

"Can digital media be a voice for men, too? What can we learn from male sexual assault disclosure made through digital media"

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Abstract

Social networking sites and online forums are becoming a safe space for people to find supportive online communities where they can self-disclose sensitive matters anonymously without fearing an adverse reaction. These platforms have also become top use for sexual assault victims who turn to using online forums and social media for self-disclosure, community building, seeking support, and interacting with people similar to them. Online forums support and help users, which traditional sources fail to do. Therefore, considering these features of online sites, this study's objective was to use online networking sites to gather insights to understand what could be learned from posts made by sexual assault victims. Therefore, this study aims to explore mental health issues male victims of sexual assault experience by using thematic analysis on self-disclosure stories made on Reddit. Thematic analysis was used on 15 posts and 442 comments gathered from 4 subreddit communities between 2017 and 2022 to enhance our understanding of victims' post-assault experience. The results of the findings include five main themes and eleven sub-themes that highlight different factors attributed to male victims. These themes are: 1. Mental health, 2. Family, friends, and perpetrator response upon disclosure; 3. Navigating post-assault dynamics: Experiences and responses, 4. Victims' wants and desires, 5. Social media as a platform for victims. The findings highlight different perspectives, issues, and struggles victims come across and how impactful assault could be on victims' mental health. Furthermore, this study draws attention to the lack of research and the lack of understanding of male victims. It focuses attention on support/help services and designing interventions while keeping male victims in consideration.

Keywords: sexual assault, male victims, mental health, self-disclosure, online support groups

Introduction

Sexual assaults, sexual abuse, and rape of men is an overlooked topic that is far more prevalent and serious than given importance to (Davies, 2002). Being a male and a victim of sexual assault is a difficult concept to comprehend, considering sexual assaults are primarily associated with female victims and always envisioned as male perpetrators (Petersson & Plantin, 2019; Gagnier et al., 2017). Furthermore, the attention directed towards sexual assault as a female issue has inadvertently intensified the sense of isolation experienced by male victims of assault (Davies, 2002). At the same time, current projections indicate that research, help, and support are more than twenty years behind for male survivors (Davies, 2002). It is estimated that each year there are 72,000 male victims of sexual assault and 12,000 rape survivors, however; important to consider that the numbers are expected to be higher, given the numerous sexual offenses go unreported, thus posing challenges in obtaining accurate data regarding their frequency (Ioannou et al., 2017). Additionally, there is speculation that the prevalence rate of male victims could be similar to female occurrences (DiMarco et al., 2021; McLean et al., 2005). Furthermore, male victims experience multiple psychological symptoms even years after the assault, including psychological disturbance and health problems that can last decades (Campbell, 2013; Chiverse-Wilson, 2006; Walker et al., 2005). However, unfortunately, there is rarely any psychological help provided, and access to counselling services takes longer for males than females; research shows that it takes 16 years on average for males to seek counselling after the incident (McLean, 2013).

In addition to that, societal norms and stereotypes, such as power, masculinity, and strength, hinder the help-seeking behaviours of men. These stereotypes also hold the capacity to shape the perception of professionals dealing with male victims, thus consequently affecting the support and help services provided to them (Gagnier et al., 2017). Thus, stigma and reluctance to seek services are one of the many reasons contributing to underreporting of

male victims (Doherty & Anderson, 2004; Young et al., 2016). The lack of attention has led to societal failure to address this issue adequately and has contributed to marginalization and neglect (Davies & Rogers, 2006; Sable et al., 2006). Upon disclosure of an incident, victims are often met with pervasive negative responses causing victims to turn to other venues for self-disclosure, including online platforms such as social media, online communities, and digital media (Alaggia & Wang, 2020). Research has found victims using social platforms for assault disclosure as an alternative avenue for support and predominantly received encouraging responses and support (Alaggia & Wang, 2020; Barak & Gluck-Ofri, 2007).

Furthermore, social media campaigns such as #MeToo and #NotOkay have encouraged victims to come forward and disclose their experiences (Barta, 2021). Also, regarding sharing content via social media, research has found that male victims find sharing their experiences in anonymous or private settings more comfortable (Young et al., 2016), making social media a perfect medium for understanding how sexual assault affects male victims through self-disclosure made by the victims themselves.

Therefore, this study aims to gather mental health related information and other issues male victims of sexual assault experience through self-disclosure stories posted in online forums and social media platforms.

Characteristics and post-trauma effect of sexual assault on victims

Numerous studies have been conducted to find characteristics of victims and perpetrators, and research by Weiss (2010) has found few characteristics common among male victims. For example, Weiss (2010) found that victims usually come from low-income households, with 50% of victims having incomes lower than 25,000\$ a year. Furthermore, the median age for male victims reported by most studies is within the 20-30 years range (McLean, 2013), and abuse begins between the ages of 7 and 10 (Romano & De Luca, 2001).

Time is another factor, as 65% of male incidents occur at night, and 41% of these incidents occur in either the victims' or the perpetrator's home. Furthermore, male-to-male sexual assaults are 54%, and female-to-male are 46%. Whereas further examination has revealed that offenders of male victims are mostly strangers (24%, Weiss, 2010; 75%, Ioannou et al., 2017) and co-workers (29%) at the same time, male victims are more likely to report incidents to police that male offenders perpetrate than female offenders because it questions and threatens masculinity of the victim. These are some of the problems male victims experience, and the current study aims to find further significant issues victims experience.

Additionally, the effect of victimization has a drastic impact on the mental and physical health of the survivor. "Short- and long-term physical injury, fear, anxiety, despair, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), low self-esteem, social difficulties, and suicide ideation" (Thomas & Kopel, 2023, p. 1) are common after-effects the victims experience. Furthermore, there is a common myth that men are generally less affected in comparison to females, whereas, on the contrary, research conducted by Peterson et al. (2011) found that men are as equally affected as females and experience higher distress, worse outcomes, and higher traumatic stress symptomology including but not limited to anxiety and depression (Peterson et al., 2011). Unfortunately, considering the post-assault effect, there is limited help and support available to male victims compared to their female counterparts (Pearson & Barker, 2020). These are some of the mental health problems victims experience, and by conducting a thematic analysis of self-disclosure stories, this study hopes to generate and discover further problems victims experience associated with mental health.

