

Reclaiming publicness in the face of sexual assault:

Social media, disclosure, and visibility

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**Abstract**

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In recent years, social media have supported a host of viral campaigns aiming to increase awareness of, accountability for, and social justice around sexual assault (e.g., Maas, McCauley, Bonomi, & Leija, 2018; Provenzano, 2017). These campaigns are frequently Twitter-centered (e.g., #MeToo, #NotOkay) and often rely on survivors' stories to destigmatize sexual assault and increase compassion for the survivors of sexual assault. Organized calls for disclosure, such as #MeToo, have received criticism, however, for needlessly increasing the vulnerability of and risk of harm to sexual assault survivors who participate (White, 2017). Apart from these campaigns, however, sexual assault survivors disclose personal stories of sexual assault victimization on social media using descriptive and identifying hashtags, such as #SexualAssault and #SexualAssaultSurvivor. The present study focuses on the motivations and communicative practices of this population of sexual assault survivors visible on social media.

Disclosure, the revelation of personal information (Omarzu, 2000), is typically considered a strategic and goal-oriented behavior. Understood through a Communication Privacy Management (CPM) theoretical lens, decision-making processes surrounding disclosure are informed by dialectical tensions such as conceal-reveal and risk-reward (Petronio, 2002). There are myriad motivations for disclosure that sexual assault survivors and research reports suggest are benefits of disclosure, including seeking social support or other aid (Ullman, 1999), processing experiences (Ahrens et al., 2007), seeking to educate others or raise awareness (Ahrens et al., 2007), supporting similar others (Bogen, Millman, Huntington, & Orchowski, 2018), and seeking justice (Powell, 2015).

The risks to survivors who choose to disclose a sexual assault include negative reactions such as judgment, stigma, and blame (Ahrens, 2006; Ullman, 1999). Research additionally indicates that social media contexts can be leveraged in abusive tactics (e.g., monitoring, harassment) exerted through sexual assault and relationship abuse (Freed et al., 2018), suggesting additional risks associated with social media as disclosure sites. A social media landscape that is frequently and demonstrably toxic toward women and other vulnerable populations further informs this tension (Dhrodia, 2018; Vera-Gray, 2017). Additionally, social media as a disclosure context differs significantly from face-to-face contexts due to characteristics of the platform, including its potential for “masspersonal” communication (O’Sullivan & Carr, 2018) and abilities afforded by features and policies. Visibility, the degree to which content is “seeable” to others (Thompson, 2005), that is afforded by social media both supports survivors’ motivations and increases survivors’ vulnerability (Fritz & Gonzales, 2018; Petronio, 2002).

This project centers on the experiences of sexual assault survivors who engage in highly visible disclosure, such as public, hashtagged disclosure on social media, to show the range of motivations, reactions, and social media structures that inform disclosure. Findings from qualitative interviews and social network analyses of Twitter hashtag networks suggest that survivors report engaging in deliberate practices regarding disclosure motivation, assessing social media platforms' suitability for disclosure, considering and targeting audience(s) to disclosure as well as likely reactions from these audiences to disclosure, and strategically leverage social media affordances, including visibility, to manage risks, target and constrain audiences, and otherwise pursue motivations. This analysis thus contributes to literature on strategic visibility management of sexual assault disclosure in a social media context as well as to scholarship on social media users' perceptions of platform utilities and affordances for disclosure.

The mixed-methods approach, informed by network ethnography methods (Howard, 2002), lends nuance to work on online disclosure networks in suggesting that sexual assault survivors leverage multiple communicative channels (public posts and private messages) with varying levels of visibility to engage in reciprocal disclosure and resource exchange. In light of this, the high percentage of isolate (i.e., self-loop) tweets containing disclosure, again in combination with participant insights, suggests that survivors perceive hashtags as affording searchability and visibility more so than connecting topically similar content. These insights would not be discernable from either research method alone. This approach is also novel in its application to online disclosure networks and builds on literature using similar methods to address offline networks and sexual assault disclosure (Dworkin, Pittenger, & Allen, 2016). The findings here suggest that support providers, such as anti-violence practitioners, could better use

social media to challenge stigma, validate survivors' experiences, and promote and provide support and resources to survivors.

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*For Alexander*

## **Chapter 1: Introduction: Sexual Assault Disclosure, Visibility, and Social Media**

On October 15, 2017, in light of allegations of sexual assault and rape levied against Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein, actress Alyssa Milano tweeted a screenshot of text and an accompanying caption. The message of both was clear: “If you’ve been sexually harassed or assaulted write ‘me too’ as a reply to this tweet” (Provenzano, 2017). The intention, as indicated by the screenshot, was to demonstrate the sheer magnitude of sexual harassment and assault against women by creating a digital wave of “me too” sentiments. The response was alarming: Thousands of Twitter users, including celebrities, engaged in a barrage of disclosures, all marked with the hashtag #MeToo. Tweet content ranged from simply the hashtag, functioning like a silent hand-raise, to threads cataloging experiences of harassment and/or sexual assault. Other tweets, however, critiqued the hashtag for putting the onus on victims of sexual assault to display their traumas and for obscuring the role of feminist activist Tarana Burke as the creator of the “Me Too” campaign, which was founded 10 years prior (Garcia, 2017). Furthermore, a range of voices criticized the inclusivity of #MeToo, arguing that the digital iteration of the movement seemed to have forgotten their stories and instead marginalized their voices (White, 2017).

Although flawed, the 2017 #MeToo moment showed the pervasiveness of sexual misconduct and, importantly, illustrated the extent to which sexual assault continues to be stigmatized in the United States. Specifically, conversations were fueled by media coverage of accusations of sexual violence perpetrated by highly visible men in media, politics, and entertainment industries. In both realms (interpersonal Twitter networks and news cycles), public disclosures of sexual violence appeared to be met with scrutiny, judgment, and—sometimes hostile—rejection of survivors’ recounted experiences (Soler, 2017). Consequently, #MeToo

shed light on both the extent and severity of sexual violence as well as, somewhat paradoxically, the stigmatization and silencing of survivors of sexual violence.

### **Defining Sexual Assault**

For the purposes of this project, I define “sexual assault” as synonymous with “sexual violence” following the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, which refers to any attempted or completed sexual act perpetrated against someone without their consent (Basile, Smith, Breiding, Black, & Mahendra, 2014). Sexual assault (SA) is thus an umbrella term that includes rape and attempted rape as well as forced fondling, child molestation, incest, unwanted exposure to sexual materials, nonconsensual peeping and voyeurism, and sexual harassment, among other nonconsensual sexual activities. Sexual assault may happen with other violent acts and in other violence situations, such as relationship abuse and child abuse.

This definition collapses numerous specific contexts of violence and potentially flattens important differences and considerations that distinguish, for instance, sexual assault in the context of sexual exploitation, in the context of trafficking from the context of dating violence, or in the context of child abuse. In terms of this project, however, these demarcations across categories of context are of less significance as compared to an individual self-identifying as having experienced “sexual assault.” I chose not to focus on the details of the categories of the context for sexual assault, which could have potentially exposed participants to unnecessary risks of trivialized or sensationalized accounts of trauma. I do note these larger contexts of violence when relevant in this dissertation, but instead focus on self-identification as the primary inclusion criteria.

Feminist and advocacy-informed understandings of sexual assault emphasize the perspective that sexual assault is a crime of power and control rather than of sex (Nicolaidis &

Paranjape, 2009). This framing situates sexual assault as a tactic of abuse within larger patterns of behavior, particularly in the context of intimate partner violence, as well as a choice made by a perpetrator of violence. In the context of this project, understanding sexual assault as a tactic of power and control also aids in highlighting the perceived import and significance of disclosing victimization. As I discuss in Chapter 2, survivors who choose to disclose online may view their act as a means of challenging silence (Andalibi, 2019) and/or of reclaiming power or pursuing justice (Powell, 2015).

Although anyone can experience sexual assault, women are disproportionately affected. Estimates of lifetime incidence vary, due to factors such as inconsistent definitions of sexual assault and underreporting to law enforcement or medical professionals, though findings suggest that at least 20% of women, or one in five, in the U.S. will experience sexual assault in their lifetime (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). Results from the 2010 National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS), a national telephone survey with 18,049 respondents, estimate that 18.3% of women (and 1.4% of men) have experienced completed or attempted rape, 13% of women (and 6% of men) have experienced sexual coercion, and 27.2% of women (and 11.7% of men) have experienced unwanted sexual contact (Black et al., 2011).

Viewed through a lens of power and control, sexual assault is a crime in which marginalized groups may be disproportionately impacted (Sigurvinsdottir & Ullman, 2015; Walters, Chen, & Breiding, 2013). Women of color are more likely to have experienced rape or other forms of violence than have white women. The NISVS estimates that 22.0% of black, 18.8% of white non-Hispanic women, and 14.6% of Hispanic women in the U.S. have experienced rape in their lifetime (Black et al., 2011). Estimates are higher for native populations, as 26.9% of American Indian-identifying and Alaska Native-identifying women

reported experiencing rape (Black et al., 2011). Estimates for men reflect lower rates of rape victimization, with 1.7% of white non-Hispanic men reported to have experienced rape; estimates were too small to report for other racial/ethnic groups (Black et al., 2011, p. 21).

### **Disclosure**

For many survivors, sexual assault is a traumatic experience that significantly affects well-being (Ahrens, Stansell, & Jennings, 2010; Ullman & Siegel, 1995). Others, however, may not identify experiences as sexual assault, may not feel that assault experiences were severe, or may feel able to “handle” consequences from such experiences without additional support (Starzynski, Ullman, Townsend, Long, & Long, 2007). Additionally, survivors may not engage in disclosure, opting instead to stay silent about their experiences (Ahrens et al., 2010). Research suggests, however, that approximately 66–75% of adult sexual assault survivors do eventually disclose or report assault to someone (Ahrens, Campbell, Ternier-Thames, Wasco, & Sefl, 2007; Golding, Siegel, Sorenson, Burnam, & Stein, 1989).

