hookway, 2008) and so are similar to diaries, with each written post to the blog analogous with an individual diary entry (Sherman, 2013). A further similarity with diary entries is the lack of rules regarding the content, style, length and frequency of blog posts. Blogging (writing a blog) about painful experiences may be beneficial as the computer has the potential to act like a mirror reflecting what has been written, thus allowing survivors to focus directly on their innermost thoughts and feelings (Joinson, 2001). This coincides with the notion that the simple act of blogging facilitates catharsis and improved mental and physical health by enabling individuals to better understand their traumatic experiences (Suler, 2004). Yeager (2012) suggests that writing and re-writing about victimisation within a blog allows survivors to revisit and review their traumatic experiences, in a process similar to narrative therapy, which involves individuals documenting their progress through therapy to enhance their therapeutic growth (Yeager, 2012). Further similarities with therapeutic practice are likely to exist, as therapeutic implications such as the instillation of hope, and having constructive emotional experiences (or catharsis) are achievable within online support groups (Finn and Lavitt, 1994).

Where blogs differ from diaries is that their publication in the online public domain means that the writer is aware whilst they are blogging that others will read their words (Sherman, 2013) and there is a corresponding option to allow readers to post their own comments on the individual blog entries. This makes blogs

susceptible to readers contributing intentionally provocative written messages to the blog (commenting) in order to cause upset and conflict, an act known as ‘trolling’ (Willard, 2008). However, bloggers can choose to password protect their blogs to prevent public accessibility (Hookway, 2008) and research suggests that ‘lurking’ online (reading accounts without interacting with the bloggers) is actually much more common than posting comments to the blogs (Preece et al., 2004).

With regards to lurking online Lenhart and Fox (2006) and Nardi et al. (2004) suggest that blogging is undertaken to document or share personal life experiences with others, to motivate others, to meet new people, to express deeply felt emotions, and to form and maintain community forums. Thus, blog writing may be beneficial for readers as well as for authors. For instance, sexual assault survivors may access blogs written by other survivors to gain much-needed advice and support. Barak et al. (2008) propose that members of online support groups feel empowered through reading others’ experiences, sharing emotions and building relationships. This is likely to hold true for blog readers also, as blogs commonly allow users to interact via a feedback system of posting and responding to comments (Hookway, 2008). Hence, users have the opportunity to share their emotions, validate others’ experiences, and form supportive friendships. Although there is limited research on this issue, both Chung and Kim (2008) and Han et al. (2012) found that cancer patients much more commonly read online support forums than contributed comments to them. Hence, lurking maybe a useful method for survivors to gain information, advice, powerful narratives and stories of personal achievement provided by those who share similar experiences (van Uden-Kraan et al., 2008). Coulson (2005) suggests that those who have experienced the same life stresses are often able to provide the most effective support, showing the potential of blogs to aid recovery. However, the function and benefits of blogs written by survivors of sexual assault need exploring.

The present study

Previous empirical findings indicate that a range of factors relating to the use of blogs may serve to facilitate the process of healing and recovery following sexual victimisation (for example Smith, 2010; Yeager, 2012). However, no prior studies have explored this directly by analysing the content of blogs written by survivors of sexual violence. Employing this method should provide an insight into why survivors engage in blogging, and has the potential to enhance understanding of the experience of sexual victimisation, particularly in regards to how survivors cope with and overcome these highly adverse experiences. Ultimately, research into this area is limited but is imperative to understanding the full range of experiences that survivors are likely to encounter (Yeager, 2012). Due to this, the present study implemented a qualitative thematic analysis of blogs written by survivors of sexual assault in order to assess the factors that influence effective recovery from sexual violence, and to explore the functions of writing a blog following sexual victimisation.

Methodology

Study design and approach

A qualitative approach was undertaken to gain rich and meaningful data regarding survivors' experiences of sexual victimisation, and their engagement with blogging. A data-driven thematic analysis was conducted (Attard and Coulson, 2012), and a unique coding framework in relation to sexual victimisation and blogging was developed.

Sample

Thirty blog entries formed the data in this study. Due to the high number of blogs on sexual victimisation, strict inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied. All included blogs were written by a self-declared survivor of sexual violence following victimisation, and had a primary focus on the experience of victimisation and recovery (as determined by the blog author's online profile and the keywords assigned to the blog entries). Blogs written by multiple authors, consisting of predominantly photographs, poetry or reposts from other websites and with no recent blog entries for the preceding 12 months were excluded from the sample.