As mentioned, social media has become a supportive community for victims. Many victims turn to social media for numerous reasons, including seeking support, processing their traumatic experience, educating others about similar experiences, and seeking and giving support (Barta, 2021). In addition, social media has become a platform for

communicating and connecting people through communicative and unique capabilities, which helps victims and gives them a platform to disclose their experience and heal from the trauma (Barta, 2021).

Online Support Groups (OSGs) and sharing stories

Online support groups (OSGs) are becoming standard therapeutic tools for people coping with mental difficulties (Lawlor & Kirakowski, 2014). At the same time, the number of people surfing the internet for health information has also increased over the last few decades (Chung, 2013; Gutierrez et al., 2013). Recently, social, and digital media, including internet support groups and social networking sites related to health, have become quite popular with users seeking help and information. Similarly, OSG is increasingly used to connect people with similar health concerns (Chung, 2013; Haythornthwaite, 2005). The two features of OSG, namely anonymity and asynchronous communication, have been shown to improve well-being. These two features create a safe environment and increase self-disclosure without negative consequences (Eysenbach et al., 2004; Lawlor & Kirakowski, 2014). With anonymity provided by OSGs, individuals are liberated from barriers such as shame, feeling underestimated, and the fear of stigma. Moreover, active participation in OSGs helps dismantle the negative emotions that hinder individuals from seeking support, empowering them to seek assistance offline in the real world, thereby improving their mental health and well-being (Barak et al., 2008; Lawlor & Kirakowski, 2014).

Furthermore, these technological advancements and the popularisation of social media platforms have allowed users to self-disclose while maintaining privacy at the same time (Clark-Gordon et al., 2019; Manikonda et al., 2018). Self-disclosure is defined as "the telling of the previously unknown so that it becomes shared knowledge, the "process of making the self known to others" (Balani & Choudhury, 2015, p. 1374). While social media platforms

allow users self-disclosure, research has found that doing so improves physical and psychological well-being (Balani & Choudhury, 2015; Luo & Hancock, 2020).

Additionally, digital media has become a safe place for victims to share their stories. Research by Lowenstein-Barkai (2020) found that victims are more willing to come forward and share their stories online in hopes of receiving social support, seeking information, or hoping their disclosure can change the policies. These are possible because of the nature and features of online platforms. Furthermore, online communities are composed of similar people who have experienced the same situation and can talk about sensitive topics (Lowenstein-Barkai, 2020). While victims are reluctant to disclose their experience in a formal justice setting, an increasing number of victims use digital platforms to access online assault survivor communities privately. These platforms are Facebook, Reddit, Twitter, Tumblr, forum websites, and others (O'Neill, 2018). O'Neill (2018) found that victims use digital platforms for three main reasons: 1. access to communities and support, 2. seek advice, and 3. as a form of storytelling. Because victims usually receive negative responses upon disclosing incidents, so they turn to online platforms to share their stories and find communities that can support them. Furthermore, victims also use these online platforms for reasons such as to raise awareness on the matter and for support and advice through digital media. All digital media and online communities provide a platform where victims' voices are heard and believed by other users, where victims have control over their experience, and where their needs are fulfilled through online help (O'Neill, 2018).

The present study

In online forums, victims can self-disclose to their heart's content almost anything that is either not socially desirable, not perceived well by people, or is difficult for victims to share in real-life settings (Barak et al., 2008). Online self-disclosures give victims a platform

where they are welcomed, encouraged, empowered, and perceived positively and where victims can be their true selves. These aspects of online forums will be utilized in the current study to gather information on sexual assault victims (O'Neill, 2018). Sexual assault is a sensitive topic for all victims. However, male victims of sexual assault are the most underrepresented and under-researched populations (Petersson & Plantin, 2019; Gagnier et al., 2017). Most victims often do not disclose their assault incidents for multiple reasons, which makes it challenging to learn and understand these victims and how impactful assault is on the male victims. This is where online forums come into context. Through the help of online self-disclosure studies, this study's target is to get a more detailed understanding of the aspects that are present and related to male sexual assault and their experience and, in addition, what can be done in order to tackle these challenges male victims experience and go through. Mental health challenges will be discovered, but in addition to that, this research will also look at other factors that male victims experience to get a more detailed and nuanced understanding. This study, with the help of an online forum, Reddit, aims to understand male victims of sexual assault and their experiences by answering the following research question: *What mental health challenges and other significant issues do male victims of sexual assault disclose in online forums?*

Methods

Study design

For this study, a qualitative research design was employed, using thematic analysis by Clarke and Braun on data gathered from discussion threads on the online forum Reddit. Text-based thematic analysis was used to identify patterns of meaning to help get a deep and nuanced understanding of mental health factors associated with male victims of sexual assault.

Context of the study

The social networking platform Reddit allows users to share and discuss stigmatizing topics such as sexual assault by sharing their own stories in-depth with others (Manikonda et al., 2018). This online social networking website has 73 million daily active users, 16 billion posts and comments, and 100,000 active communities, also called subreddit, each dedicated to a particular subject, hobby, and overarching concept (Reddit, 2024). While specific social media platforms could hinder people from sharing, where their name or other such characteristics can identify them, Reddit's inherent feature of allowing users to engage while maintaining partial or total anonymity fosters more open and unrestricted discussion (Miller, 2020). It makes sharing a comfortable experience (Young et al., 2016). Reddit features of anonymity, open discussion, and a large number of users where they can freely self-disclose their experience will be utilized in this study to investigate the post-assault experience of male users.