Anti-violence advocates and the scholarly literature use the term “reporting” to refer to the act of disclosing sexual assault victimization to law enforcement or other officials with the intent of pursuing formal action against a perpetrator (cf. Zinzow & Thompson, 2011).

“Disclosure,” on the other hand, refers to the revelation of private information to another (Omarzu, 2000). Disclosure is thus often part of “reporting,” though the two terms are not synonymous or interchangeable. In this project, I use the term “disclosure” to emphasize revelation of private information as a strategic communicative act. The act of disclosure, I find, is motivated by factors beyond help seeking in the immediate aftermath of assault.

When sexual assault survivors do choose to disclose to others, they typically make complex decisions about when, how, to whom, and for what purpose to disclose. Disclosure is a

strategic, goal-oriented behavior (Omarzu, 2000) that is further shaped by considerations of context, audience, and motivation. Early theories of disclosure propose motivational categories such as self-expression, self-clarification, social support seeking, social control, and relational development (Derlega & Grzelak, 1979). Sexual assault disclosure research suggests that, in addition to obtaining medical care and other tangible services, disclosure is motivated by social support seeking (O'Neill, 2018; Ullman, 1999), processing experiences (Ahrens et al., 2007), seeking to educate others or raise awareness (Ahrens et al., 2007), supporting other survivors (Andalibi & Forte, 2018a; Bogen, Millman, Huntington, & Orchowski, 2018) and seeking justice (Powell, 2015).

Disclosure, however, carries risks as well as rewards. Dialectical perspectives on disclosure, such as Communication Privacy Management (CPM) theory (Petronio, 2002), highlight this inherent contradiction, as they view disclosure as involving tensions between opposing forces, such as conceal-reveal and risk-reward (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). Revealing private information requires relinquishing privacy and control over that information, or, in other words, as taking on a degree of vulnerability (Petronio, 2002). Thus, individuals may evaluate the risks and benefits attached to disclosing particular information in order to assess the degree of vulnerability associated with revelation (Petronio, 2002).

Risk categories implicate vulnerability and include security risks such as the loss of personal safety, “face risks” such as embarrassment, role risks (relational turbulence), and stigma (Petronio, 2002). In sexual assault disclosure, the risk of negative reactions, such as judgment and blame, to disclosure is particularly influential in determining if and to whom one discloses (Ahrens, 2006; DePrince, Welton-Mitchell, & Srinivas, 2014; Hoover & Morrow, 2015; Littleton, 2011; Ullman, 1996). Additionally, sexual assault disclosure may be particularly risky,

as previous scholarship suggests that patterns of power and control exerted through sexual assault and relationship abuse can continue in online contexts (Freed et al., 2018). The risks associated with sexual assault disclosure are compounded by the fact that sexual assault is often treated as a stigmatized identity.

Stigma refers to an undesirable attribute possessed by an individual that marks them as “deviant” in some way (Goffman, 1963). Concealable stigma refers to attributes or personal information that is “socially devalued but is not readily apparent to others” (Dindia, 1998, p. 236). Sexual assault victimization can thus generally be considered a concealable stigmatized experience. Cultural stereotypes, myths, and experiences of social stigma inform both stigma as enacted by others and self-stigma, as an internalization of myths and stereotypes (Deitz, Williams, Rife, & Cantrell, 2015; Edwards, Turchik, Dardis, Reynolds, & Gidycz, 2011). Many survivors may fear being blamed, further victimized, or of not being taken seriously if they disclose (Ullman, 1999), all potential outcomes of stigmatization. As a result, many victims do not formally report instances of sexual assault to law enforcement, or disclose only to trusted friends and family (Ullman, 1999).

Consequently, when individuals choose to disclose, they tend to do so in a way that minimizes perceived risks (i.e., negative responses from others). Understood through the theoretical lens of CPM, individuals may construct and manage privacy boundaries to protect sensitive information (Petronio, 2002). Once information is shared, however, a person is unlikely to regain complete control over it, and, as such, moments of tension or turbulence among disclosers and confidants may occur despite careful boundary management (i.e., making choices about the disclosure; Petronio, 2002). Online contexts for disclosure such as social media further

shape both the ability to draw and manage privacy boundaries and the ways in which boundary turbulence manifests.

**Social media as disclosure context.** The term “social media” refers to Internet-based, “masspersonal” (blending aspects of mass and interpersonal communication, see O’Sullivan and Carr, 2018) communication channels that do not necessitate spatial or temporal co-presence to facilitate interaction between users, and that allow users to create and share content (Carr & Hayes, 2015). I expand on this conceptualization of social media in Chapter 2. As disclosure sites, social media differ from face-to-face contexts in several ways, including communication style (masspersonal versus dyadic) and their affordances, or the relationships between actors, tools, and contexts (Treem & Leonardi, 2011). Affordances describe the abilities of tools or technologies, as perceived by an actor in pursuit of a goal, which enable or constrain behavioral outcomes. In a social media context, affordances are not features nor outcomes but, rather, a variable action that furthers a goal (Evans et al., 2017). Social media features and policies afford or constrain anonymity, for example, by allowing pseudonymous usernames or requiring legal names. Of particular interest to this project is the role of visibility as affordance: the degree to which a person or object is “seeable” by another (Thompson, 2005), as affordance.

Both mediated and “traditional” visibility is relational, strategic, and outcome-driven (Brighenti, 2010; Pearce et al., 2018). As an affordance, visibility is variable, in that it may be increased, decreased, or maintained through strategic manipulation of social media features and structures. For example, content visibility may be constrained through “blocking” particular users from seeing certain posts, or curating “friend lists” to separate a particular audience from one’s larger social network (Vitak & Kim, 2014). As with revelation of information, visibility is often in tension with vulnerability, in that increasing the visibility of sensitive information

potentially increases one's vulnerability to risks such as negative reactions. Vulnerability and power, however, do not neatly relate to visibility (Brighenti, 2007), as visibility may be leveraged strategically despite risks in pursuit of goals such as challenging sexual assault stigma (Andalibi, 2019). This is not intended to downplay the severity of risks associated with disclosure but, rather, to highlight the relationships between visibility, vulnerability, risk, and motivation that inform the context of this project. Indeed, in light of the risks associated with disclosure of stigmatized experiences, such as sexual assault victimization, and given that social media potentially amplifies vulnerability associated with disclosure by supporting greater visibility than offline contexts, the overarching question guiding this study is as follows: **Why are some sexual assault survivors disclosing their experiences on social media to audiences of mostly strangers?**

This study explores this question in the context of “everyday” (i.e., not viral) disclosures of sexual assault victimization and makes several contributions to literature and practice. Insights from participant interviews aid in expanding and refining the range of motivations that inform sexual assault disclosure on social media. Findings support self-expression and help-seeking motivation categories but also suggest the particular salience of other-focused motivations, such as supporting other survivors and educating others, in online contexts. This project thus supports findings in extant literature on sexual assault disclosure and extends literature on online stigma disclosure (e.g., Andalibi & Forte, 2018a) to a sexual assault context. In presenting a range of visibility management strategies that sexual assault survivors use to both increase and constrain disclosive content, this project also contributes to visibility management scholarship (e.g., Flyverbom et al., 2016; Pearce, Vitak, & Barta, 2018). By drawing on a mixed-methods approach to map disclosure networks, this project provides evidence to suggest that disclosure

networks leverage multiple communicative channels (i.e., public posts and private messages) to further individuate visibility and risk management and facilitate the exchange of resources, validation, and disclosure.

### **Chapter Map**

In Chapter 2, I review relevant literature on sexual assault disclosure with attention to disclosure motivations, impact of reactions to disclosure on sexual assault survivors, visibility as multidimensional and in relation to affordances, and CPM as a theoretical lens through which social media disclosures of sexual assault can be understood. I do so to establish disclosure on social media as resulting from complex decision-making processes that weigh motivation and reward against risks, including negative responses from disclosure recipients, and draw on social media platform structures (features, policies, affordances) to do so. This context informs the research questions guiding this project, which focus on disclosure motivations and goals; the technological characteristics and affordances, such as visibility, that inform disclosure decisions; the characteristics of online social media disclosure networks; and the role of social media in survivors' broader systems of social support and recovery.

Chapter 3 presents the social media landscape that aids in contextualizing social network analysis findings (methods for which are detailed in Appendix B: Orientation and Methods). I consider user population size and demographics of each site of interest and begin to outline the features, policies, and assumptions that further shape disclosure decision-making. Findings from hashtag network analyses conducted using Twitter data demonstrate that sexual assault survivors engage with a variety of hashtags for disclosure purposes and suggest that disclosures, in particular, may be isolated (i.e., disconnected) from other content and users in the network. Network maps afford insight into the characteristics of disclosure networks, such as the size and

interconnectedness of networks as well as influence of users within these networks. That said, these maps are limited in that they represent disclosure on only one, highly visible communicative channel. Participant insights presented in Chapter 5 suggest that users engaging in disclosure utilize multiple communicative channels to disclose, reciprocate disclosure, interact with audience, and support other survivors. I introduce the concept of *beacons over bridges* as a way of specifying the function such isolate disclosures may play, and I expand on this idea in Chapters 4 and 6 in conjunction with considerations of disclosure motivations and strategic use of hashtags to manage visibility of disclosive content.

To illuminate these communicative practices, I present insights on the relationships between disclosure dimensions and social media choices in Chapters 4 and 5. More specifically, Chapter 4 relates insights pertaining to motivations, audience considerations, and reactions to disclosure. Applying Andalibi and Forte's (2018b) decision factor framework yields additional considerations informing disclosure that are particular to sexual assault, such as temporality and offline social support systems. Similarly, attention to the audiences of disclosure imagined by participants begins to inform platform choice as well as visibility management strategies.

This understanding is furthered by insights regarding responses to disclosure and how participants navigate the visibility of subsequent disclosive content in light of such reactions. Chapter 5 considers the role of social media platform choice more fully, as well as associated features and affordances, in realizing disclosure motivations. The chapter culminates in exploration of the visibility management strategies that arise from considering motivation alongside platform choice, and identifies how participants strategically increased or constrained visibility of both disclosive content and their profiles more broadly. Importantly, these strategies

suggest additionally how participants may constrain visibility of others as a means of handling reactions to disclosure and for healing purposes.