Data collection

Twenty-two blogs meeting the inclusion criteria were identified using relevant search criteria entered into the search engine Google¹. Although six of these bloggers (blog authors) provided consent to be included in the research, one was excluded as it did not contain a sufficient number of blog entries for in-depth analysis. Four female and one male adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse wrote the five blogs, and each of the blogs allowed comments from readers.

The blogs had been active for a period of between one-and-a-half years to seven-and-a-half years, meaning that it was not feasible to analyse all of the existing data. Moreover, Hammersley (2015) suggests that sample size in qualitative research should be determined by the richness of the data collected, rather than any arbitrary a priori standard. Therefore, thirty blog posts, three of the earliest and three of the most recent entries, were selected from each blog to provide a useful insight into the experiences of survivors at the earlier and later stages of their recovery journey. Although the blogs also included a mixture of text, videos and photographs, only the text written by the blog authors was analysed.

The bloggers' names were replaced with pseudonyms, and blog entries were numbered 1-6 for each author, where the numbers represent the chronological position of the blog entry in relation to when it was posted online.

Data analysis

A thematic analysis was conducted to explore the impact of sexual violence, the factors relating to effective recovery from sexual victimisation, and how blog writing may facilitate healing and recovery. Although the anonymity inherent within blogging means that fictitious blogs can be created, Hookway (2008) and Yeager (2012) suggest that online data are no less or more trustworthy than other forms of naturally occurring data. Correspondingly, no external corroboration of the blogs' veracity was sought and instead, in accordance with the inductive semantic based approach to thematic analysis adopted (Braun and Clarke, 2006), the content of the blogs was accepted as representing the thoughts, feelings and experiences of genuine sexual assault victims. Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework for thematic analysis

1 In order to preserve anonymity, the specific search terms used to locate the blogs, and the name and web address of the blogs have not been published.

was followed to maintain a level of rigour throughout the process, and to facilitate checking or replication of the research in future. A second coder analysed a proportion of the blog entries to increase the credibility of the analysis process.

Ethical considerations

The public/private nature of blogs is highly contested, and although online postings may be publicly accessible or password protected (Hookway, 2008), some researchers argue that they should be treated as private as many bloggers write with an expectation of privacy (Elgesem, 2002). Due to the sensitive nature of the blogs relevant to the present study, the bloggers provided their informed consent for their blogs to be included in the study, and their identity was kept anonymous. Furthermore, the research adhered to the ethical guidelines outlined by the British Psychological Society (British Psychological Society, 2013).

Analysis and Discussion

A thematic analysis of blog entries written by survivors of sexual assault revealed three main themes that were termed the aftermath of abuse, the need for support and helping others.

The aftermath of abuse

As established previously in the literature, sexual violence frequently resulted in clinically significant psychological distress including PTSD, depression and anxiety (Littleton et al., 2012). The bloggers provided detailed accounts of many of these signs of distress suffered following their abuse.

I've been depressed, anxious, paranoid, suicidal, you name it. To this day I suffer from PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder) where certain triggers such as sounds, smells, or even sights, can make me have panic attacks and can give me flash backs to the abuse (Anna, entry 1).

Other negative consequences documented by the bloggers included cognitive distortions and complex emotional reactions such as feelings of worthlessness and self-blame, both as the result of their abuse and the repercussions of their disclosure.

I thought for years that I was the bad one. I must have done something to deserve this treatment (Diane, entry 2).

I felt that I had destroyed my family, that I was the reason my parents separated and divorced, that my brothers no longer had a father, and that we were financially struggling. I felt the need to take all of this blame onto myself, it was my fault (Anna, entry 2).

O'Leary et al. (2010) suggest that cognitive distortions and interpersonal difficulties should be expected in instances of abuse involving high levels of secrecy,

coercion and relationship distortions, similar to those reported by the current bloggers. The bloggers described how their experiences had affected their ability to trust and to form and maintain healthy boundaries between themselves and others. Moreover, they reported feeling that the abuse they experienced has disrupted the normal process of development leading to a tendency to fear relationships, mistrust others, or misplace trust and get hurt.

Someone that I considered in authority or someone that I trusted, touched me inappropriately and left me confused and in emotional pain. I did not know who to trust or who to believe (Diane, entry 4).

The extent to which the bloggers experienced negative outcomes differed, which may be due to mediating factors such as the provision of caregiver support and the coping strategies employed by individuals (Elliot and Carnes, 2001; Walsh et al., 2010). The bloggers acknowledged that their abuse would be likely to have an enduring impact and although they suggested that they would never truly overcome the consequences of their abuse, they demonstrated a willingness to continue trying.

I doubt that I will ever be fully recovered. It doesn't sadden me as intensely as it once did, but it's still disturbing (Chloe, entry 6).