Procedure

In the first step, ethical approval was received to ensure that the data collected, and research conducted were in accordance with the University of Twente's ethical standards. After that, a manual search on Reddit began. First, a search through all subreddit communities was conducted, and a total of 4 subreddits were finalized from which the final dataset was gathered. The 4 subreddits were chosen (See Table 1 in Appendix A) because they had a higher number of members (found in the list of communities) or more male members, as found in the name and description of the subreddit community. Each subreddit had guidelines, rules, and moderators to ensure the discussions remained within the subreddit rules mentioned on the community page. The four subreddit communities used are r/AskReddit, r/MensLib, r/TrueOffMyChest, and r/AskMen. The subreddit r/AskReddit is

about asking and answering thought-provoking questions, has 46 million members, and is the second-highest community with the most members on Reddit. r/MensLib is about discussing issues related to men and has 238 thousand members. The r/TrueOffMyChest is about getting personal things off your chest and has a total of 2.3 million members; the last subreddit community is r/AskMen, with 6.1 million members, where questions are to men or about men. After finalizing the subreddits from which data would be gathered, the search for posts began.

Reddit requires more specific terminologies to get the required search results. Therefore, the following terminologies were used in all four of the selected subreddit communities: “men sexual assault,” “men rape victims,” “men who are raped,” “men of Reddit what’s your sexual assault story,” and “Male victims of sexual assault what’s your experience?” These terms were also searched in a few other subreddit communities to ascertain if more results could be obtained. However, the results were diverse and unrelated to the current research, mainly because those subreddits had different interests.

After obtaining a large dataset, the search was narrowed down by selecting posts with one thousand or fewer comments and posts that covered different questions related to male sexual assault. Posts that were repeated or very similar were excluded to ensure variability in the questions covered in the post. In the end, the selected posts were between 2017 and 2022. This led to using 15 posts and 442 comments gathered from 4 subreddit communities within six years (See Table 1 in Appendix A).

Inclusion criteria

Three inclusion criteria were considered while collecting data from Reddit: 1. Stories are posted only by male users and are about their own experiences. 2. Posts made between the years 2017 and 2022. 3. Posts with comments 1000 or under.

The second and third inclusions were selected to ensure that the data remained relevant and feasible for comprehensive analysis, that the dataset was manageable, and that thorough examination could be conducted without overwhelming the analysis process.

Exclusion criteria

Four exclusion criteria were carefully considered to maintain the integrity of the data:

1. Questions that had overlapping. 2. Comments about support or encouragement in the discussion thread; 3. Comments where a user shared someone else's story; and 4. Comments where the user identified itself as a female.

Data analysis

During the data analysis process, Braun and Clarke's (2006) six steps of thematic analysis were followed. During the first step, the data set was familiarized by reading through all the comments users of Reddit posts had posted. All the comments were then copied into a Word document (Microsoft Word), and separate documents were made for each post, resulting in 15 Word documents. Each Word document was then transferred into Atlas.ti (Version 24.1.0), where the comments were reread and initial codes were generated (Step 2 of thematic analysis; Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). During this step, open coding was performed, where codes were created as the data was read through without any pre-determined codes in mind. The data was coded as relevant data was found or something captivating related to the research question was captured. After that, step 3 of thematic analysis (Search for themes) was conducted, where codes that fit together under a theme were examined, and the theme was named, i.e., depression and PTSD, under the theme of mental health. All the themes were then reviewed (step 4) to ensure that the data gathered applied to each theme and that the data supported the themes. During Step 5, which is about defining and naming the themes, it was

ensured that the themes were clear and accurate. Two people reviewed the data before writing the data analysis and gave subsequent suggestions on the themes, sub-themes, and codes. Finally, in the last step (step 6), the analysis of the data was written.

Results

After coding the data, 5 overarching themes were found, each with its sub-themes (total of 11), followed by 51 codes to answer the question: *What mental health challenges and other significant issues do male victims of sexual assault disclose in online forums?*

The table below provides an overview of the analysis of the results from the Reddit data. The table begins with mental health challenges and then follows four other significant challenges male victims experience.

Table 1

Themes and sub-themes formulated represent different factors

Overarching main themes & sub-themes	Corresponding codes
1. Mental health	
1.1 post-trauma effect on mental health	PTSD Alcoholism Depression Eating disorder Still struggling Suicidal
1.2 Effects on victims	Long-term recovery journey Loss of trust Questioned their sexuality Scared to tell and disclose assault Struggle being at work
2. Family, friends, and perpetrator response upon disclosure	
2.1 Role of perpetrator	Perpetrator blaming the victim Perpetrator gaslighting the victim Perpetrator threatening the victim Perpetrator was someone known

	Dismissed by perpetrator who was a close friend or family member
2.2 Family and friends' response	Gaslighted by family and friends Silenced or not believed by family and friends Strained close relationships Told to keep it secret Blamed for the incident Accused of enjoying Called gay Laughed at

3. Navigating post-assault dynamics: Experiences and responses

3.1 Feeling discouraged	No one cares No support/services Not acknowledge as assault
3.2 Acknowledgement of assault	Difficult to acknowledge assault Blame themselves for the incident Culture
3.3 Steps taken by the victim	Asked for help Going to therapy Share to close people Seeking professional help years later
3.4 Victims' response/reaction	Ashamed to ask for help In denial Embarrassed
3.5 Responses the victims received	Dismissed by people Support groups/services not helpful Dismissed by therapist Dismissed by work/management/school/law enforcement

4. Victims wants and desires

4.1 What victims need	No means no Not all men are rapist Support/help/services Believe men Bias and double standard towards men Take men words serious too Men can also be assaulted
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5. Social media as a platform for victims

5.1 Role of social media	First time sharing on social media Sharing personal experience to help other victims Social media helped recognised assault
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Each theme and sub-theme will be discussed in detail below.

