

“if I stay silent, it doesn’t help anyone”: Understanding how people use TikTok to talk about sexual violence

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Abstract

TikTok is the second most popular social media platform among American teenagers, suggesting it may be a way to reach young people with sexual violence-related messages. This qualitative content analysis focused on what TikTok users share about sexual violence. The content of the videos fell into two primary types of information, people sharing experiences of sexual violence (i.e., what happened, how they responded, impacts of experiences) and people sharing other information related to sexual violence (i.e., education, raising awareness). The study results demonstrate that people use TikTok as a platform to share their messages about sexual violence-related topics, underscoring the potential of this platform for prevention and recovery messages targeted toward individuals who directly or indirectly experience sexual violence.

Key Words: TikTok, sexual violence, sexual assault, disclosure, social media

Introduction

Experiences of sexual violence may lead to myriad physical, mental, and social health consequences (Jina & Thomas, 2013), which may be lessened through positive help-seeking and coping strategies. Within the broader help-seeking process, disclosing sexual violence is influenced by numerous intrapersonal, interpersonal, societal, and cultural factors (Halstead et al., 2017). There is substantial research on sexual violence disclosure, although much of it occurred before social media played a substantial role in social communication (Lemaigre et al., 2017; Manay & Collin-Vézina, 2021; Morrison et al., 2018).

TikTok, a short video-based social media platform, has become increasingly popular worldwide. In 2020 alone, nearly one billion people downloaded the TikTok app for the first time (Statista, 2021). As of 2022, TikTok was the second most popular social media platform among American teenagers ages 13 to 17 (Vogels, Gelles-Watnick, & Massarat, 2022). Its popularity may provide a new avenue for young people, the age group at highest risk for sexual violence, to share and seek sexual violence-related information (Smith et al., 2018). However, video-based disclosure may differ from other disclosure forms, as additional information (i.e., tone, visual cues, audio) is available to the people giving and receiving disclosures. Our study aimed to examine how people share experiences and content about sexual violence on TikTok. Understanding novel elements of video-based disclosure may build the foundation for future research that informs social media-based interventions.

Online Sexual Violence Disclosure

The internet has become one of the most influential platforms for sharing information, voicing opinions, and gaining support (Lisitsa et al., 2020). Disclosing sexual violence experiences on social media may result in social support from strangers, serve as a coping

mechanism, and increase motivation to report sexual violence to authorities (Bogen et al., 2019). Anonymous disclosure is one of the appealing aspects of social media for many survivors; however, with anonymity comes the inability to control who sees or hears the disclosure and who subsequently comments on survivors' stories (Bogen et al., 2022). As a result, disclosing information about one's sexual assault on social media may result in harassment and cyberbullying (Peter & Valkenburg, 2010). More private platforms, such as online discussion boards restricted to members, may be a way to reduce the risk of negative consequences. Although privately sharing sexual assault experiences may reduce the risk of negative repercussions, it also lessens the potential to build a larger sense of community and support from strangers (Moors & Webber, 2013). Whether private or public, disclosure provides survivors a platform to vocalize their narrative and develop resilience (Mendes, Keller, et al., 2019).

Evolving Social Media Use

Social media preferences tend to evolve quickly, and preferred sites have recently created spaces where images and creative expression are central to the dialogue (Madden & Alt, 2021). Instagram, for example, is the third-most popular social media platform among U.S. teenagers (Anderson & Jiang, 2018). It allows users to share content mainly through visual means, which gives survivors of sexual assault a way to share their experiences non-verbally (Vogels, Gelles-Watnick, & Massarat 2022).