In Chapter 6 I expand on the connections between social network analysis results and interview participant insights as well as between privacy boundary control and visibility management strategies. As noted, the community of survivors networked through social media hashtags is not fully visible from quantitative analysis alone. I combine hashtag network structures and interview insights to explicate the concept of beacons over bridges, introduced in Chapter 3, which illustrates a particular interaction between a motivation to support invisible other survivors and the searchability and visibility afforded by hashtags. Additional social media structures, such as private message systems, provide an important feedback mechanism that appears especially conducive to reciprocal disclosure. This chapter further considers how social media structures and policies shape the availability of social media platforms as disclosure spaces. I conclude the chapter with discussion of implications for theory and practice, opportunities for further research, and limitations affecting the generalizability of findings.

In Appendix A: Legend of Cautions, I draw on Tracy's (2010) suggestion for inclusion of a research paper section that "warns readers about the ways that the research analyses may misread, misappropriated, or misused" (p. 848). I expand this concept slightly to include items, ideas, and terminology that rely on assumptions requiring further clarification, including my use of "victim," "survivor," and "recovery" in this project. Participant recruitment and interview materials and social network analysis results are included in subsequent appendices.

Appendix B: Orientation and Methods presents the research orientation and methods guiding social network analysis, participant recruitment, and interview protocol and analysis. I consider my own paradigmatic orientation and positionality as researcher as well as outline

procedures I employed to maximize participant privacy and anonymity. I detail hashtag selection and social network analysis methods as well as network ethnography methods, interview participant selection, and interview protocol and coding procedures. Limitations pertaining to methodological choices are also reviewed.

### **A Note to Participants**

Finally, I wish to conclude my introduction to this project by expressing my extreme and most sincere gratitude to the individuals who participated in interviews for this project. I acknowledge and appreciate the thoughtfulness of their responses and willingness to share their stories with me, an Internet stranger. I wish also to clarify that the excerpts included in this project in no way convey the totality of these individuals' experiences. As is always part of qualitative research, I have made choices about which excerpts to highlight and in so doing will undoubtedly and inadvertently cast others into shadow. For every response highlighted, there are others that are not but yet express agreement with that insight. Conversely, each participant's experience with sexual assault as well as with disclosing on social media is unique and informed by myriad factors and considerations specific to the participant's life. I have attempted to elevate commonalities across motivations, considerations, and other factors that suggest themes relevant to the underlying processes of disclosure decision-making. In so doing, I have again highlighted some voices and experiences over others, and I wish to clarify that what is represented here is not comprehensive of nor generalizable beyond the context of disclosing sexual assault on social media. I am aware that there are many stories not reflected here. In knitting together the stories shared with me, however, I hope to contribute a richer tapestry of experience to a broader narrative of coping with and responding to sexual assault. In so doing, I share a motivation with many of my participants. In sharing these stories, I hope to support survivors of sexual assault

who have not yet shared theirs. I hope these chapters convey what so many of us need to hear: I believe you, it was not your fault, and—most emphatically—you are not alone.

## **Chapter 2: Sexual Assault, Disclosure, and Communication Privacy Management Theory**

A survivor's decision to disclose sexual assault victimization is often the result of careful consideration. Myriad factors inform disclosure decision-making, including the nature of the information being disclosed, the motivation(s) for disclosing, to whom one discloses, and the risks and benefits to disclosing. A social media context further impacts how these factors manifest and influences decision-making processes. More specifically, social media features touch on visibility, or the extent to which a person or content is "seeable" (or perceivable by sight) to others (Thompson, 2005), and other affordances (the relations between actors and technologies that enable/constrain behaviors; Evans et al., 2017), which affect the size and scope of the audience to disclosive posts, perceived risks of disclosure, and the strategies survivors use to manage these risks and realize motivations.

I draw on Communication Privacy Management (CPM) theory to frame disclosure in terms of privacy, revelation, and vulnerability. More specifically, CPM theory views personal information as private, in which revelation (i.e., disclosure) carries a degree of vulnerability. Drawing on Altman's (1975) privacy regulation theory, the CPM framework uses a boundary metaphor to theorize the connections between these concepts and position disclosure recipients as "co-owners" of private information within a boundary, as well as elucidate moments of boundary "turbulence" or violation (Petronio, 2002). Such moments in turn inform the risks and consequences of disclosure. In the context of sexual assault disclosure, risks, such as negative reactions, may be especially impactful and negatively affect survivors' well-being (Ullman, 1999).

To better outline the range of disclosure reactions, I first suggest that sexual assault victimization may (but does not necessarily) constitute a stigmatized experience. Through the

lens of stigma, negative consequences, such as victim blaming and shaming, are associated with internalized self-blame regarding assault, which in turn potentially affects survivors' willingness to seek resources (e.g., medical aid, law enforcement, social support). Perceived and realized negative reactions to disclosure inform silence as an alternative to disclosure and silencing as a risk of disclosure. In light of scholarship demonstrating the weight of disclosure risks (e.g., negative responses), viewing sexual assault victimization through the lens of stigma aids in underscoring the importance of risk assessment in disclosure decision-making.

In contrast to risks, perceived benefits to disclosure (e.g., social validation, self-clarification, relationship development) motivate decisions to disclose. As such, disclosure is a strategic act, and survivors' motivations for disclosing further shape where, to whom, and what/how much they ultimately disclose. In the context of offline sexual assault disclosure specifically, literature has tended to emphasize disclosure as a means of securing assistance or social support such that additional motivations have been largely unexplored (Ullman, 1996a, 1996b, 1999). Social support, framed as "the things people say and do for one another" in order to aid individuals in managing stress (Goldsmith, 2004, p. 3), is a potential benefit to disclosure, though, as research on disclosure of stigmatized experiences/identity and online disclosure provides evidence for a range of disclosure motivations beyond support/help seeking, there is a need to explore sexual assault disclosure motivations in more depth.

A social media context complicates disclosure of stigmatized experiences, as online disclosure differs in important ways from face-to-face disclosure (Pearce, Vitak, & Barta, 2018). Social media as disclosure space further informs this gap, as such spaces differ from offline conversations in communication style (e.g., masspersonal versus dyadic), abilities afforded by the space, and relative visibility of disclosure. Audiences reachable on social media differ

considerably as well, and survivors reported targeting a range of co-audiences (i.e., friends and perpetrators) to both increase and restrict visibility of disclosive (i.e., containing disclosure) content (see Chapter 4). An affordances framework aids in further outlining the abilities of social media survivors leverage in pursuing disclosure motivations and managing risks.

In outlining literature in these areas, I aim to establish disclosure as a risky endeavor (to which the alternative is non-disclosure) motivated by a range of behaviors that both satisfy personal needs as well as push for social change. Furthermore, I position social media as a context for disclosure that implicates visibility in particular ways that potentially amplify both disclosure risks and rewards. I draw on this literature to frame survivors' insights on motivation, audience, risk and reactions, platform choice, affordances, and strategic management of visibility, presented in Chapters 3–6. Research questions arising from the literature and guiding this project are presented throughout as well as at the end of this chapter.

### **Disclosure of Sexual Assault Victimization**

Scholarship exploring disclosure of sexual assault victimization experienced a surge in the late 20th century, as disciplines such as psychology and social work began to consider the motivations and outcomes of disclosure in more depth. Disclosure, defined as revealing personal information about oneself to another (Omarzu, 2000), can be seen as a strategic act undertaken by individuals in attempts to “control their social worlds and achieve their social and personal goals” (p. 174). Research on disclosure of sexual assault often frames the phenomenon as dyadic, occurring offline, and undertaken in pursuit of social support or as a precursor to social support (Ullman, 1996a, 1996b, 1999).

In framing it as such, early conceptualizations provide a crucial, albeit limited, foundational understanding of the components and considerations relevant to disclosure of

sexual assault and other topics. More recent research has expanded the context of disclosure to consider online spaces with broader, more diverse audiences and, in so doing, expanded the range of motivations associated with disclosure of sexual assault to include help-seeking (Ahrens et al., 2007; O'Neill, 2018), supporting others (Andalibi & Forte, 2018a; Bogen et al., 2018), self-expression and catharsis (O'Neill, 2018), educating others and challenging stigma (Ahrens et al., 2007; Andalibi & Forte, 2018a; Bogen et al., 2018), and seeking justice and accountability from perpetrators of violence (Powell, 2015). In combination, this research indicates that sexual assault survivors' decisions to disclose are informed by complex decision-making in determining when, how, and to whom to disclose. These decisions often rest on the survivor's motivations or goal(s) for disclosure, including receiving medical care, pursuing legal action, and seeking emotional or other support, as well as the survivor's perception of the disclosure recipient's ability to provide or facilitate that goal (Ullman, 1999). As this perhaps implies, the context, content, purpose, and recipient of disclosure comprise key components of disclosure, as these attributes mutually inform and shape disclosive content.

### **Disclosure and Communication Privacy Management (CPM) Theory**

To make sense of the connections between disclosure attributes, I draw on Communication Privacy Management (CPM) theory (Petronio, 2002), a dialectical theory of disclosure. Understanding disclosure as dialectical frames the practice in terms of “a *ceaseless interplay* between contrary or opposing tendencies” and views these tensions (e.g., conceal/reveal) as central to communicative practices, such as disclosure (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996, p. 3). Understanding disclosure as both informed by contradiction/tension as well as being multi-dimensional (i.e., breadth, depth, and duration of disclosure all matter), as explored below, aids in tracing the complex decision-making that informs not only how such

information is concealed, but also to whom it is revealed, under what circumstances, and for what purpose.