Will I ever see the top of that hill, I do not know but I do know I have to keep fighting my hardest everyday to stay on track or I will never reach it (Brian, entry 6).

Long-term positive changes have the potential to reduce the severity of the psychological distress experienced following trauma (Linley and Joseph, 2004) and, consistent with prior research (Borja et al., 2006), some of the blogs showed evidence of positive growth following the abuse.

I didn't have my eyes on him [God]. But it is my gift from suffering. I made it out alive from a rape and kidnapping. I thought death was in my face and that it was inevitable and that it was only a matter of time. He gave me a way out. He brought me to it and dragged me through it (Chloe, entry 2).

I have a lot of empathy. As part of figuring out my own gunk, I'm often able to figure out other people's enough to have compassion for them. I can make a frame for people to be who they are and as they are (Eve, entry 4).

Not all of the bloggers documented positive changes following their victimisation. This difference experiences of the bloggers are understandable given the differences between the bloggers in regards to mediating factors (Frazier et al., 2004), time since the abuse and duration of blogging.

Need for support

This theme relates to participant reflections on the importance and type of support required from others within the recovery process. Although all bloggers had previously received some level of social support, only a few did so over a prolonged period of time. These select few appeared to benefit greatly from having a reliable and caring social support network, and in one instance, a blogger explicitly credited her successful healing to this, thereby providing support for the stress buffer model (Olstad et al., 2001). Despite experiencing significant emotional difficulties, several of the bloggers were unable to share this with loved ones, or simply did not feel they had anyone to tell. In accordance with past research, this lack of openness and social support led to feelings of loneliness and isolation (Spaccarelli and Kim, 1995). The bloggers described feeling the strain of constantly putting on a brave face and hiding their struggles to protect loved ones, and to prove to others that they were strong and happy individuals.

Things like this I fight with everyday and most times the fights are to overwhelming to handle. And right now, as I try and stay grounded I have no one to call for that support I so could use right now (Brian, entry 5).

The lack of social support discussed within the blogs is particularly noteworthy, as good social support has been demonstrated to facilitate feelings of control, autonomy and self-confidence (Olstad et al., 2001). All the bloggers indicated that, at some point, they had experienced poor reactions following disclosure to formal agencies and family. In such instances, the bloggers' reported that their psychological well-being and relationship with their parents were weakened by the caregivers' unwillingness to take action against the perpetrator (O'Leary et al., 2010). It was evident that a poor initial reaction to the disclosure discouraged the bloggers from disclosing to others, a finding that echoes that of Sudderth (1998).

If my own mother did nothing about the sexual abuse what reason would I have to go tell anyone else...I did not tell anyone because I was raised to believe nothing comes from telling (Brian, entry 2).

I'm so angry about how I was treated as a victim since we reported it to the police. I'm angry that my abuser has received more sympathy from the system than I have (Anna, entry 3).

Perhaps their poor experiences of disclosing to family negatively affect attitudes towards professionals, which may in turn increase a survivor's reluctance to engage in counselling (James, 2007). Thus, writing about difficult experiences is likely to facilitate the process of catharsis (Suler, 2004), and allows survivors to

reflect on their innermost thoughts and emotions (Joinson, 2001). There is also a potential for blog readers to challenge negativity and self-blame, as do positive offline support providers (Littleton and Radecki-Breitkopf, 2006). Moreover, disclosing painful experiences online can help counteract the loneliness, isolation and depression perpetuated by ineffective or strained offline support systems (Shao, 2008). Further research exploring the use and accessibility of formal support provision and the role of reader's comments on blogs is necessary to gain a greater understanding of this. This theme implies that the bloggers used their blogs to offload deeply felt emotions that they were unable to share with others in the offline world, thus suggesting a clear benefit of blogging.

Helping others

The bloggers' desire to help those struggling with their healing journeys was evidenced through the frequently expressed words of encouragement and validation, and the sharing of stories of personal achievement and recovery. Barak et al. (2008) propose that this serves to empower readers through instilling a sense of hope, and assuring readers that a successful outcome is truly attainable. The bloggers shared the methods they employed to facilitate healing, including sharing emotions openly and honestly with loved ones, using religious and spiritual coping, practicing self-compassion and self-acceptance, and confronting painful emotions in order to overcome them.

I talk to myself as if I was a child and with compassion. I need to nurture my heart and soul and allow myself to heal. I can't do that if I am constantly criticizing me. I have to forgive me and realize that a lot of what I have done in life is a natural reaction to all of the sexual abuse I have encountered (Chloe, entry 2).