Online conversations about sexual violence have also evolved since they first emerged in the early 2000s. One of the most significant transitions followed the #MeToo movement, which brought increased communication about sexual violence into online spaces (Quan-Haase et al., 2021). Originating in 2006 on Myspace by Tarana Burke (Me Too, 2024), #MeToo was intended to raise awareness of sexual violence among women of color. It gained international prominence

in October 2017 when celebrities shared their experiences and invited others to do the same (Quan-Haase et al., 2021). Twitter was a key platform for survivors of sexual violence to share unwanted sexual experiences and for other users to provide support (Bogen & Orchowski, 2021), but the movement expanded to other platforms. Instagram was also used to share messages during the #MeToo movement, with content raising key issues around sexual violence prevention (Guidry et al., 2020). There was also an increased number of Google searches related to sexual violence, such as a 36% increase in ‘sexual assault’ and an 89% increase in ‘sexual harassment’ searches after #MeToo went viral (Kaufman et al., 2021). Even Pinterest has been used to share messages relating to sexual violence (Carlyle et al., 2021). In addition to finding relevant information, sharing stories on social media may help people find and build a community. Nearly 50% of Facebook users in the U.S. are friends with someone who posted a message about experiences of sexual assault or harassment (Tambe, 2018).

This research and the related findings may be understood as a form of digital feminist activism, which emerged in the early 2010s as a way for women to connect around experiences of sexual violence (Mendes, Ringrose, et al., 2019). This form of activism serves two primary purposes: 1) to draw attention to women’s experiences in public discourse while empowering women to understand their experiences and 2) to facilitate help-seeking (Alaggia & Wang, 2020; Collaton et al., 2022; Mendes, Ringrose, et al., 2019; Titus, 2018; Turley & Fisher, 2018).

Video-Based Social Media

Limited research has been conducted on sexual violence and video-based disclosure, which occurs primarily on YouTube and TikTok. In two studies focused on YouTube content, women and girls challenged rape culture through their videos, although some videos included problematic information (Garcia & Vemuri, 2017; Harrington, 2019). To the best of our

knowledge, a 2023 dissertation is the only research focused on sexual violence content on TikTok (Nicolla, 2023).

TikTok was the most downloaded app in the world in 2020 and maintained over 150 million monthly users in the U.S. in 2023 (Mohsin, 2020; Shepardson, 2023). Studies on TikTok have found it more interactive than other social media platforms (Bhandari & Bimo, 2020). TikTok allows users to combine multiple information channels to communicate and spread their message (Medina Serrano et al., 2020). In addition to increased interactivity, TikTok also uses ‘creative chaos,’ which occurs because users are unable to anticipate the next content (Anderson, 2020). This feature, in combination with the advanced algorithm the TikTok app uses to create an individually curated ‘For You Page,’ presents a variety of topics on a large scale (Anderson, 2020). Overall, these features seem particularly attractive to young people, with almost 70% of TikTok users being under 25 years old and 85% under 35 years old (Li et al., 2021). Beyond viewing content from other people, TikTok is leveraged by organizations interested in reaching certain audiences. For example, public health agencies have started communicating valuable health information to young people via TikTok (Li et al., 2021), suggesting that TikTok may be an important way to reach young people who are leaving other social media platforms (Anderson & Jiang, 2018).

Study Purpose

Given the rise of TikTok and its unique features (e.g., video, brief content, ‘creative chaos’), our study aim was to understand how users share experiences of sexual violence on the TikTok platform. Understanding the contexts of these public disclosures provides insight into how people process experiences of sexual violence. Further, by understanding popular TikToks,

our findings may guide individuals and organizations seeking to provide sexual violence-related resources and support.

Methods

Sample

Because TikTok has millions of videos, we reduced the scope to a manageable subset for qualitative analysis. To obtain a subset of TikToks that met the study aim, we began by reviewing TikToks tagged with #MeToo in spring 2020. Then, we reviewed other hashtags included on those videos and other videos posted by the same content creators. Then, we repeated this process with the videos identified in our first review. Through this process, we identified hashtags with substantial numbers of views and sexual violence-related material. Ultimately, we focused on four hashtags: #MeToo, #NoMeansNo, #SexualAssault, and #Survivors). We abstracted the top six videos twice per week for 16 weeks starting in July 2020, as these videos represent the most viewed content within the hashtag.