The conceptual origins of disclosure are often traced to Altman and Taylor's (1973) social penetration theory, which argues that disclosure facilitates relational closeness. Within the context of social penetration, disclosure is understood as multi-dimensional, in which factors such as breadth, depth, and duration of disclosure are thought to influence relationship formation (Altman & Taylor, 1973). Scholars such as Omarzu (2000) have furthered investigation of disclosure along these dimensions, whereas others such as Wheelless and Grotz (1976) propose amount, positive-negative valence, conscious intention, honesty-accuracy, and intimacy as important dimensions of disclosure. Definitions of such dimensions may overlap, however, as depth may be understood as intimacy, for instance (Altman & Taylor, 1973). Moreover, definitions of disclosure may emphasize particular dimensions, such as characterizations of disclosure as an information management strategy, dependent on the deliberate sharing of personal information with another (Catona & Greene, 2016), or as facilitating certain goals or outcomes. Chaudoir and Quinn (2010), for example, define disclosure of a stigmatized identity as "a goal-oriented behavior wherein people have specific motivations and goals" for sharing information (p. 572).

In conjunction with an understanding of disclosure that positions revelation in relation to pursuit of a personal goal, an additional dimension worth considering is an individual's perception of the content of disclosure. That is, the degree to which a message is considered disclosive may vary considerably depending on whether the disclosing individual considers that information private, secret, or public. Sexual assault victimization may be framed as a *concealable stigmatized experience*, in that a social understanding persists that information

regarding personal experiences with assault should not be public; furthermore, the impact of reactions and range of negative consequences associated with disclosing sexual assault victimization intimate that the social default for such information is private or secret (Ahrens, 2006; Dindia, 1998). As suggested, however, there are significant benefits associated with disclosure of sexual assault victimization; these extend beyond the benefits associated with disclosure more broadly and suggest that disclosure, in facilitating social support and access to resources, can positively impact the well-being of sexual assault survivors (Ahrens, Stansell, & Jennings, 2010; Ullman & Siegel, 1995).

Considering disclosure as dialectical sheds further light on the tensions between disclosure dimensions and attributes. I thus draw on CPM theory as an ideal framework through which to examine online disclosures of sexual assault. As noted, and as the following section demonstrates, CPM theory adopts a dialectical perspective on disclosure, has been applied to online and sexual violence contexts (Petronio, 2013; Petronio, Reeder, Hecht, & Ros-Mendoza, 1996; Pluretti & Chesebro, 2015; Waters & Ackerman, 2011), and considers both privacy and visibility central components of disclosure. Additionally, CPM is described as a “translational theory,” meaning that findings from research using CPM theory may have practical outcomes that inform recommendations for practitioners and other professionals who engage with survivors of sexual assault (Petronio, 2007).

**CPM theory as dialectical perspective.** In its initial iteration, CPM theory was premised upon several suppositions underlying the theory’s constituent elements (Petronio, 2002). These suppositions positioned CPM as a dialectical perspective on privacy and disclosure in which private information is centered as the object of disclosure and privacy-disclosure/conceal-reveal as a central tension. This perspective is informed by Baxter and Montgomery’s (1996) dialectical

approach to interpersonal relationships, yet differs from this perspective in several ways discussed later in this section. CPM uses a boundary metaphor to elaborate on the relationship between privacy and disclosure in which private information is understood as owned by an individual and co-owned by recipients of disclosure; privacy boundaries provide a means of control over information ownership, and boundaries are regulated via a “rule-based management system” (Petronio, 2002, p. 3). Implicit in this supposition is the idea that, once revealed, information is no longer private. The relationship between “private information and public relationships” is also informed by a supposition that “revealing or concealing private information may lead to feeling vulnerable” (Petronio, 2002, p. 3).

In a 2013 update on CPM, Petronio adjusted her theory somewhat in light of findings from research using the theory. The suppositions persist, though they are now more formalized as a set of eight axioms, speaking collectively to the interrelations between privacy control, privacy ownership, and privacy turbulence, as well as predicting the ways “people enact their management of private information” (Petronio, 2013, p. 8). Axioms 1 and 2 speak to privacy ownership and predict that “people believe they are the sole owners of their private information and they trust they have the right to protect their information or grant access;” when access is granted, recipients “become ‘authorized co-owners’ and are perceived by the ‘original owner’ to have fiduciary responsibilities for the information” (Petronio, 2013, p. 9), respectively.

Axioms 3-7 speak to privacy control, and predict that people “also justifiably feel they should be the ones controlling their privacy,” and do so through the “development and use of privacy rules” (pp. 9-10). When privacy boundaries are co-owned, privacy rules are coordinated and negotiated with co-owners, which leads to collective privacy boundaries; collective boundaries are additionally regulated “through decisions about who else may become privy, how

much others inside and outside the collective boundary may know, and rights to disclose the information” (p. 11). Axiom 8 speaks to the issue of privacy turbulence and predicts that privacy regulation is itself unpredictable and may lead to disagreement or conflict.

What emerges from these suppositions and related axioms is a framework in which private information is regarded as typically individually-owned, and disclosure of such information is carefully and deliberately coordinated with others, such that disclosure recipients become the co-owners of formerly private information. Within the relationship between privacy and disclosure, it is implied that disclosure necessarily involves relinquishment of privacy, which in turn necessitates the assumption of vulnerability to risks. Communication Privacy Management thus positions privacy and disclosure as opposites and suggests the influence of vulnerability, visibility, and risk/benefit calculations as elements of disclosure.

***Contradictions.*** Several approaches to disclosure understand the phenomenon as dialectical (as opposed to transactional) or consisting of oppositional attributes in tension. I consider Dindia’s (1998) dialectical approach to stigmatized disclosure, similarly based on Baxter and Montgomery’s (1996) foundational theory of dialectical perspectives, as a useful comparison in expanding on CPM’s use of dialectics. A dialectical perspective understands relationships as ongoing negotiations rather than static agreements between people, and assumes four primary attributes of dialectics: Contradiction, change, praxis, and totality.

Contradiction constitutes a central component of a dialectical perspective, signifying tensions between opposing forces (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996; Dindia, 1998). In considering stigma disclosure, Dindia outlines the oppositions of conceal-reveal, expressiveness-protectiveness, and shame-support (Dindia, 1998). Contradictions are additionally characterized by multivocality, which suggests contradictions are more complex than binary interactions. That

is, contradictions go beyond simple oppositions such as “openness and closedness” (Dindia, 1998, p. 85) to consider tensions between attributes of contradictions, such as directness/indirectness and honesty/deception. In so doing, multivocality aids in “personalizing” disclosure by considering individuated risk-reward tensions, for instance. As Dindia (1998) argues, the tension between “the need to reveal and the need to conceal” (p.86) is not only central to individuals with stigmatized experiences/identities, but may also be multivocal in that the tension “involve[es] different meanings for different people” (p. 86). Relational dialectics considers two forms of opposites: logical, defined as “X and not X” (Petronio, 2002, p. 13), and functional (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). CPM theory draws on functional oppositions rather than logical oppositions, such that privacy and disclosure are positioned as “polar opposites” (p. 14), in which “disclosure is only meaningful in relation to privacy” (p. 14), although the two constructs “hav[e] distinct features from one another that function in incompatible ways” (p. 13). Underlying this contradiction is the supposition that disclosing necessarily means giving up privacy. This tension between privacy and disclosure constitutes the primary contradiction centered in CPM.

**Change.** The prominence of contradictions within a dialectical framework is further underscored by the relationship between contradictions and change, in that “contradiction is the driving force of change” (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996, as cited in Dindia, 1998, p. 86). In the context of dialectical perspectives on disclosure, change implicates additional dimensions, such as process versus event (or efficient versus formal cause), teleological versus indeterminate change, and linear versus spiraling change (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996; Dindia, 1998; Petronio, 2002). In combination, dimensions of change reinforce the contention that disclosure

“occurs on a continuum” (Dindia, 1998, p. 87) as well as the ideas that neither full concealment nor revelation is truly achievable, and disclosure is not necessarily a linear process of revelation.

According to Petronio (2002), CPM aligns most closely with formal or event cause, in that CPM argues that “focusing on the mutual relationship between the sender and receiver” is necessary for developing “a complete understanding of the communicative exchange” (p. 16). In other words, attending to the disclosure recipient in addition to discloser and the effects of disclosure on both informs other aspects of the communicative event. As such, this project emphasizes in part the role of audience(s) and anticipated reactions (which in turn informs risk-reward assessments) in disclosure decision-making.

Furthermore, CPM adopts aspects of both teleological and spiraling change models, as defined by Baxter and Montgomery (1996), and in so doing may align more fully with earlier models of dialectics (Petronio, 2002). The teleological model considers the disclosure-privacy tension and posits that change, namely boundary formation and coordination, occurs after disclosure occurs (Petronio, 2002). That is, the formation of a (dyadic) privacy boundary following disclosure relieves the contradiction between disclosure and privacy and results in “synthesis” (p. 17). Following synthesis, boundary coordination aids in regulating the privacy boundary drawn via disclosure.

As Petronio (2002) notes, however, “there are times when coordination fails,” and synthesis is disrupted, which she refers to as boundary turbulence (p. 17). Elements of additional change models clarify how individuals respond to moments of turbulence. CPM relies partially on a linear change model in its consideration of how individuals manage boundaries through “rules that permanently modify the nature of their boundaries or the ways they regulate them” (p. 17). Because “boundaries come together and pull apart depending on the ebb and flow of private

information being maintained” (p. 17), however, CPM also draws on spiraling change models to theorize how rule change occurs. In drawing on multiple models of change, CPM considers the relationship between discloser and recipient in the establishment of privacy boundaries, as well as defines boundaries as both determinate and revisable.

**Praxis.** As an attribute of stigma disclosure, praxis concerns the “communication actions-reactions to contradiction” (Dindia, 1998, p. 92), positions individuals as “proactive and reactive simultaneously” (Petronio, 2002, p. 22), and implicates the regulation of privacy in disclosure (Petronio, 2002). Praxis has been repeatedly addressed in applications of CPM, which, Petronio (2002) argues, is uniquely positioned to “allo[w] researchers to consider not only an individual’s ‘self-disclosure,’ but also the reactions of recipients and the counteractions of those initially setting the privacy-disclosure dialectic into a praxis pattern” (p. 23). In other words, CPM provides space to consider more than just the disclosing individual in understanding the establishment and negotiation/adjustment of privacy rules, boundaries, linkages, etc.