I'm not afraid of crying. I know that clearing emotions is just something that has to happen, like vomiting when you're really nauseous, and that once it's passed you feel a lot better. Eventually, it clears so much that acceptance happens and that piece of gunk is fully healed (Eve, entry 4).

Although avoidance coping is typically associated with greater levels of psychological distress (Santello and Leitenberg, 1993), several of the bloggers had previously utilised this method of coping as it distanced them from their distressing realities, and hence allowed them to function more effectively in the short-term (Roth and Cohen, 1986). However, these strategies later became dysfunctional leading to the adoption of more permanently adaptive techniques, such as directly addressing painful emotions, and openly discussing experiences with trusted

individuals. For example, Chloe reported that ‘the drugs only numbed the pain for so long. And I was in a vicious cycle that would never end until I sought professional help’ (Chloe, entry 2). This is consistent with the assumption that the function of coping with sexual abuse alters over time, and the suggestion of Cantón-Cortés and Cantón (2010) and Walsh et al. (2010) that both approach and avoidance coping may be beneficial to survivors.

As well as sharing personal experiences, the bloggers offered advice on how to facilitate healing. The bloggers explicitly advised survivors to practice self-compassion, and to allow themselves to feel and work through difficult emotions. Blog entries frequently contained useful resources including references to relevant books, events and support groups.

It helps to know what to expect, to understand the process, to learn the steps to healing...Any change is hard, especially if we are not prepared for it. We will resist the change, even sabotage it, especially if we don't understand the natural cycle of the healing process (Diane, entry 6).

Furthermore, the bloggers offered moral support, and words of encouragement and empowerment to other survivors throughout the blogs. Some of the bloggers also shared personal stories of recovery and achievement to motivate readers to persevere with their healing journeys.

Remember, you change your life by changing your belief's, owning your story and unlocking your heart. I offer you my support and want you to know that I believe in you (Diane, entry 6).

Some bloggers described supportive reactions when disclosing to their family and support groups. Connecting with those who could truly understand and validate abuse-related feelings and experiences was considered invaluable to the healing process. Consequently, the bloggers saw themselves as having a responsibility to assist others who were not at a point where they could discuss their abuse. This is illustrated by Anna and Chloe below.

We can be the voice for those who can't yet speak up, and hopefully someday soon they too will speak up and free themselves from the chains of abuse (Anna, entry 2).

My testimony is powerful and I know the power of being able to share it and how someone else knowing they are not alone is very healing in itself. I witnessed that power in group settings for my counseling. I, all of a sudden, didn't feel so crazy anymore (Chloe, entry 6).

Diane and Anna were particularly passionate about raising public awareness, understanding and interest in sexual abuse and were involved in advocacy work such

as speaking publicly about their experiences to inform and educate others. As well as striving to inform potential support providers, they argued that generating discussion regarding sexual abuse through relevant events and support groups would allow survivors to reach out to one another to offer strength and the courage to speak out.

an event that shows the community that abuse is not okay, that abuse is not the victims fault, and that as a victim you do not need to be strong all by yourself, is beyond important, it's necessary (Anna, entry 2).

Victims know the scrutiny they will undergo if and when they break the silence, and for all too many, the risk is too great, we choose to stay silent about it (Diane, entry 5).

Reading narratives written by fellow survivors could help to validate and empower survivors by 'normalising' their own experiences, and several of the bloggers revealed that they had gained support and validation from fellow survivors as other victims could relate to the challenges associated with the process of recovery. This corresponds with Coulson's (2005) finding that those who have experienced similar trauma are often perceived as the most effective support providers as they can match the support needs of the individual. For example, Webber and Wilmot (2012) found that an Australian health-concern website frequently used by survivors provided advice from fellow survivors and trained professionals that added to the formal support offered by medical practitioners. Such findings demonstrate the potential for setting up dedicated websites run by survivors to promote recovery following sexual victimisation, although in this situation control of information quality would be problematic. The lack of control and potential for erroneous information available online having a negative effect on victim recovery should be acknowledged, suggesting that professionals should take responsibility for signposting victims to specific high quality blogs.

Study limitations

Although the study was concerned with the blogging experiences of survivors of sexual victimisation, survivors of childhood sexual abuse wrote all of the blogs included in the study. Consequently, survivors of sexual victimisation in adulthood may not identify as strongly with the findings as their experiences are likely to differ to some degree. Secondly, the select individuals who engage in blogging, and those that make their blog publically accessible, may represent a particular sub-group of survivors. For instance, those who are further on in their

recovery journeys may feel more able to support and motivate others through blogging. Alternatively, bloggers may be those who are in greater need of support or catharsis. In-depth qualitative interviews with bloggers would elucidate this issue. Thirdly, females mainly wrote the blogs analysed in the research. As more stigma is attached to male victims of sexual assault, (Easton et al., 2014) blogging could provide a particularly useful source of support for male victims of sexual abuse. However, given the small sample in the current study, more research focusing upon bloggers (and male bloggers in particular) is required. Finally, although the fact that the bloggers provided consent for their blogs to be studied implies that they were in fact genuine accounts of victimisation, the actual veracity of the accounts cannot be established.