Videos could be captured in multiple hashtags and data collection points. When each video appeared in the top six for the first time, we abstracted the audio and video without the username. During the first and subsequent abstraction points, we used REDCap to record the number of likes and comments, captions, hashtags, and audio track names. During the 16 weeks of data collection, 35 videos were captured. Overall, 28.6% ($n=10$) were posted under #SexualAssault, 28.6% ($n=10$) were under #MeToo, 22.8% ($n=8$) were under #Survivors, and 20.0% ($n=7$) were under #NoMeansNo. Only one video was captured with multiple hashtags (#MeToo and #NoMeansNo), meaning it was in the top videos for both hashtags. As a result, there were 34 unique videos analyzed in this study.

The Purdue University Institutional Review Board reviewed this project as an ‘Exempt Study.’ The study was restricted to only publicly available information as part of the IRB approval. As a result, we could not access comments for analysis.

Analysis

For this study, we used qualitative content analysis (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Krippendorff, 2012; Schreier, 2012). To create the codebook, we followed Schreier’s (2012) adaption of grounded theory. This iterative process ensured that the final codebook accurately represents the data. Four team members (all authors of this publication) began by uploading videos to Dedoose, then viewing each video twice. During the second review, we noted patterns of recurrence and divergence across the video content and other characteristics. Based on these notes, we developed a draft codebook, which was discussed among the entire research team (represented by additional authors on this publication). The team built and refined the codebook through several conversations based on consensus. We pilot-tested the codebook on the full sample of videos, then revised it until it accurately captured the materials. After the codebook was finalized, it was applied to the segments of the videos identified through thematic criteria, as described by Schreier (2012). Because TikToks often include text and videos, our analysis involved multiple dimensions of communication. First, we coded the message content in each video. Second, we coded the audio in the video, including the sounds used to convey the content. Finally, we coded the video, which included the visuals used to convey the content.

After the codes were applied, we reviewed the content of each code category. For some codes, we identified patterns and themes in the content and described the results qualitatively. For other codes, categorical variables (e.g., primary topic) were created to summarize the videos’

basic characteristics. This process also allowed us to identify differences in patterns and themes by video characteristics.

Ethical Considerations for Reporting Results

Careful consideration is needed when researching public social media and sharing social media content in academic outputs. First, it is necessary to avoid inadvertently sharing identifiable content. Although the research team did not recognize any identifiable content (e.g., faces, locations, voices, etc.), it is possible readers would. Because audiovisual components of TikToks are important in the disclosure process, we included some images and links to audio in our results. For both types of information, we presented only non-identifiable information. For audio links, we included links to only commercially produced audio. TikToks are brief, so the audio links are to the specific section of the song used in the TikTok. For videos, we created a pixelated image of an individual with text from a different video. Doing so reduces the likelihood of inadvertent identification.

Second, we do not share our data in a public repository. Although there is a recent emphasis on open data-sharing practices, sharing the full collected dataset is not the most appropriate approach for our study. Creators may decide to remove or modify their content. Publicly sharing our dataset would remove creators' ability to do so. Instead, we have provided the specific hashtags used to create the dataset in the methods section. Upon request, we will also provide the unique identifiers we created based on the first four letters of the username, the date the video was posted, and the first three words of the caption. Although it would be time-consuming, interested individuals could use this information to identify the current version of any publicly available content.

Results

Video Characteristics

At the end of data collection, the 34 videos in our sample had been collectively viewed approximately 41 million times and were accompanied by approximately 500,000 comments. The frequency of views and number of comments varied by hashtag. Videos with #MeToo ($M=2,140,000$; $SD=27,199$) and #NoMeansNo ($M=1,901,613$; $SD=1,060,914$) were viewed far more often than #SexualAssault ($M=474,320$; $SD=784,050$) or #Survivor ($M=182,225$; $SD=167,995$). Similarly, there were far more comments on #MeToo ($M=26,190$; $SD=27,199$) and #NoMeansNo ($M=23,611$; $SD=23,126$) compared with #SexualAssault ($M=3,875$; $SD=5,012$) or #Survivor ($M=2,473$; $SD=3,861$).