Theme 1 mental health:

1.1 post-trauma effect on mental health

This theme is about the after-effects of assault on the victim's mental health and the type of mental health disorders or challenges the victims suffered from after the incident. Among the mental health effects, PTSD, alcoholism, depression, eating disorders, suicidal thoughts, and still struggling years after the incident were codes found common among the victims. For most victims, the incident still haunts them, which has affected their daily lives, and memories of the incidents are traumatizing to victims even when years have passed after the incident. Some victims do not recognize their selves anymore, whereas for others, feeling connected to their bodies feels foreign. Nightmares, flashbacks, commitment issues, trust issues, addiction, anger and sadness, binge drinking, and suicidal ideation were discovered in the stories. For some, the incident was very extreme, which has affected their daily lives, whereas for others, disclosing and sharing about the incident is challenging and brings back memories.

These victims share their after-assault experiences as having long-lasting effects that they can still remember years after the incidents. Similarly, for others, the memory is described as humiliating and anxiety-evoking.

“I suddenly at age 24 had crazy strong flashbacks of that episode and started crying uncontrollably” (User 28, post 1, r/AskReddit) and most define their experience as

“Humiliating, emasculating, infuriating, and anxiety-provoking” (User 19, post 1, r/AskReddit)

For some, memories of the incident have affected their health, causing panic attacks, and dealing with it is challenging. In this comment, the victim has completely repressed his assault incident for years, but it has surfaced at some point, causing him to have panic attacks. While, in this case, the victim was already seeking professional help, it shows the importance of having someone to talk to when experiencing such psychological and physiological changes.

I eventually repressed those memories so deep I had completely blocked out that year. That is until covid happened and I was stuck at home with my thoughts. Eventually something triggered the memories and I remembered it all. Every word. Every movement. Every punch. Everything. All at once I went from a-ok to bawling my eyes out, shaking, hyperventilating, and losing feeling in my limbs (according to my therapist this was probably my first panic attack) (User 31, post 1, r/AskReddit)

Others, however, frequently receive reminders of the incident through experiences similar to their assault. For instance, coming across anything comparable to the incident or the perpetrators causes victims extreme flashbacks.

I get flashbacks that make my body tense and freeze up all the time. Sometimes it happens when something reminds me of her or that night, sometimes it happens when I see discussion about sexual assault in general, or sometimes it just happens with no explanation. (User 1, post 5, r/MensLib)

1.2 Effects on Victims

This sub-theme refers to the effect of assault on the victims, and five codes were gathered to show the impact. Mostly, for victims, having to come up with the terms of being assaulted as a man was difficult to comprehend. It took victims a lot of time to recover from the trauma. Some victims also questioned their sexuality after the incident. Disclosure of the incident and trusting others has been a challenging step to take, and for others, being at a place where they were assaulted was a struggle.

For most victims, the recovery journey is difficult and challenging, and it takes them a substantive amount of time to either accept what happened to them or learn to live with the effect on their mental health.

“All in all it has taken me nearly 40 years to fix the damage that it did, and I have to accept that some of it cant be fixed, it can only be managed.” (User 2, post 1, r/AskReddit)

From the disclosure stories, some men were assaulted at work by their co-workers, male or female, and therefore, staying at the job working as they used to do was challenging.

I despised having to come to work knowing I would be spending 8-9 hours in a room with her suffering through this harassment but I couldn't bring anything up to the owner about it because she'd been working for the company for so damn long (User 41, post 1, r/AskReddit)

Questioning their sexuality after the incident was also found among some men. Most men were questioning whether they were straight or heterosexual just because men assaulted them.

“I'm very confused about my sexuality as result of what happened to me.” (User 5, post 3, r/TrueOffMyChest)

Theme 2 family, friends, and perpetrator response upon disclosure:

2.1 Role of perpetrator

This sub-theme focuses on the perpetrator's role. In most cases, the perpetrator was someone known to and close to the victim. Whether being a friend, sibling, partner, colleague, neighbour, parent, relative, etc. The perpetrator blaming and threatening the victim was also the reason the victim did not disclose the incident to anyone and has kept it a secret. Getting gaslighted and dismissed by the perpetrator that it was not an assault has also made victims reluctant to speak up.

Some victims also disclosed that being a male was what hindered them from telling others, believing no one would believe them as a male, which illuminates the societal differences in accepting and believing male victims.

When I asked the girl if she knew what she has done to me was sexual abuse, she replied: "Doesn't matter who did what. If it happened between us, you're the male, so I'm the victim." She sounded very persuasive at the time so I couldn't tell anyone about it. (User 99, post 2, r/AskReddit)

Perpetrators threatening the victim was also common. Most victims were often scared to disclose what happened to them and had a fear of the perpetrator that stopped them from sharing, and most still have not disclosed to anyone despite years after the incident.

“When he was done he told me not to tell anyone or I would get into big trouble. I knew that had to be wrong, but I was scared.” (User 33, post 1, r/AskReddit)

As mentioned, in most stories, the perpetrator is someone known and close to the victim. The perpetrator can be anyone, such as a parent, sibling, cousin, relative, neighbours, etc.

“I was sexually abused by my father starting at the age of six. When I was 11 he raped me for the first time... continued to molest me until I was about 16.” (User 1, post 3, r/MensLib)

2.2 Family and friends' response

This sub-theme involves the victim's family and friends' reaction when the victim told them about the incident. In almost all cases, the victims were either not believed by their family and friends, blamed for the incident, and accused of being the reason he was assaulted, or told to keep the incident secret and not to tell anyone. Some were gaslighted into thinking what happened to them was not assault or that the incident never took place. Furthermore, some victims were also blamed that they might have liked and enjoyed what happened to them. Some were called gay for being assaulted as a male, whereas others were laughed at

upon disclosure, finding it difficult to image a guy being assaulted. These responses were, in turn, found to have strained the relationships between the victims and his family and friends.

Here, the victim who decided to share and tell his mother about his assault experience was brutally shunned and not believed when he found the courage to seek help from his mother.

“My own mother told me "this sort of stuff doesn't happen to boys" when I worked up the courage to tell her. Been called a liar, too. At 12 yrs old.” (User 59, post 4, r/AskReddit)

In most cases, victims were not taken seriously upon disclosure, and responses such as ‘lucky’ or ‘enjoyable’ were widespread and received from people, whether close or just acquaintances or those victims put their trust in to talk to.