Implications and future research

This research demonstrates some of the fundamental failures encountered by survivors in regards to receiving appropriate support, as well as a desire to blog in order to help others. Future research should seek to interview survivors about their experiences of blogging and whether this has influenced their recovery. This could also provide a greater understanding of survivors' experiences of social support, and reveal strategies to improve the quality of formal/informal support provision. Nonetheless, the findings imply that formal support given to victims of sexual assault requires development. For example, van Uden-Kraan et al. (2008) proposed that doctors recommend support forums to patients as they provide more information than formal medical publications. In support of this, Burrows (2011) advocates training for counsellors in recommending and facilitating sexual assault victims' use of online support forums. Similarly, the current study results indicate that survivors of sexual assault may benefit from being signposted by professionals to blogs written by sexual assault survivors. However, care must be taken considering that the veracity and validity and accuracy of information in these blogs cannot be determined, and professionals may need appropriate technological training.

This study highlights some of the positive functions of blog writing, but negative aspects of online communication, such as social isolation and trolling also exist (Finn and Lavitt, 1994; Breuer and Barker, 2015). However, the relative newness of using blogging within academic research (Hookway, 2008) and the tendency for research to focus upon children's online behaviour and experiences (see for example Mitchell, Wolok and Finkelhor, 2008) means research on the potential

negative experiences of blogging amongst adult sexual assault victims is currently unknown. Although they were not analysed in the current research, a cursory examination of the comments posted on the blogs utilised in the present research showed no instances of trolling or negative comments towards the bloggers. Clearly more research is needed to explore the potential negative effects of blogging. A further potential limitation of blogging about sexual assault victimisation relates to the concept that reading about difficulties with coping or personal achievements may, in some victims, reinforce the idea that they will never truly recover from their experiences, or alternatively, increase feelings of inadequacy in relation to rate of recovery (Yeager, 2012). For example, research exploring engagement with online forums by patients with depression, found that some individuals felt the support of offline friends had more impact than ‘meaningless’ comments from strangers online (Breuer and Barker, 2015). Similarly, some individuals may be uncomfortable or incapable of using this form of technology to express their emotions and experiences (Yeager, 2012). However, without further research into the use of blogs and forums, the benefits, drawbacks and levels engagement with these technologies remains unclear. Clearly, those who do not find blogging useful or appealing are unlikely to begin or persist in blogging and so would not be sampled in a study of this nature. Hence, further in-depth and direct research qualitative and experimental research would gain a more complete picture of how blogging can influence recovery in survivors of sexual violence.

Conclusion

This study examined the recovery process and the role of blogging for sexual assault survivors. The blogs provided a highly personal understanding of the impact of sexual victimisation, which suggests that support providers may underestimate the emotional and social challenges encountered by survivors. The findings indicate that survivors are often reluctant to reveal the nature and severity of their distress due to perceptions of the ignorance of wider society based upon poor initial reactions to disclosure from family and professionals. Thus, the scarcity of reliable support may hinder the recovery process. However, support from fellow survivors is highly beneficial to recovery due to their first-hand accounts of the healing process, support and advice.

Most importantly, the study has demonstrated the value of blogging in the process of recovery from sexual victimisation. The blogs enabled victims of abuse

to express deeply felt emotions and painful experiences, both of which assist the process of catharsis. Blogging also allowed survivors to share useful advice with others regarding effective coping and recovery, which helped the bloggers feel they had achieved positive growth. Furthermore, the findings suggest that survivors could gain the validation, empowerment and resources necessary to progress in their healing journeys through reading the experiences of those who understand and fully appreciate the challenges associated with recovery. Future research is required to assess the utility of professionals recommending blogging and lurking online to survivors of sexual assault.

Implications for practice

- Negative reactions to initial disclosure discourages survivors of sexual assault from discussing the daily challenges of coping with their abuse.
- To meet the needs of victims more effectively, formal support given to victims of sexual assault requires development.
- Survivors of sexual assault may benefit from being encouraged to read blogs written by other sexual assault survivors.
- Victims of sexual assault see blogging as a way of educating and helping others, and making sense of their victimisation experience.
- Further research is required to provide a more complete picture of the effect of reading blogs upon survivors of sexual violence recovery.

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