In addition to the hashtags used to select videos, numerous other hashtags were used to indicate the content of the videos. Some hashtags related to sexual violence, such as #DenimDay, #abuse, and #SexualAssaultAwareness. Other hashtags broadly supported women, including #RespectWomen, #feminism, #HerProtector, and #womenruletheworld. Many TikToks were tagged with #ForYouPage, #fyp, or #ForYou, which was intended to increase the likelihood that a video would appear on the ‘For You Page’ (i.e., TikTok users’ homepages). However, it was unclear if this was an effective approach to increase visibility.

Twenty-six videos included references to sexual violence in the caption or the video. Eight videos were tagged with hashtags commonly used on sexual violence-related videos but were not related to sexual violence. These videos were excluded from the remainder of the analysis. Most non-sexual violence TikToks were posted under #Survivors and presented information about surviving other challenging issues (e.g., cancer, surgery). Two videos were posted to #MeToo. One was intended to antagonize women, as it was captioned with *‘imagine if a man was at the top of all women related hashtags [muscle emoji]’* with a distorted image of a

man. The other was an individual presenting as a man telling a joke unrelated to women or sexual violence.

Topics Discussed

The content of the 26 videos was divided into two main categories: 1) people sharing their sexual violence experiences and 2) people sharing other information related to sexual violence. People sharing their own experiences accounted for about two-thirds ($n=17$) of TikToks, and other information about sexual violence accounted for approximately one-third ($n=9$).

Personal Experiences

When sharing their sexual violence experiences, TikTok creators often focused on describing the incident, their relationship to the perpetrator, their age at the time, whether any bystander intervened, the perpetrator's substance use, and whether the violence was ongoing or occurred only once. For example, one creator shared her experience of being abused by her stepfather during childhood. She described how he woke her to 'watch a movie' and told her not to tell her mother. Although this creator did not explicitly state in the video that she was sexually abused, the caption and hashtags implied it. Another creator live-streamed her reaction immediately following an incident of sexual harassment at a gas station. Occasionally, creators also talked about their experiences reporting sexual violence, including speaking with the police. In one video, the creator described speaking to the police and going to trial.

In addition to the content of the videos, creators also included captions to convey additional information. Many of the captions reflected that creators were ready to share their stories (e.g., '*This took me a long to come out and say but I'm ready for my story to be heard.*' or '*debated on posting this but if I stay silent, it doesn't help anyone.* '). Some captions described

the decision to stay anonymous (e.g., *'I wish I had the balls to post this on my actual account'*).

Some captions expressed how sharing their experience helped to reclaim their power (e.g., *'This is terrifying to post. But this also makes me feel like somehow I'm gaining some of my power back.'*). Other captions reinforced that creators sought to build a community by sharing (e.g., *'I chose to have a voice & want you to know you're not alone.'*).

Other Topics

For non-disclosure content, creators shared educational information or raised issues for discussion. These creators may have experienced sexual violence but did not disclose their experiences. For example, one creator used humor to ask a variety of questions (e.g., *'Are men afraid to be treated as feminine because they see how women are treated?'*) and share information about consent (e.g., *'No means no, but so does eh, not right now, I don't like that.'*) Another creator posted a message that said, *'If 50 men call one woman a "hoe," you'll believe it, but if 50 women call a man a rapist, you find it questionable.'*

Audiovisual Characteristics

Beyond the words included in the content of the TikToks, audio and visual elements were also important to how creators shared sexual violence-related messages. All videos had an audio component. TikToks usually had one audio source, although some combined multiple sources. Music and voice were the most common types of audio. Out of the 26 total videos, 73% ($n=19$) had music in the background. Approximately 20% ($n=6$) of videos contained the creator voice or voice content from another user. Some creators explicitly described wanting to be anonymous, and using someone else's voice content or music was a way to preserve their anonymity. Sometimes, users would borrow audio as part of a larger trend. For example, several creators used the same audio track while painting their bodies to show where they were touched during an

assault (bit.ly/SV_TikTok_1). Others used a different audio track while showing embroidery on the fly of their jeans (see Figure 1; bit.ly/SV_TikTok_2). These videos were part of Denim Day, a larger movement to bring awareness to sexual violence (Bennett et al., 2021).