**Totality.** As a final attribute of dialectical perspectives, totality concerns the location of contradictions as a means of situating the focus of disclosure phenomena on or beyond an individual or dyadic context. As implied by CPM’s consideration of praxis, CPM aligns with Baxter and Montgomery’s (1996) location of contradictions in the “relational arena” (Petronio, 2002, p. 18) rather than with an individual. Petronio argues, however, that CPM’s treatment of totality differs from Baxter and Montgomery’s (1996) in two important ways: expanding totality to include multiple relationship types, such as not only dyadic interpersonal partnerships, but also groups (which may additionally vary along dimensions of professionalism, intimacy, etc.); and “allowing for a personal privacy boundary” (Petronio, 2002, p. 19), which reinforces the idea that disclosed information begins as privately owned by an individual, rather than as a

“cocreation between people” (p. 19). As a result, CPM “affords individuals the right to own private information independent of others” (Petronio, 2002, p. 20) while also facilitating understanding of disclosure consequences when information is shared with others, which may include individuals or larger groups. CPM thus provides an ideal lens through which to understand online disclosure in both positioning such disclosure as a deliberate choice as well as providing a broader conceptualization of audience that moves beyond an intimate dyadic context.

CPM is helpful in guiding this work by maintaining focus on concepts in tension, such as risk-reward. Doing so aids in framing disclosure as a deliberate and complex decision and draws attention to the context in which disclosure occurs. Additionally, attention to boundary management and privacy rules (discussed in the next section) provide useful concepts in further understanding how sexual assault survivors manage the visibility of their disclosures and draw on the materiality of social media platforms and abilities afforded therein (such as “blocking” users) to both enforce privacy rules and manage privacy boundaries.

**Privacy rules in CPM.** According to CPM, privacy rules are “used in all matter of managing revealing and concealing” private information (Petronio, 2002, p. 23). Privacy rules inform to whom, how, when, and how much to disclose (or conceal) at a given time by lending structure to individuals’ decision-making surrounding disclosure. Three processes further inform these rules: rule foundations, including consideration of decision criteria, such as motivation and context; boundary coordination, touching on boundary ownership, linkage, and permeability; and turbulence, exploring how individuals adjust rules and boundaries following moments of boundary conflict or confusion.

Privacy foundations are informed by rule development and rule attributes, or “the way people acquire rules and the properties of these rules” (Petronio, 2002, pp. 23-24). According to

CPM, rule development is guided by five categories of decision criteria, including cultural, gendered, contextual, motivational, and risk-benefit ratio criteria (Petronio, 2002). At their most foundational, criteria situate disclosure contextually according to individual circumstances and identity facets; understanding privacy rules thus aids in differentiating between disclosure contexts and begins to explain how individual disclosers develop unique privacy rules, somewhat independent of disclosure content. For the purposes of this project, I understand cultural, gendered, and contextual criteria as bracketing the broader context in play; that is, I examine the development and use of privacy rules within a U.S./Canadian cultural context in which sexual assault is often stigmatized and survivors identify predominantly as women or feminine. Moreover, the particular space is one in which survivors are disclosing in a mediated, online context (i.e., on social media platforms).

Petronio (2002) defines contextual criteria as speaking to both the social environment, or decisions pertaining to “the appropriateness of raising a particular topic in a situation” and timing of disclosure (p. 25), as well as the physical setting, which “impact[s] both our nonverbal behavior and our choices about revealing and concealing private information” (p. 25). In a study of children’s disclosure of sexual abuse, Petronio and colleagues (1996) noted that children tended to disclose abuse “in settings where a trusted other was engaged in mundane tasks...or within a home considered a ‘safe haven’” (Petronio, 2002, p. 25), suggesting that trust and comfort may be aspects of physical environment conducive to disclosure of sexual victimization. Research suggests additionally that social media users maintain norms of propriety, such that disclosure may be interpreted as (in)appropriate for sharing in public channels (Bazarova, 2012; Buehler, 2017).

Furthermore, social media users may perceive the functionality and audience of social media spaces as varying across platforms (e.g., Facebook is for connecting with family; Reddit is for anonymous advice) (Bazarova & Choi, 2014; Zhao, Lampe, & Ellison, 2016), suggesting, for instance, that contextual criteria at an individual platform level may be more relevant than simply contextual criteria of social media more broadly. Consequently, sexual assault survivors who engage in disclosure in social media spaces may likewise take contextual criteria into account in deciding on which platform to disclose as well as in determining to whom, what or how much, and how to disclose.

**Disclosure benefits and risk.** I consider motivational and risk-benefit ratio criteria categories together in this section, as both constructs consider consequences (positive and negative) of disclosure and speak to disclosure as a goal-motivated and strategic communicative behavior. Motivational criteria pertain to the desired outcomes or utility of disclosure, such as seeking social support or emotional expression. The dialectical conceal-reveal tension central to CPM's framing of disclosure indicates additionally that motivational criteria inform decisions to conceal information, as well as to reveal/disclose. CPM also makes explicit what is implied in many discussions of motivation, namely that "the same behavior may result from a variety of motivations" (Petronio, 2002, p. 24). Indeed, this project assumes that the behavior of disclosing sexual assault victimization on social media is informed by myriad motivations. In Chapter 4, I draw on participant insights to further suggest that sexual assault survivors may also simultaneously pursue multiple motivations (e.g., catharsis and raising awareness) for disclosures made on social media. In so doing, I take up Ahrens et al.'s (2007) suggestion that survivors may have multiple reasons for disclosing.

The decision to disclose or conceal information (and by association open or restrict privacy boundaries), however, although informed by motivation, is shaped additionally by risk-benefit ratio criteria. As indicated, CPM positions disclosure and privacy such that disclosure necessarily involves relinquishment of privacy, which in turn increases potential vulnerability. Risk-benefit ratio criteria seek to assess the degree of vulnerability likely to be incurred by disclosure, as well as the balance between perceived risk and benefit resultant from disclosure. In privacy boundary terms, individuals “evaluate the risks and benefits for granting or denying access to privacy boundaries” (Petronio, 2002, p. 26). Importantly, the perceived risk associated with disclosure may vary, either from person to person (in the case of similar disclosure topics) due to individual circumstances/stakes, or from topic to topic (e.g., not all “private” information is also secret) (Petronio, 2002).

Petronio draws on Derlega and Grzelak’s (1979) disclosure motivation categories to outline a set of benefits associated with disclosure (expression, self-clarification, social validation, relationship development, and social control). Risks pertain to vulnerability associated with security risks (loss of power, safety of self/others), stigma risks, based “on the assumption that others might negatively evaluate behavior or opinions of an individual” (Petronio, 2002, p. 70), face risks (embarrassment), and role risks (turbulence in relationships). Thus understood, benefits of granting access may pertain to fulfilling motivations (e.g., opening boundaries to friends may result in received social support) and risks may pertain to consequences of disclosing to specific or non-specific others (e.g., judgmental reactions from friends, harassment from strangers). Baxter and Montgomery (1996) similarly identify four categories of risk stemming from disclosure: rejection by the listener, reduction of personal autonomy and integrity, loss of control, and potentially hurting or embarrassing the listener

(Omarzu, 2000). The potential reduction of personal autonomy and loss of control as risky outcomes of disclosure further underscore the relationship between disclosure and vulnerability.

Theories of disclosure such as social exchange theory and privacy calculus theory (cf. Krasnova, Spiekermann, Koroleva, & Hildebrand, 2010) center this balance and posit that individuals disclose when they perceive benefits to outweigh risks. Krasnova et al. (2010) propose maintaining relationships, relationship building, self-presentation, and enjoyment as perceived benefits associated with online disclosure, broadly defined. They suggest that risks or costs associated with disclosure stem from loss of privacy, which may be mitigated by factors such as trust in one's social network members, the social network provider, and perceived control (Krasnova et al., 2010). These factors, in turn, are informed by privacy rule development and properties, which in combination describe how individuals come to learn, practice, and adhere to existing privacy rules as well as develop and exercise their own privacy rules.

Rule development is aided by the fact that people may be socialized into existing privacy boundaries and associated privacy rules, negating the need to develop new privacy rules for each disclosive interaction (Petronio, 2002). In furthering this argument, Petronio provides two illustrative examples: family rule socialization and organizational rule socialization. In both contexts, rules may change over time, but individuals, such as children and employees, enter an existing system of privacy rules and must learn both what these rules are and what constitutes a violation of these rules. Rules may be stated explicitly, such as through "disclosure warnings" (e.g., "Don't tell Dad," non-disclosure agreements), or stated/negotiated implicitly, such as through hints and prompts (e.g., "Should we tell someone?") (Petronio, 2002). Social media users similarly articulate explicit privacy rules (e.g., "#Do not reblog," "#Ok to share" tags on Tumblr) as well as learn and practice more implicit rules (e.g., "#Personal," blocking someone

for taking screenshots). As I argue in Chapter 5, visibility management strategies additionally inform and shape privacy practices, boundaries, and rules/expectations.

A final aspect of privacy rules is rule properties (i.e., the “qualities of privacy rules that describe their nature”; Petronio, 2002, p. 79). Rules may be routinized, oriented to a particular group, change due to circumstance, and carry sanctions for violators. Routinization refers to the degree to which a privacy rule becomes second nature; for example, one may never disclose medical history to non-familial others “as a matter of practice” (Petronio, 2002, p. 79). In contrast, orientation rules “signal an ingrained value toward privacy and disclosure,” and become “permanent” rules, such as not discussing a family secret with familial and non-familial others (p. 79).