““got lucky” or “you had early experience, nice” when they find out my aunt took advantage of me as a toddler.” (User 53, post 4, r/AskReddit)

When victims decide to share what they have been keeping secret for so long, they often experience disappointing responses, which, in this case, has led to strained relationships. In this comment, the victim has kept it to himself for a long time and has finally decided to share it with his wife. His wife blaming him for the assault has led to divorce and the end of the relationship for him. This was also seen in many disclosure comments where, upon receiving negative responses, it has led to strained relationships.

I didn't tell anybody for years until I was 5 years into my marriage and I finally told my wife. Her immediate response was: it's my fault because I didn't stop it from happening and I must have enjoyed it then. Took 5 more years, a divorce, and finding a good therapist to trust ever telling anybody ever again. (User 2, post 3, r/MensLib)

Theme 3 Navigating post-assault dynamics: Experiences and responses:

3.1 Feeling discouraged

This sub-theme is about the experience victims have upon disclosing and sharing the incident with others. When victims decided to talk about their sexual assault, they were often met with disappointing outcomes. Most victims were distressed due to the lack of help services available to male victims. In addition, victims did not get much support from people. Most victims mentioned that people don't usually care about males, and most of the time, the incident is not even acknowledged as assault.

Here, the victims mention challenges he faced when it came to making people believe him and about the lack of professional health providers for male victims. Furthermore, this comment also emphasizes that while there is a lack of professionals trained in dealing with male victims, the lack of mental health professionals, in general, is concerning, considering the waiting list to see a therapist, which can worsen a victim's mental state.

Speaking as a male who sought treatment for sexual trauma, I couldn't even get to the "believe their stories" part, I couldn't find a therapist qualified to treat male sexual trauma in 300 miles that would take my insurance and didn't have a one-year+ wait to be seen. (User 4, post 3, r/MensLib)

There were some victims who, despite getting discouraging responses, persisted in sharing and disclosing the unfortunate incidents they faced, but not all were successful in getting the justice they deserved.

I've tried to reach out a few times to get help, but you'd be surprised how people's ideas seem to turn once they realize you're a man who got raped by a woman. Way too many people think you're lying, or even worse, that it happened but you deserved it for [x] reason. (User 5, post 4, r/AskReddit)

3.2 Acknowledgement of assault

This theme refers to the difficulties victims had with acknowledging their assault. For most victims, it wasn't easy to recognize and come to terms with accepting that they had been assaulted. Many victims blamed themselves for being the reason they got assaulted. For others, the cultural stigma associated with male assaults made it difficult for them to realize that the incident was indeed an assault.

This victim highlights that having physical changes to the body at the time of assault does not mean consent, nor does it mean a victim wants or enjoys it. Having a physical change, like an erection, is just a physiological reaction that can take place and could be, for instance, because of fear.

I felt a sense of guilt and shame. Yes I got an erection. It took me some time to accept that no that doesn't mean I wanted this to happen. It does not mean I liked what happened. And it does not mean I consented. (User 61, post 1, r/AskReddit)

The cultural stigma associated with the impracticability of men getting assaulted has made it difficult for victims to accept and disclose that they were assaulted. In this comment, the victims talk about the stigma men face. That when men are assaulted, they either want it or are probably gay.

Cultural stigmas make it difficult for people to believe a guy can get raped; if a guy is raped by a woman, he must have wanted it. If a guy is raped by a guy, he should have fought him off, or if the rapist isn't out of the closet, then it's not possible because he's 'not gay'. I was sexually assaulted by a considerably larger guy than me when I was in my early teens. I told my coach about it and he said 'he couldn't have, he's the quarterback on the football team, and I'm pretty sure he has a girlfriend'. It's an odd double standard we have in our culture. (User 2, post 4, r/TrueOffMyChest)

3.3 Steps taken by the victim

From the shared disclosure stories, some victims took the initiative to help themselves recover from the incident. Some victims directly asked for help or decided to get professional help and seek therapy. For others, disclosing their assault was difficult, and they only chose to share with people close to them who believed they could help them in some way. For some victims, it took years to seek professional help eventually.

While some are still asking for help in some way, either in real life or online settings, most other victims talked and strongly emphasized their desire to be believed.

“Please listen without judgement when a male comes to you with their story. Heck, listen with compassion when anyone does. It will mean the world.” (User 58, post 1, r/AskReddit)

Trying to recover and handle the trauma by themselves was also found among a few male victims. Here, the victim mentions online media and related online webpages that helped him learn and work through the trauma himself.

“I had to work through the issues myself, by researching the topic of being a survivor and how to recover from it, online (over a decade).” (User 11, post 2, r/AskMen)

While receiving a positive reaction or having a support system was barely seen in self-disclosure stories, this victim was instead met with support upon disclosure and received a pleasant response from his family and therapist, which was lacking in other stories. Thus, this highlights the importance of disclosure for victims.

“my girlfriend, parents, therapist, and others have been very supportive.” (User 6, post 1, r.MensLib)

3.4 Victim’s response/reaction

After being assaulted, there are a few points that were common among most disclosure stories. Most victims were ashamed to ask for help; some were embarrassed, and others were in denial that they were assaulted or that they let it happen to them.

Here, the victim highlights the lack of support he received and how he felt broken because he was ashamed of what happened to him. Being ashamed can lead to a drastic impact on mental health, help-seeking behaviour, disclosing, and reporting the crime.

“So not supportive. I thought I was broken for being ashamed of the experience.” (User 26, post 1, r/AskReddit)

Being embarrassed, having a long period of denial, being scarred or ashamed of the incident, or having difficulty with asking for help was a common and recurrent response victims had.

i think, for me, the part that is the worst is that i didn't know what was going on at the time. it took me awhile to realize what had happened (a couple of years) and i didn't tell anyone for over a decade. i think talking about it sooner with more people would have helped me a lot (User 53, post 1, r/AskReddit)

“Then I went into a period of denial. I kept telling myself that sexual violence could not happen to men.” (User 1, post 2, r/MensLib)

3.5 Responses the victims received

This theme is mainly associated with the responses victims received from people who were not family or friends. That is victims, who, upon disclosure, were dismissed by support services, therapists, management at work such as the HR department or their bosses, school authorities, and law enforcement. In most cases, victims were assaulted either at their place of work or at their school during their adolescent years; some victims did try to talk to the

respective authorities who could get them justice. However, in most cases, victims were dismissed by those authoritative figures.