Figure 1 about here

Visual information, either still images, videos, or text, was often used to supplement stories and the context of the individuals' experiences or situations. Some creators made photo montages ($n=5$) using still images, which showed several photos of their lives since the experience of sexual violence. Two creators used greenscreens, including a single photo as the backdrop with a superimposed video of their faces. Within the video aspect of TikToks, nearly all videos included the person sharing the information. Only three TikToks did not include a person (i.e., showed Denim Day embroidery; showed a video of a lion). Usually, creators stood facing the camera with their faces visible, although some obscured their faces with text boxes, emojis, or by cropping the video (see Figure 2).

Figure 2 about here

In these videos, creators used their bodies to demonstrate the abusive experience. Many used paint to illustrate where the perpetrator touched them during the sexual violence. Others showed still images of the person who abused them and then positioned their bodies to mimic the photo. Some survivors, particularly those who were younger when the abuse occurred, dressed and arranged their hair in child-like styles (e.g., frilly nightgown, pigtails) and recreated the

abuse experience with superimposed text boxes to explain the situation. Text information was usually superimposed over the video, although sometimes it was part of it (e.g., the creator held notecards with text). The text was often used to clarify the creator's intent, provide additional information about the experience of sexual violence, or share their experience in person or on social media.

Discussion

The goal of our study was to understand how creators share experiences of sexual violence on the TikTok platform. We found that most videos about sexual violence focused on the creators' experiences, which is similar to prior research on other platforms (Harrington, 2019; Mendes, Ringrose, et al., 2019). The video capabilities of TikTok were critical to how creators articulated their stories. Many used body movement to tell their stories, and audio was often important. Only a few videos would have easily translated to other social media platforms (i.e., still images), so understanding TikTok provides a unique view into how experiences of sexual violence are shared.

Prior Research on Sexual Violence and TikTok

The content discussed on TikTok may be understood as a type of narrative communication, specifically firsthand experiential, secondhand, and culturally common types (Schank & Berman, 2002). For the most part, content shared in the TikToks was firsthand experiential information, which included personal experiences of sexual violence and its related consequences. This is consistent with prior research on the types of information shared on social media (Mendes, Ringrose, et al., 2019). We also observed culturally common narratives, including stories about shared experiences. Generally, these culturally common narratives also included educational information.

To the best of our knowledge, the only other published research about sexual violence on TikTok is a 2023 dissertation (Nicolla, 2023). The author of this dissertation qualitatively analyzed 150 TikToks identified through hashtags. The study processed the videos with an extensive coding framework focused on things like engagement, gender, age, authenticity, self-disclosure, framing, emotion, and other elements of TikToks by identifying the presence or absence of these features. Our coding frame was organized differently. We were more interested in the nuance of the features (e.g., how captions complemented the video) rather than the presence of the features (e.g., whether captions were used). Further, our coding frame focused on more manifest content (e.g., we did not attempt to code the creator's underlying motivation, emotion, etc.). As a result, Nicolla (2023) captured a wider range of information about TikToks, although with somewhat less depth about each category.