Of particular interest to this project are triggered rules, which arise due to life changes (often unplanned changes) or unpredictable situations and signal a need for “a new rule or modification in our existing privacy rules” (p. 80). Triggered rules may result from boundary turbulence or from life changes, as in the case of rules triggered due to marriage, and thus need not stem from traumatic events. Sexual assault may constitute a life change, and survivors may experience significant boundary turbulence when disclosing to others. Child et al. (2011) refine trigger categories in the context of “blog scrubbing,” or blog content deletion practices, to include impression management triggers, in which “posted content portrayed [posters] or others in inconsistent ways with the impressions they currently wished to convey” (p. 2022); identity safety triggers, informed by motivation and risk-benefit ratio criteria and reflect a “recogni[tion] that posed information could reveal their identity and place them at an uncomfortable level of risk” (Child et al., 2011, p. 2022); relational triggers, or content deletion intended to “prevent conflict, preserve harmony, or promote catharsis within a wide range of relationships” (Child et

al., 2011, p. 2022); and fear of legal/disciplinary action triggers, which speaks to deletion practices “specifically because they realized that information on their blog could result in negative repercussions from authority figures” (Child et al., 2011, p. 2023).

As Child et al. and Child and Westermann (2013) indicate, privacy rule changes may be triggered proactively (before boundary violation or negative response occurs) as well as reactively (following violation or feedback). That rules may change proactively indicates a further enmeshment of privacy regulation with concepts such as the imagined audience in that “the way people imagine the consequences of their privacy management,” presumably consequences levied by audience members, “influences the choices made in judging the adequacy of their privacy rules and the necessity of privacy rule readjustments” (Child et al., 2011, p. 2024). Reactively triggered changes similarly implicate audience, in that practices include deleting content, which alters the visibility of disclosure to audience (Child et al., 2011); disclosing on a different platform, which makes content more visible to a different audience and less visible to the audience that triggered rule changes) (Vitak & Kim, 2014); and sanctions, framed as consequences for audiences to disclosure (Petronio, 2002).

Sanctions, as implied, “are used to fortify the use of rules” and, according to Petronio (2002), may be positive (e.g., rewarding those who maintain desired privacy boundaries) or negative (p. 81). Negative sanctions may include reprimands/warnings, loss of access to future disclosures/information, and withheld or partial disclosure/information; regardless of the particular action, sanctions aid in “exercise[ing] some power and control” over private information (Petronio, 2002, p. 81). As such, sanctions again pertain to the issue of control as part of the conceal-reveal tension at the heart of a dialectical understanding of disclosure, and begin to suggest strategies for adjusting privacy boundaries. In online contexts, visibility

management strategies aid in levying and enforcing sanctions through concrete actions (e.g., blocking).

**Sexual assault victim/survivor as stigmatized identity.** Before addressing the components of audience, motivation, and responses to disclosure, it is necessary to situate sexual assault as a stigmatized identity. Although individuals may not identify as sexual assault victims/survivors nor feel stigma associated with sexual assault (Starzynski et al., 2007), considering the ways in which sexual assault, and identifying as a survivor of sexual assault by extension, is often stigmatized captures the reality for many of healing from sexual assault in a U.S. context, informs the gravitas of decision-making around sexual assault disclosure, situates the risks associated with sexual assault disclosure, and aids in understanding why negative responses to victimization disclosures are especially impactful.

Stigma, according to Goffman (1963), refers to an undesirable attribute, possessed by an individual, which “makes him different from others” (p. 3) and serves to discredit the individual. In Goffman’s terms, stigmatized differences may be “of the body” (e.g., physical blemishes), “of the character” (including mental illness and substance addictions), and “tribal” (including race and religion). In speaking to difference, stigma implies a socially-agreed upon default, an “expectation on all sides that those in a given category should not only support a particular norm but also realize it” (Goffman, 1963, p. 6). These norms, or standards, are policed and enforced socially, and failure to meet these standards may result in “deviant” individuals experiencing intense shame, guilt, or self-blame/failure.

This definition of stigma alludes to the roles of visibility and perception in enacting/experiencing stigmatization. In Goffman’s framework, stigma requires a socialness, a nebulous societal other responsible for perceiving deviance and enforcing difference/othering

(consciously or unconsciously). It also requires, to some degree, an individual's perception of both societal norms and their own deviance from them. In considering disclosure of stigma, Dindia (1998) draws on the concept of "social visibility" to distinguish between *discredited* and *discreditable* stigmas. Discredited refers to "one whose stigma is already known or is immediately apparent to others" (Dindia, 1998, p. 83), similar to Goffman's (1963) "of the body" characterization. In contrast, discreditable refers to "one whose stigma is not known about nor immediately apparent to others" (Dindia, 1998, p. 84), which bears similarities to Goffman's (1963) "of the character" category. Chaudoir and Fisher (2010) refer to a similar category of stigma as *concealable* stigma, defined as "personal information that is socially devalued but is not readily apparent to others, such as mental illness, experiences of abuse or assault, or an HIV-positive diagnosis" (p. 236). Although the terms describe similar categories, I favor Chaudoir and Fisher's (2010) terminology over Goffman's (1963) use of "of the character" and Dindia's (1998) use of "discreditable," as "concealable" both highlights the role of visibility (and by extension privacy, as is discussed below) and an individual's control over it, as well as avoids associating sexual assault with a failing of morals or character.

Importantly, visibility and stigma are dependent upon context. Discussed further in a following section, visibility refers to how "seeable" or perceivable by sight an individual (or aspects thereof) or content is to others (Thompson, 2005). As Goffman (1963) notes, "the decoding capacity of the audience must be specified before one can speak of degree of visibility" (p. 51). That is, specialized knowledge of or familiarity with a particular stigma may render certain identities more visible than to those without such knowledge; a doctor, for instance, with medical training may be able to identify a person living with AIDs on sight, while the average person cannot. In this way, as discussed further later in this chapter, visibility is relative and

variable (Brighenti, 2010; Thompson, 2005). Visibility is implied additionally in the descriptive terminology applied to stigma, in that “concealable” suggests that the stigmatized individual maintains a certain degree of control over whether and how stigma is rendered invisible (concealed) or made visible (revealed). In other words, taken as a concealable stigmatized identity, sexual assault survivors may choose not to disclose as well as to disclose. This relative invisibility also affords a degree of control over *when* to disclose, as one’s status as a sexual assault survivor may remain concealed, and *to whom* to disclose, as the stigmatized identity is not immediately discernable to another.

In the context of the U.S., sexual assault can carry considerable stigma for victims and survivors. Deitz, Williams, Rife, and Cantrell (2015) argue that such stigma stems from a combination of cultural stereotypes (including rape myths) and social stigma, or “stigmatized individuals’ reports of negative or unfair treatment by others” (p. 602), further reinforced by self-stigma or self-blame. Myths surrounding rape and sexual assault position victims variously as willing (e.g., “they wanted it,” myth that victims enjoy rape), deserving (e.g., “they were asking for it,” myth that individuals cannot rape their spouses or partners), or lying or otherwise discreditable (e.g., “no one will believe you,” myth that victims lie about being raped) (Edwards, Turchik, Dardis, Reynolds, & Gidycz, 2011). Self-stigma thus indicates an internalization of such myths and stereotypes as truth and as descriptive of one’s own situation. In other words, individuals may draw upon cultural stereotypes in blaming themselves for assault, which consequently perpetuates stigma and shaming (Deitz et al., 2015).

Indeed, Deitz et al. (2015) found that self-stigma, understood as the degree of shame and embarrassment felt by an assault victim, was positively related to trauma symptom severity, suggesting that stigma and internalization thereof can physically affect (detrimentally so) sexual

assault victims' experiences of trauma. Additionally, belief in these myths may impact if survivors disclose (Kennedy & Prock, 2018), and if so to whom. A review by Ullman (1999) indicates that stereotypes, such as that victims are expected to resist assault and that rapists are strangers who jump out of bushes, may directly impact survivors' willingness to seek treatment, such that women who were sexually assaulted and did not resist, for instance, were less likely to seek treatment. In combination, cultural stereotypes, social myths, and subsequent internalization thereof perpetuate victim blaming, discredit victims, and reinforce silence surrounding sexual assault; in turn, these outcomes interrupt the ability and process of holding perpetrators accountable for violence.

In managing the tension between disclosing and risking stigma, Dindia (1998) argues, "the major problem for the discreditable is information control, or the management of undisclosed discrediting information about self" (p. 84). Thus, individuals may decide to partially disclose, retaining details or circumstances as private information; gradually disclose, revealing more information over time; fully disclose; or not disclose at all. That said, disclosure motivations do not always pertain to receipt of aid, as findings from this project and extant literature indicate (Ahrens et al., 2007; Andalibi & Forte, 2018b; Chaudoir & Quinn, 2010) and may instead be informed by sense-making needs or the desire to support others, for instance.

**Silence and silencing.** As the previous section suggests, factors such as self-blame, cultural stereotypes, and negative responses to disclosure can negatively influence a survivor's willingness to either continue disclosing (in the case of responses) or disclose at all. These factors underscore silence or non-disclosure as an alternative—though one not always proactively chosen by survivors—to disclosure. Indeed, if approximately 66-75% of survivors do

eventually disclose to someone (Ahrens et al., 2010), this means that approximately 25-33% of survivors choose to remain silent or not disclose victimization.

For some, this choice is informed by factors such as stereotypes and stigma, which frame disclosure as a risky, detrimental, or socially deviant behavior. Ahrens (2002) notes, for instance, that silence is more likely when “the costs are perceived to outweigh the benefits” (p. 10) and when personal or social beliefs frame sexual assault as a problem best handled privately. Allen, Ridgeway, and Swan (2015) similarly consider “barriers” to disclosure, defined as “any factor that decreases the likelihood that a survivor will tell someone else about his or her victimization” (p. 104), to further highlight risks associated with sexual assault disclosure as influencing the reveal-conceal tension central to disclosure (Petronio, 2002). In considering what informs disclosure to mental health professionals, Starzynski et al. (2007) found that demographic factors (such as race and sexual orientation) and post-assault factors (such as trauma symptom severity and available social support) predicted sexual assault disclosure. Barriers and risks can bear on silence both in discouraging survivors from continuing disclosure and in discouraging survivors from disclosing at all.