Here, for example, dismissal and lack of support systems for male victims of assault are mentioned. The victim talks about his experience with support services for male victims and how ineffectual they are while dealing with male victims.

“I went to a charity/agency designed to help male victims and they were pathetically fucking useless. hopefully other people have better experiences of support” (User 9, post 1, r/AskReddit)

Lack of action from authoritative figures, such as in schools or by law enforcement, was also very repetitive and familiar. This victim mentions how he was dismissed by a teacher when he was in school, which highlights that society does not believe young adolescent male victims, let alone have sympathy towards adult male victims.

“When I finally had the strength to go tell a teacher who was the only one that was nice to me, she laughed and told me to not say silly things” (User 45, post 1, r/AskReddit)

Here, the response from law enforcement is showcased. While police and authority figures are expected to treat every victim in the same manner, most male victims were instead met with contrary responses, which calls attention to unprofessional dealing with a specific population of victims.

“what do you expect us to do about it?” the police officer I eventually reported it to” (User 114, post 2, r/AskReddit)

Theme 4 Victims wants and desires:

4.1 What Victims Need

This theme focused on the message male victims wanted to portray and wanted others to understand through their self-disclosure stories. Among the stories, seven principal codes were identified that describe these messages. Codes identified are that when a victim denies, does not give consent, and says no, they mean it, and being male does not mean they always want to participate in sexual activities. The second code emphasizes that society primarily views men as a perpetrator. While this could be correct, considering the large number of female victims, it does not mean that all men are rapists. The third code concerns the lack of support and help services available to male victims. Most mentioned the bias and double standard associated with male victims and that incidents are not identified and named as sexual assault solely because the victim is a man. Most men mentioned that they want to be taken seriously and that a man can also become a victim of sexual assault.

Here, the victims emphasize that regardless of gender, when a person does not give consent, they mean it and should be respected regardless.

“No means no. It doesn't matter who says it, no means no.” (User 1, post 2, r/AskMen)

Not all men can be perpetrators of sexual assault, and society needs to change its perception of how it views all men because it will affect how male victims are perceived and believed.

“I’d love for people to stop assuming only men are capable of rape” (User 43, post 7, r/AskReddit)

Bias and double standards towards men are pervasive in every society and culture, which makes victims ashamed and embarrassed of themselves. Having these biases and double standards is also why assault crimes against men are so underreported.

“People show so much sympathy for women survivors. Male survivors are mocked and shamed for being weak enough to be victimized. It's a vile double standard. This is why men rarely speak out about this problem.” (User 22, post 2, r/AskMen)

The lack of services for men and finding support services is challenging. Support services are rarely designed to accompany male victims, and even if they are available, it isn't easy to find professionals who are trained to deal with male populations.

Honestly just the chance to talk to a professional would be cool at no or low cost. I go to a pretty good school and even then they only offer all of three one-hour sessions. All pur money goes to the sports programs ...Anyways, would be a lot better if everyone had access to better healthcare, including mental health (User 72, post 7, r/AskReddit)

Theme 5 Social media as a platform for victims:

5.1 Role of social media

This theme examines using social media as a platform for victims to disseminate their narratives. Three principal codes were identified. Social media was used by victims who find

it challenging to share their assault experiences with people in real life use social media as a way of self-disclosure. Some wanted to share their expertise online in the hope of helping those with similar experiences and giving support or suggestions. Whereas few victims recognized they were assaulted with the help of other online users when they shared their stories online.

Social and digital media are ways to connect and speak about complex matters that society overlooks. Here, the victims could only disclose the information in online forums and not in real-life settings.

“I have never told anyone outside of the internet.” (User 36, post 1, r/AskReddit)

There was lots of interaction between victims within threads, giving support and suggestions to help each other. In this comment, the victim shares the name of a book for men in recovery that helped him. Additionally, he also writes encouraging words about recovery and survival.

If you are a male and are in recovery from any childhood sexual abuse, you should read *Victims No Longer*, a book about surviving child sexual abuse, for and by men. I remember reading the introduction and weeping - it was such a relief to encounter a book written for me, that I didn't need to translate and recontextualise. Recovery is possible, guys. Survival is possible. Hell, it's even possible to thrive. (User 5, post 3, r/MensLib)

Different social media platforms used by victims were valuable and helpful to them. In this comment, the victim stresses how talking and disclosing about assault incidents is essential. Here online media Reddit helped him realize that the incident that took place with him was rape which might not have occurred to him otherwise.

“I had no idea I was raped until I learned on reddit that it is indeed a thing that happens.”

(User 12, post 1, r/AskReddit)

Discussion

This study aimed to discover mental health and other significant issues male victims of sexual assault experience by using the online discussion forum Reddit to gather and analyse self-disclosure stories posted by the victims themselves.

The findings highlight the diverse range of issues male victims experience in addition to the effect on their mental health. Five overarching themes have been found that reflect the findings from the self-disclosure stories. The central theme found is the mental health issues victims experience, and the remaining four themes highlight the further impact on victims. The themes recognized are: *1. Mental health, 2. Family and perpetrator response upon disclosure, 3. Navigating post-assault dynamics: Experiences and responses, 4. Victims' wants and desires, 5. Social media as a platform for victims.*

First of all, the central theme of *mental health* that has the subthemes *post-trauma effect on mental health* and *effects on victims* focuses on the psychological challenges victims face post-trauma. Reddit users disclosed the mental and psychological health issues that they faced after their sexual assault incident. PTSD, alcoholism, depression, eating disorders, suicidal ideation, and continuous struggle were discovered. These findings were similar to research conducted by Walker et al. (2005) that suggests the prolonged effect of assault on the

psychological and physical health of the victims. Furthermore, McLean's (2013) study research found that the effects on victims are trauma-producing, and males show significantly higher levels of distress on the Trauma Symptom Inventory (McLean, 2013). The current research found similar results on the *effect on victims'* theme where, in addition to continuous struggles and long-term recovery journey, a few more factors were discovered, including being in denial, loss of trust, questioning sexuality, fear of disclosure, and struggling at work. These findings show the extreme impact of assault on different aspects of victims' lives, and in addition to mental health, other parts of their lives are also affected for the victims and those around them.