In areas where our coding framework overlapped, the findings were quite similar. For example, most of the creators in both samples presented as women and were young adults. Captions and music were common, as was self-disclosure. Although we did not specifically code for elements of authenticity, many of the elements captured by Nicolla (2023) were also captured in our codebook. Both studies noted that many creators showed their faces, while few used their own voices. We did not specifically code for a home environment in the background or looking directly at the camera, but both were common in our sample. We also did not code for the emotions presented by the creator. We considered including this in our codebook during its creation but could not identify a way to do so across coders reliably. Nicolla (2023) was able to operationalize emotion sufficiently and found that anger/disapproval was present in more than half of TikToks. Sadness and love were also common emotions. We did not categorize the types of sexual violence described, in part because many of the TikToks in our study used general

language like, ‘sexual assault’ and ‘sexual harassment.’ Similarly, Nicolla (2023) found that more than one-third of videos did not specify the type of sexual violence. Among those who shared specific details, rape was the most common type. Childhood sexual assault and unwanted sexual contact were also frequently mentioned.

The rest of the dissertation focused on understanding the impacts of sexual violence narratives (Nicolla et al., 2023). In this study, participants viewed either personal narrative TikToks about sexual violence or unrelated content. Participants who viewed sexual violence-related TikToks reported increased perceived severity of sexual violence and higher knowledge of the consequences of sexual violence. They did not generally have negative reactions to the content. These findings suggest that TikTok may be an effective way to change knowledge and attitudes about sexual violence, although it is not yet clear how long these changes last.

Navigating and Engaging with the TikTok Platform

Our sample size did not allow for a statistical comparison of engagement metrics across hashtags. Still, trends in our findings are consistent with prior research demonstrating statistically significant differences (Guidry et al., 2020). In our study, the hashtags #MeToo and #NoMeansNo elicited far more engagement than #SexualAssault and #Survivor. However, it is unclear how important hashtags were on TikTok for connecting content to broader trends, relative to other social media platforms.

Prior to TikTok, people used hashtags for numerous reasons. Rauschnabel, Sheldon, and Herzfeldt (2019) identified 10 primary motivations, ranging from providing comedic value to supporting people or brands. Most reasons relate to increasing connections to other users and content, including connecting posts to relevant topics, matching the style of similar posts, associating posts with trending topics, bonding with like-minded individuals, inspiring others,

reaching specific audiences, and endorsing preferred individuals and content. These functions help users move beyond their personal connections to content created by like-minded individuals and organizations, which allows a viral spread of information through posts and comments (Bruns & Burgess, 2011; Saxton et al., 2015). #MeToo and related hashtags were an important element of how conversations about violence against women received national media attention (Mendes, Ringrose, et al., 2019).

TikTok hashtags were not an effective way to access new content, as evidenced by our small sample size. We expected to abstract approximately 700 videos (6 videos of 4 hashtags at 2 times per week for 16 weeks) but found only 34 unique videos. To better understand how people use TikTok, we asked our undergraduate research assistants to demonstrate how they would navigate TikTok and then use hashtags to navigate content. They were confused by the second request, as they generally watched content that appeared on the 'For You' page and occasionally watched other content by creators featured on the 'For You' page. We had to demonstrate how to navigate via hashtags. Although our students' experiences may not reflect all users, the 'For You' page is key to users' TikTok experiences (Broderick, 2019). For the most part, the 'For You' page presents content to users, and users accept the recommendations (Broderick, 2019). This difference is both an opportunity and a challenge for individuals seeking to share sexual violence-related content. On one hand, content may reach beyond users already in a network with people sharing the content or users directly seeking it. On the other hand, it may be more challenging to build connections with specific content and relevant users.