Others, however, may view their assault in such a way that disclosure is not particularly advantageous, and silence is a more attractive option. For instance, when individuals are not certain that their experience is significant enough or they do not feel distressed enough to “warrant assistance” (Ahrens 2002, p. 20), they may find little need to disclose. Similarly, when survivors feel capable of “handling” or coping with assault themselves, they may choose silence over disclosure (Starzynski et al., 2007). This understanding of silence draws on disclosure as motivated by help-seeking goals, such as obtaining resources or social support to aid recovery.

This framing is useful, however, in further considering the range of motivations that inform sexual assault disclosure. That is, disclosure and silence represent a similar tension to reveal-conceal, such that both disclosure and non-disclosure are choices. As previously reviewed, disclosure can be risky in the context of sexual assault; when seeking resources is not a primary motivation (i.e., when personal benefit isn't a primary outcome), what informs survivors' decisions to disclose in a highly visible space such as social media? The following section considers this question and outlines a range of motivations supported in the literature that further informs this study.

### **Disclosure Motivations**

Motivations for disclosure of sexual assault speak to the goal orientation of disclosures (or the purposes for disclosing), and additionally touch on other interrogatives, including when and to whom one discloses. I briefly review previous typologies and categorizations of disclosure motivations to suggest a set of motivational factors informing online disclosure of sexual assault; in so doing, I consider how motivations relate to additional aspects of disclosure, including willingness to disclose and disclosure contexts.

**Motivation categories and factors.** Several models of disclosure draw on the disclosure functions initially proposed by Derlega and Grzelak's (1979) functional theory of disclosure. This theory proposes that individuals disclose in pursuit of at least one function (i.e., self-expression), thus positioning disclosure as both functional and strategic; function categories include self-expression, self-clarification, social validation, relationship development, and social control (Derlega & Grzelak, 1979). Notably, social support is not indicated as a stand-alone function according to this theory; this is perhaps explained by the fact that Derlega and Grzelak's (1979) theory speaks to everyday contexts of disclosure and not specifically contexts that center a

stressor. Omarzu (2000) addresses this concern when outlining the Disclosure Decision Model by suggesting that functions/motivation goals are informed additionally by situational cues and individual differences. The author asserts that the context surrounding disclosure also informs if and how disclosure occurs. In situations in which no particular goal is present, norms of social desirability/appropriateness are thought to shape if/what one discloses.

The fever model (Stiles, 1987) expands on Derlega and Grzelak's (1979) self-expression function in suggesting that disclosure facilitates catharsis. More specifically, the model proposes that, not only do people tend to disclose more in moments of high psychological distress, but also disclosure helps relieve distress. The model positions the relationship between disclosure and distress as analogous to that between infection and fever, such that "[b]oth are indicators of some underlying disturbance and part of a restorative process" (Stiles, Shuster, & Harrigan, 1992, p. 980). That is, disclosure (as does a fever) signals the presence of a problem (distress or infection) and a need for relief. In continuing this analogy, the model proposes that, as distress increases, so too does the level of disclosure. Importantly, the fever model differs from the conceptualization of disclosure adopted in this study in that it does not position disclosure as necessarily goal-oriented and "does not require that the people anticipate any benefits from [d]isclosing" (Stiles et al., 1992, p. 981). In proposing that disclosure leads to relief of distress and catharsis, however, the model is commensurate with the contention that self-expression may be a motivation of disclosure.

Pennebaker's (1997) expressive writing model proposes a similar relationship between disclosure and catharsis, albeit in a written context. Rooted in psychology, the model suggests that writing about emotional experiences can positively impact physical and mental well-being. Mechanisms thought to inform such outcomes include inhibition (e.g., disclosure relieves

inhibition which relieves psychological stress), and cognitive processes (e.g., the use of more positive emotion words, insight words, and causal words in writing on trauma predicts health) (Pennebaker, 1997). Although this model does not speak to disclosure as defined in this dissertation, it provides a valuable connection between disclosure as catharsis and many written (as opposed to spoken) contexts for disclosure. That said, disclosing online through writing importantly differs from writing offline for oneself, in that online contexts do not similarly guarantee that written disclosure “will not be met with any reactions from others” (Ullman, 1999, p. 346). I address the impact of audience and interactivity on digital disclosures later in this chapter.

In the context of offline sexual assault disclosure specifically, Ahrens et al. (2007) suggest a division between help-seeking motivations, such as catharsis, emotional support, tangible aid, and seeking justice (e.g., catching a rapist), and “other-initiated” motivations. In addition to social support, the category of seeking justice carries particular significance in the context of sexual assault. Powell (2015), for instance, likens “voicing personal experiences of rape” (p. 582) to an informal justice-seeking strategy and one among many motivations for disclosing sexual assault. Informal justice sought through this manner has the potential to result in formal criminal investigation or other formal justice, as well as to “offer girls and women the support and validation that can elude them in off-line contexts and perhaps offset the advantages that the public sphere affords men accused of sexual violence” (Salter, 2013, p. 238). This disclosure strategy thus illustrates how multiple motivations may be pursued through a single strategy, as well as suggests that validation constitutes a valuable form of social support.

I position “other-initiated motivations” as connected to the relational development function of disclosure proposed previously, although the two are not synonymous. Rather,

Ahrens et al.'s (2007) other-initiated category expands on and lends valuable nuance to Derlega and Grzelak's (1979) relational development function. Relational development as a function or motivation for disclosure is informed by a social penetration approach, which suggests that sharing private information can facilitate relational closeness (Altman & Taylor, 1973; Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). The disclosure models addressed assume that the discloser organically (i.e., without prompting) initiates disclosure. Ahrens et al.'s (2007) findings, however, indicate that others may also initiate disclosure, either directly, such as by asking others what's wrong, asking them to explain their behavior (also related to self-clarification), or less directly, by having a discussion about the general issue, in this case rape or being present at the scene of assault. Direct asks relate to relational development in that they are framed as coming from a place of care and concern and a desire for repair. Less direct initiations speak to relational development in more familiar terms, as sharing something private as part of a conversation is a context considered in Social Penetration theory; witnessing or interrupting assault constitutes the basis for a shared experience or interaction, which may also facilitate closeness or relational development (Altman & Taylor, 1973). In considering disclosure as potentially other-initiated, Ahrens et al. (2007) importantly expand motivations as originating from additional sources beyond the self.

Crocker, Garcia, and Nuer (2008) make a similar perspective shift in suggesting egosystem (i.e., self-benefiting) and ecosystem (i.e., other-benefiting) categories as a framework for understanding motivation in the context of disclosure in intergroup relations. Rather than considering the origin of disclosure motivation (e.g., self or other), however, this framework considers the potential beneficiaries of disclosure and again expands upon disclosure as encompassing more than benefitting oneself. Chaudoir and Quinn (2010) apply this framework

to the context of revealing concealable (discreditable) stigmatized identities, in which “egosystem motivations are people’s default motivations and reflect a focus on satisfying the needs and desires of the self,” and “ecosystem motivations consider the well-being of others and place oneself as part of a larger structure of human interconnectedness” (p. 572). Egosystem motivations for disclosure include soliciting social support and emotional expression/catharsis, while ecosystem motivations for disclosure might include educating others and relational development (Chaudoir & Quinn, 2010).

Findings from a largely female (76.6%) survey of 235 undergraduate respondents indicate that respondents who disclosed a history of sexual assault were “the least likely to report an ecosystem motivation” (Chaudoir & Quinn, 2010, p. 578). Similarly, content analysis of a Reddit forum indicated that finding a supportive community, seeking advice, and telling one’s story—all egosystem motivations—constituted primary motivations for sexual assault disclosure (O’Neill, 2018). The mechanisms informing such findings are not articulated neatly, though they may again indicate the salience of stigma, myths, and stereotypes in shaping motivation disclosures or the need to seek social support/aid for oneself before considering others. Regardless, the binary of eco- and egosystem motivations differs from the more expansive understanding of functions proposed by Derlega and Grzelak (1979), though the categories overlap significantly; self-expression, self-clarification, and social support maintain egosystem orientations, whereas relational development and educating others align with ecosystem motivations. In framing disclosure motivations as potentially extending beyond oneself, this eco/egosystem orientation suggests an additional dimension to disclosure and begins to expand the array of motivations associated with stigmatized disclosure. In combination, these perspectives on motivation work to shift disclosure away from a framing that positions

disclosure as purely self-focused and begin to consider motivations that go beyond social support. Considering motivations for online disclosure further expands the array of salient motivations.

**Social support as a guiding concept.** As suggested previously, scholarship on sexual assault disclosure often frames disclosure in relation to soliciting social support (Ahrens et al., 2007; O’Neill, 2018; Ullman, 1999). This literature further tends to draw on conceptualizations of social support that emphasize tangible aid and emotional support, as these categories map most directly to the types of medical, legal, and emotional aid survivors may seek out following sexual assault. In focusing on tangible aid and emotional support, scholars tend to consider formal support providers, such as medical aid, police intervention, legal aid, and therapy or psychiatric services, and informal support providers, such as family and friends, as the primary categories. Given the online context central to this project, I focus on informal support providers to whom survivors are likely disclosing, and define social support with this audience in mind.

Social support may be framed as a communicative practice focusing on enacted support, or “the things people say and do for one another,” in which social support is sought or offered with the intent of “*buffer*[ing] individuals from the negative effects of stress by facilitating coping” (Goldsmith, 2004, p. 3, emphasis in original). Coping, or cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage a stressor (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980), is also an aspect of trauma recovery and references a broader process of “integrating [a] traumatic experience into one’s life in an adaptive manner, including the meaning of the trauma, one’s memory of the trauma, and the emotions associated with it” (Littleton, Axsom, Breitkopf, & Berenson, 2006, p. 774). As such, coping with a stressor can take the form of seeking social support from others.