The second theme, family, friends, and perpetrator response upon disclosure, focuses on the role of the perpetrator and family and friends' response. For the role of perpetrator, it was found that in most cases, the perpetrator was someone known; this finding was similar to the study conducted by Ioannou et al. (2017), where 67.4% of perpetrators were acquainted with the victims and included people such as partners, family members, co-workers, and roommates among others whom the victim trusted. However, the current study also found a more significant role of the perpetrator in most self-disclosure stories, where victims were blamed, gaslighted, threatened, or dismissed by the perpetrator. Furthermore, Moors & Webber (2012) found that because perpetrators are often close and known to victims, it makes them reluctant to contact or ask for help, and that delays their disclosures.

In this research, *silenced or not believed by family and friends* upon disclosure were found in addition to *strained close relationships* discovered after disclosing their assault incident. A study conducted by Ahrens & Aldana (2012) found that reactions victims received upon disclosure depended on the relationship victims had with others prior to the disclosure. Those victims who received positive reactions from others almost always had close relationships, and those who received negative reactions had poor relationships prior to the

disclosure. While the current research found that victims were often silenced or not believed by family and friends which in most cases led to strained close relationships, there could be a possibility that most victims did not have a good relationship with family, friends, or acquaintances they shared their disclosures with, which led to such consequences. Additionally, responses and reactions from family and friends included being blamed for the incident, accused of enjoying, called gay, laughed at, or told to keep it secret. It is found that victims of sexual assault receive the most silencing and stigmatizing reactions from people upon disclosure than any other victimization (Reich et al., 2021). This can explain why victims receive harsh responses upon disclosure. Furthermore, it can be concluded that this study found silenced or not believed and negative harsh responses upon disclosure, which led to strained close relationships, but also that perhaps prior negative relationships with who the victims disclosed their experience resulted in negative responses, not believed and harsh reaction.

Furthermore, within the *Navigating post-assault dynamics: Experiences and responses*, it was found that victims are almost always ashamed to ask for help, embarrassed, and in denial about their sexual assault incident. This highlights that the majority of victims were in denial, embarrassed, and did not ask for help because of multiple male rape myths and not wanting others to know, fear of being perceived as gay, lack of trust in police, and fear of not finding help among others (Allen et al., 2015). Additionally, Sable et al. (2006) found that these are the factors that contribute to the underreporting of the crime, especially among male victims who associate reporting with putting their masculinity in jeopardy. Most victims blame themselves, and males often experience elevated levels of self-blame for the incident that happened to them. Self-blame is often associated with negative consequences, including anger, hostility, and loss of trust (Davies, 2002). Therefore, males experience high

levels of blame and are also blamed more for their assault, and these findings are similar to the results found by Davies (2002).

For the theme 3.5 *Responses the victims received*, the current research found that victims were often dismissed by therapists, work, management, school, law enforcement, and people in general. In addition, not finding support groups and help services valuable was common among the self-disclosure stories. Considering the lack of support groups and services, most do not get the required treatments, and there is no opportunity to prevent the long-term health outcomes associated with it (Du Mont et al., 2013). It is also widespread for male victims to receive less sympathy, and their assaults are considered less severe than females; furthermore, they are expected to fight and escape from the scenes and blamed if they fail to do so (Davies, 2002).

Additionally, within the theme four of *Victims' wants and desires*, victims often struggle with bias and double standards towards them; they find it difficult to be believed by others that a man can be assaulted and often are not taken seriously in this matter. They want to be believed for their self-disclosure stories and want more help and services available for them as well, and the notion that all men are rapists is not valid for all men. In such cases, it is widespread for people and society to blame men (the victims) over the perpetrator of the crime (Bieneck & Krahe, 2010). Furthermore, male myths result in bias and double standards (Walfield, 2018), and similar findings, including cultural differences, were discovered in the current study.

Moreover, *social media (theme 5)* Reddit was a supportive and encouraging platform for victims. Within the discussion threads, victims were often met with supporting, encouraging, empathetic, and sympathetic responses from other users. Victims often share their stories as a form of self-disclosure, to help others with similar experiences, or to get help assistance in recognizing and confirming their assault. This study found that victims are often

dismissed and not believed upon assault disclosures, and (Moors and Webber, 2012) found that upon receiving negative responses, victims turn to anonymous online forums for self-disclosure. For most victims, self-disclosing through online forums is a way of unburdening by writing anonymously (Moors & Webber, 2012). Furthermore, social media and online forums are great platforms for victims and supporters who want contrasting visibility. Online forums allow victims to decrease their visibility by remaining anonymous, while supporters can use hashtags to search for content and increase their visibility to substantiate victims (Barta, 2021).

Overall, from the results of this study, multiple mental health factors were discovered that victims experience and which last a substantive period and thus consequently affect their daily habits, lifestyles, their perception of themselves, and their relationships with other people. Furthermore, this study also sheds light on the perpetrator's role, especially if it is someone close and known to the victim, and how this familiarity can hinder the victim's help-seeking behaviours. The role of family and friends is also highlighted, and how adverse reaction can affect victims and their relationships with victims. This study also found a need for more support services; the point here is that more focus should be put on providing help to male victims and training required to help figures when required to deal with such victims. Additionally, what victims want, desire, and feel about their situation was highlighted to understand their experience better. Lastly, this study also accentuates the importance of online forums and social and digital media as convenient for those victims who are dismissed and misunderstood by society and their surroundings. It provides a safe place where they can be themselves, talk without the fear of hiding anything, and find empathy, support, encouragement, and suggestions from other people. In conclusion, integrating online media into the support system of victims is valuable. It increases their ability to seek and receive help and fosters a sense of community and belonging, which are necessary elements in the

recovery of victims. This study highlighted the mental and other significant issues male victims of assault experience that were recognized in the online forum Reddit and also how a continuous development of these online platforms is necessary for such victims to remain safe, effective, and inclusive.