Audio and Video Elements of the Content

Like prior research on other platforms, self-disclosure was a focus of most content shared by creators, which may be done to build connections with other individuals with sexual violence

experiences (Alaggia & Wang, 2020; Collaton et al., 2022; Mendes, Keller, et al., 2019; Quan-Haase et al., 2021). In contrast to other primarily text or image-based social media platforms, TikTok's audio and video elements may amplify these connections. Social presence theory suggests that the degree to which others are perceived as real or present influences how well people build connections (Gunawardena, 1995; Short et al., 1976). Generally, audio- and audio-video communication promotes social presence better than text-based communication (Oh et al., 2018). Some research suggests that video-based communication is the second-highest facilitator of social presence and may encourage continued engagement (Lankton et al., 2015; Song et al., 2021). Visual representation, including the degree to which the representation looks and behaves like a person, also influences social presence (Oh et al., 2018). Perceived authenticity may play a role in increasing relatability and building connections between content creators and users. Prior research demonstrated that perceived authenticity increased when creators showed their faces, filmed in a home environment, spoke directly to the camera, were unscripted, and recorded from a single camera (Abidin, 2018; Garcia & Vemuri, 2017; Hall, 2016; Tolson, 2010).

Whether or not the creators in our sample did so intentionally, many of them used their faces and bodies to increase their social presence, as they looked and behaved like humans. Of note, many creators had visible faces and moved their bodies. Some of the creators made choices that reduced their social presence, including obscuring their faces with text boxes, emojis, or cropping the video, often done to protect their anonymity. There was more variation in whether creators engaged in behaviors that increased their perceived authenticity. Voice, particularly the creator's voice, is more relevant for authenticity than social presence. Very few of the creators in our sample used their voices, meaning that they did not speak to the camera or use unscripted language. These decisions may diminish perceptions of authenticity.

Limitations

Although our study provides insight into how experiences of sexual violence are discussed on TikTok, there are limitations to this work. First, our study started with hashtags relevant to sexual violence. Other data collection approaches, including using different hashtags or collecting based on audio files, may illuminate other ways to disclose experiences or talk about sexual violence. Further, other approaches to data collection may create larger sample sizes. When we developed the sampling framework, we did not anticipate that videos would remain in the top six for many weeks. We anticipated collecting hundreds of videos (i.e., top 6 collected twice weekly for 16 weeks per hashtag). As a result, our sample size was much smaller than anticipated. Second, TikTok, and social media generally, evolves quickly. Therefore, several changes to the TikTok platform are not reflected in our study. For example, when data collection began, TikToks were restricted to one minute. Since then, the video length has been extended to 10 minutes. Less obvious platform changes may have also occurred since we collected the data. Third, when we conducted data collection, comments were not publicly available. Our IRB approval stipulated that we could only use public data (i.e., data collected without logging in to the platform). As of 2023, the top several comments on each TikTok are available. These comments may provide important insight into how people respond to sexual violence disclosure.

Implications and Future Research

Online platforms provide ways for survivors to share their experiences in public and private domains, ranging from anonymous disclosures to public calls for action. Although our study identified novel aspects of sharing sexual violence information via video, we were not able to understand how viewers responded to the content or how sharing the content impacted the

creators. Although online disclosures of sexual violence are predominantly met with positive responses (Gorissen et al., 2021), disclosing in online spaces can pose a risk for secondary trauma. Prior research suggests sharing sexual violence information on social media may result in harassment and intimidation, ranging from insults to death threats (Cole, 2015; Mantilla, 2013; Sobieraj, 2018; Stubbs-Richardson et al., 2018). Online harassment may also become a real-life issue, as attackers may publish personal information about content creators (Sobieraj, 2018). Many benefits from disclosing experiences of sexual violence are negated when other individuals respond negatively (Ahrens et al., 2010). As some elements of social presence and authenticity are different on TikTok than on non-video platforms, responses to content may also be different. It is possible that increased social presence and authenticity decrease willingness to respond negatively. However, content creators may be more influenced by negative responses because of their increased vulnerability (e.g., their bodies and faces are often displayed).

As more is understood about the dynamics of TikTok, incorporating research from user perspectives into the TikTok platform may improve the disclosure experiences. Prior research suggests that moral-emotional expressions can spread faster and further in social-media networks compared with other media, and design decisions could potentially reduce people's reliance on emotional reactions during social-media communications (Brady et al., 2020). For example, Rose-Stockwell (2021) suggests instilling an empathic prompt that reminds social media users/responders that what they are about to say or write is potentially hurtful. This approach encourages people to take time to reflect before posting their messages. A similar web-based algorithm could be used to detect specific content in online posts or videos and to prompt the creator with informational messages that direct them to other websites and online supports (e.g., the National Sexual Assault Hotline).