Future recommendations

The current research used thematic analysis to get a rich understanding of issues male victims of sexual assault experience. This research recognized some findings similar to those of previous research conducted, whereas new findings were also yielded. However, some future implications can provide further insights into the effects of sexual assault on male victims. Since this research focused on self-disclosures made on Reddit, future research can expand on the study by employing diverse online platforms, including social media and web forums. Moreover, in addition to thematic analysis, future research can benefit by incorporating mixed-method research designs to get a more nuanced and detailed understanding of different factors that play a role in the mental health of the victims. Furthermore, future research can also benefit from implementing a longitudinal study where recent victims of sexual assault are tracked over a certain period to study the changes in their mental health. Moreover, within this research, a lack of support/help services available to male victims was found, thus suggesting the need for mental health intervention for these underrepresented populations; future research can focus on designing a targeted mental health intervention and testing its effectiveness. Current findings also found a significant gap in dismissal by legal enforcement, which underlines the need for policy and legal changes regarding male victims. Future research should evaluate current policies and advocate for better changes that support victims by providing training to law enforcement and healthcare providers who can support male victims. Cultural backgrounds, bias, and double standards

were also highlighted in current research, which leaves future research to focus on providing educational programs and awareness campaigns to raise awareness and educate people about the prevalence and impact of assault on male victims, fostering a supportive environment for male victims to disclose themselves.

Limitations

The data of this study is limited to self-disclosure made on Reddit only, which might not represent all male victims; further insights could be generated if data is gathered from multiple online forums that can potentially generalize findings to a larger population. Furthermore, self-disclosure in online forums can have self-selection bias because there could be differences in the experience of those who share online versus those who do not; therefore, future research can interview victims to gather more diverse perspectives. Another limitation is the long-term impact assault has on victims. This study captured stories and experiences made at the time of disclosure but does not represent how it affects the long-term or how the victims feel at the time of self-disclosure. Another limitation is the authenticity and accuracy of the stories. The disclosures were self-reported, and there is no way to verify the authenticity and accuracy of the data; however, there is no reason not to believe these posts, considering the similarity in findings between the current research and previous studies. Cultural factors are another limitation of this study, which was also found in the results. Culture could highly impact the content of self-disclosures, which can limit findings and understandings about the nature and experience of assault within different cultures.

Strengths

The study used self-disclosure stories posted by the victims and formed a dataset reflecting victims' natural and genuine experiences. Furthermore, the anonymous feature of

online forums allowed and encouraged victims to post detailed disclosures, allowing data to be more authentic. Additionally, this study's results shed light on overlooked issues, such as cultural biases, double standards, and the lack of support services available to male victims, thus emphasizing the need for a better support system. Lastly, this study identified five subthemes and eleven subthemes, offering a detailed and nuanced understanding of issued male victims of sexual assault experience.

Conclusion

The findings of this study aimed to shed light on mental health factors that male victims of sexual assault experience, more particularly to understand what could be found from the self-disclosure stories made by the victims on online forums and social media sites. Some findings of this study align with previous research, thus highlighting its consistency and relevance. New findings were also within the constructed themes, sub-themes, and codes. Taken together, this study found mental health factors male victims of assault experience, the responses victims receive upon disclosure, victims' own experience and responses, victims' wants and desires, and finally, how online forums or social media platforms assist victims with self-disclosures. Furthermore, the findings also shed light on the necessity of support or help services from health care providers, the need for understanding and supporting male victims of assault, and the importance of online resources as a tool that helps in betterment, empowering, and supporting repressed and overlooked victims such as male victims of sexual assault.

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Appendix A

Table 1

The posts selected within the subreddit communities

Subreddit name	Search key used	Posts used from the subreddit	Number of comments used for data analysis
r/AskReddit	Male victims of sexual assault what's your experience?	1. [Serious] Male victims of sexual assault, harassment, or rape, to clear some common misconceptions, what were your experiences like?	84
		2. Fellow male victims of sexual assault, what is the most infuriating response you got when you finally told your story?	144
		3. [serious] Male rape victims; what's your story and how can we raise awareness?	25
		4. [Serious] Male survivors of sexual violence, what can society do (or do better) to help you heal from your experiences?	76

r/AskMen	Male victims of sexual assault what's your experience?	1. Male victims of sexual assault, did people react appropriately when you shared your experience?	19
		2. Male victims of sexual assault, what is something you wish more people understood?	22
		3. Male victims of sexual assault: What happened to you? And how? What stigmas did you face?	6
r/MensLib	Male victims of sexual assault what's your experience?	1. Dear Male victims of Sexual Assault, what are your experiences upon opening up about your story with women and other people?	29
		2. (long post) Why I think getting men to realize their own victimization is key in ending sexual violence against women and children.	1
		3. Male Survivors Of Sexual Abuse Struggle To Find Treatment: "Male victims of sexual trauma face a lot of obstacles to getting help. They have trouble finding people to believe their	15

stories, even when they find the strength to seek assistance."

4. Thoughts on other men's reaction to male rape victims. 1

5. How to talk about male victims of sexual violence? 10

r/TrueOffMyChest Male victims of sexual assault what's your experience?

1. I'm a guy, and I was raped. I can't keep it to myself anymore. 6

2. I'm (24m) sick of people belittling my experience with SA because i'm a guy. the only people who supported me were feminist women. 1

3. Male Victims of Rape like me are taken as an complete joke 3