As much as technology can build new communities of support, we must also continue to focus on in-person interventions and resources that better equip people to hear disclosures of sexual violence. Because many survivors turn to informal networks, it is worth exploring ways to build efficacy among family and friends and prepare them to receive and respond to disclosures of abuse effectively. Trainings to prepare informal network members to respond effectively could be patterned after bystander intervention trainings for campus sexual assault, classroom-delivered curriculum to reduce rates of interpersonal violence among high school students, or gatekeeper trainings for suicide. One example is a two-session intervention designed to teach college students how to help friends and family who experience sexual assault or partner abuse (Edwards et al., 2022). Similarly, future interventions should aim to better integrate online and in-person support strategies, with, for example, online messages demonstrating skills in delivering supportive messages and in-person interventions demonstrating effective ways to reach out to friends who disclose sexual violence experiences online.

Conclusions

Our study findings demonstrate that people use TikTok as a platform to share messages about sexual violence-related topics, including their own stories and messages intended to educate viewers about sexual violence. Talking about sexual violence on social media also helps raise awareness of the issue and can help destigmatize the experiences of survivors and help-seeking behaviors. Because so many TikToks include elements of social presence and authenticity beyond those available in most other social media platforms (e.g., faces, body movements, etc.), viewers may be more receptive to these messages. However, it may also increase the vulnerability of content creators, as their faces, bodies, and environments are available to individuals who may wish them harm. Beyond the specific content characteristics,

TikTok may be uniquely positioned to extend the reach of sexual violence messages because the ‘For You’ page presents content to users broadly. Conversely, it may also be more challenging to connect with people seeking sexual violence-related content or to create viral movements because people rarely seek content intentionally.

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Figure 1. Embroidery on Jeans

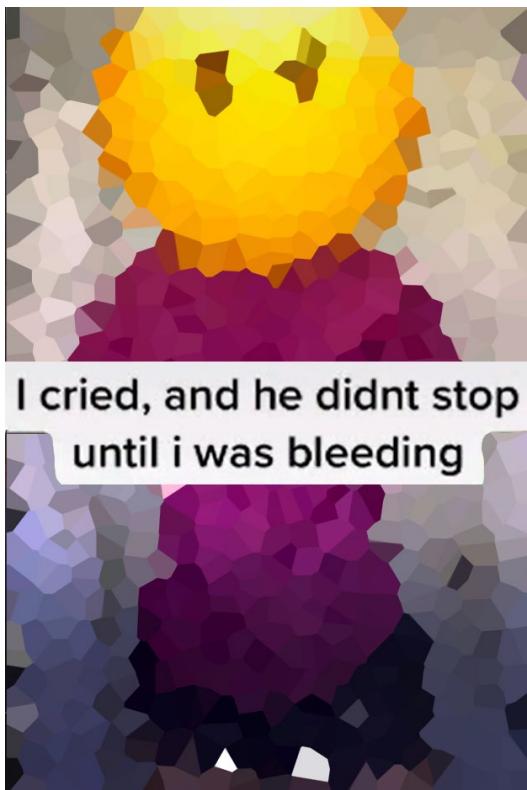


Figure 2. Composite Example

Laura Schwab-Reese, MA, PhD is an Associate Professor of Public Health at Purdue University.

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Duyen Quang is a recent graduate of the School of Health Sciences at Purdue University. At the time of the study, she was an undergraduate research assistant with Dr. Schwab-Reese.

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Kendall Chase is a recent graduate of the College of Health and Human Sciences at Purdue University. At the time of the study, she was an undergraduate research assistant with Dr. DeMaria.

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