Some work on social support and supportive communication has also investigated the impact of social support provision on an individual's psychological well-being. In an analysis of supportive communication exchange in Alcoholics Anonymous, for instance, Kuuluvainen and Isotalus (2014) found that members reported that supporting similar others provided personal benefits as well. Scholarship focusing on psychological well-being more broadly offers mixed results, but provides some evidence to suggest that supporting others may also benefit one's own well-being or coping (Brown et al., 2003; Liang, Krause, & Bennett, 2001; Weinstein & Ryan, 2010). In combination, these results offer a possible connection between supporting others as a motivation for disclosure and benefits of disclosure.

Typologies of social support are relevant in the context of sexual assault disclosure and recovery in that they describe multiple types of aid that may be sought by and/or beneficial to survivors. Cutrona and Suhr (1992), for instance, include informational support (advice, teaching, appraisal), emotional support (affection, confidentiality, empathy, reassurance), esteem support (validation, relief of blame), tangible aid (direct tasks, offering money or material goods, participation), and social network support (presence, access, and companions/"others who have been through same" [p. 122]).

Social support is also relevant to sexual assault disclosure specifically, both in the immediate aftermath of assault as well as in the broader post-assault recovery period. A review by Ullman (1999) suggests that social support offered as a response to disclosure may provide validation of a survivor's experiences, assist in processing, and otherwise "enhance a victim's ability to find meaning in the experience" (p. 345). There is a tendency in research literature to consider disclosure in the relatively immediate aftermath of sexual assault, which intensifies the

focus on social support (and more particularly aligns formal support providers with tangible aid and informal support providers with emotional aid) (Ahrens et al., 2007; Ullman 1999).

Extant scholarship, as well as findings from this project, suggests, however, that disclosure may and does occur months or years after trauma. In a survey of 155 women sexual assault survivors, Ullman (1996b) reported that approximately one third (34%) of victims “disclosed the assault immediately after it occurred,” whereas nearly one third (29.2%) “waited more than a year to tell anyone about the assault” (p. 149). Of the remaining respondents, 18% reported disclosing days after assault, 13.9% weeks after, and 4.9% a year after assault (Ullman, 1996b). Considered through the lens of social support, these findings may indicate that survivors seek social support for sexual assault immediately following and/or long after assault occurs. Given that the utility of disclosing to formal support providers rapidly diminishes (e.g., as the viability of physical evidence deteriorates, as statute of limitations constrain opportunities to report), however, it is unlikely that disclosure occurring more than a year later (as nearly 30% of Ullman’s respondents reported) was done in the context of formal support seeking, with the exception of mental health or therapy services.

This leaves disclosure to informal support providers as the primary explanation for such delayed disclosure. Survivors of sexual assault may indeed delay disclosure until they feel a need for emotional or other social support from informal support providers. When compared to categories of disclosure motivations arising from models not specific to sexual assault or stigma disclosure, however, social support provides a rather limited view of motivations underlying sexual assault disclosure. As others have suggested (Andalibi & Forte, 2018a), and as I argue in Chapter 6, supporting similar (often invisible) others is a powerful motivation for disclosing in

online spaces such as social media, yet is a motivation absent from much of the disclosure literature.

**Online disclosure and motivation.** Online contexts for disclosure differ in important ways from face-to-face contexts, such as disclosing to multiple individuals or a broader audience rather than an individual, and in terms of knowledge of to whom one is disclosing (Kim & Dindia, 2011). In their work on disclosure of pregnancy loss (framed as disclosure of a stigmatized identity) on Facebook, Andalibi and Forte (2018a) present a set of six decision factor categories: self-related, audience-related, societal, platform and affordance-related, network-level, and temporal. The authors note that several themes resonate with offline disclosure frameworks, such as Greene, Derlega, and Mathews' (2006) and Derlega and Grzelak's (1979), though again, "these factors are substantially different in the context of Facebook than in dyadic offline disclosures" (p. 9). In particular, platform and affordance factors imply a unique set of risk-management strategies made available by social media structures, features, and abilities. I return to the role of these strategies in disclosure processes later in this chapter.

Andalibi and Forte's (2018a) six-factor framework includes both other-focused and self-focused motivations. Self-related factors include disclosure as remembrance/acknowledgement, part of a healing process, and as a means of controlling one's story. As such, this category aligns with catharsis and self-expression as disclosure motivations (Derlega & Grzelak, 1979; Stiles, 1987) as well as contributes nuance specific to loss (e.g., remembrance). Audience-related factors pertain to disclosure as a means of informing specific others and relate to social control as a motivation (Derlega & Grzelak, 1979), such as disclosing to avoid unwanted conversations/questions and to control information sharing about loss. Societal factors pertain largely to disclosure as activism, a means for fighting stigma, and as increasing awareness of the

realities of pregnancy loss. Thus framed, societal factors align with and expand upon the egosystem motivation (i.e., benefiting oneself/one's own condition) of educating others through disclosure (Chaudoir & Quinn, 2010).

Andalibi and Forte's (2018a) framework additionally considers contextual factors as influential in disclosure decision-making, in that network-level, temporal, and platform and affordance-related factors all speak to distinct facets of disclosure contexts. Network-level factors describe disclosures made as a consequence of initial disclosures (i.e., reciprocal disclosures. Mediated reciprocal disclosures differ from reciprocal disclosure in dyadic contexts in that network-level reciprocal disclosures "are a response to a perceived reduction in stigma" rather than direct response to initial disclosure (Andalibi & Forte, 2018a, p. 5). In other words, network-level factors speak to a "chain-reaction" of sorts, in which one visible disclosure inspires others to disclose as well. Hashtag campaigns, such as #NotOkay, which gained prominence on Twitter in 2016 as a means of protesting normalization of sexual assault by U.S. presidential candidates, provide a useful illustration of this phenomenon (Bogen et al., 2018). In this instance, many #NotOkay tweets were written in direct response to a high-profile and disclosive tweet that invited such response: "Women: tweet me your first assaults. they aren't just stats. I'll go first: Old man on city bus grabs my 'pussy' and smiles at me, I'm 12" (CBS, 2016). Network-level factors additionally include other-focused motivations such as disclosure as a means of "being a source of support current, past, and future invisible similar others in one's network" (Andalibi & Forte, 2018a, p. 5). This consideration importantly positions *offering* social support as a motivation, rather than *seeking* social support, as discussed previously. This inclusion aids in underscoring motivations that may appear more salient in online contexts than

in offline contexts due to unique abilities afforded by online structures, and reinforces the need to further consider motivations for online disclosure that extend beyond the self.

Temporal factors as described by Andalibi and Forte are somewhat specific to pregnancy loss, as people may wish to disclose before a due date or otherwise address expectations of childbirth. In Chapter 5, I draw on participant insights to argue that timing or temporality is also relevant in the context of sexual assault, albeit in different ways that influence willingness to disclose. For instance, Bogen et al.'s (2018) content analysis of #NotOkay-tagged posts (tweets) on Twitter reveals that a high percentage of tweets attributed blame for assault to a perpetrator, suggesting that survivors who chose to participate "had already processed their victimization experiences to the point at which they were able to assign blame to the perpetrator, or had already managed their own feelings of self-blame" (p. 5). This may be indicative of a processing period that occurs or begins prior to online disclosure of sexual assault, suggesting one application of temporality to online sexual assault disclosure.

Furthermore, I consider platform and affordance-related factors as related to but not in and of themselves motivations, in that such choices inform where and how disclosure occurs but not necessarily for what purpose. For instance, Andalibi and Forte (2018a) indicate the one-to-many communication afforded by social media as illustrative of this category, whereas I understand this affordance as facilitating other motivations, such as informing online connections of sexual assault, which align with other motivational categories/factors, such as audience-related factors. I further frame affordances in relation to visibility and visibility management later in this chapter.

Comparing categories of disclosure motivation pertaining to stigma, sexual assault, and online contexts with broader understandings of disclosure yields two primary contributions

relevant to this project. The first is a more comprehensive set of motivation categories. These categories include self-expression (Derlega & Grzelak, 1979; Omarzu, 2000) or catharsis (Ahrens et al., 2007; Andalibi & Forte, 2018a; Chaudoir & Quinn, 2010; Pennebaker, 1997; Stiles, 1987); self-clarification or sense-making (Derlega & Grzelak, 1979; Omarzu, 2000; Pennebaker, 1997); social support seeking, including emotional and tangible aid, and social validation (Ahrens et al., 2007; Chaudoir & Quinn, 2010; Derlega & Grzelak, 1979); societal factors such as educating others, raising awareness, and catching rapists (Ahrens et al., 2007; Andalibi & Forte, 2018; Crocker, Garcia, & Nuer, 2008); social control (Derlega & Grzelak, 1979); and audience-related and interpersonal factors (Andalibi & Forte, 2018a; Crocker, Garcia, & Nuer, 2008; Green, Derlega, & Mathews, 2009).

The second is a set of additional facets of disclosure to consider that, in combination, expands disclosure from an offline dyadic context and begins to specify disclosure motivations in the context of online disclosure of stigma and sexual assault victimization. Ahrens et al.'s (2007) other-initiated motivation, and Andalibi and Forte's (2018a) frameworks, for instance, suggest online disclosure as originating potentially from both the self and others, as well as indicate that disclosure is shaped by context, as evident in motivation factors such as platform/affordance, network-level, and temporal.

Despite explication of disclosure motivations, a need to further expand on motivations specifically informing disclosures of sexual assault on social media remains. As Ahrens et al. (2007) note, survivors may hold multiple or shifting motivations for disclosure, yet scholarship has largely focused on primary motivations for disclosure. Insight into how survivors manage multiple motivations lends nuance to this literature. As such, a contribution of this project is extending literature on motivations to consider simultaneously held and shifting motivations for

sexual assault disclosure on social media. In addition, previous work on social media disclosures of sexual assault victimization has tended to either emphasize help-seeking (Andalibi, Haimson, De Choudhury, & Forte, 2016; O'Neill, 2018) or highly visible hashtag campaigns explicitly geared toward activism (Bogen et al., 2018); this project addresses a gap in this literature by focusing on “everyday” hashtags rather than viral moments. Consequently, I seek to respond to the question:

**RQ 1:** What are the reported motivations and goals of sexual assault survivors who choose to disclose on social media, and how do survivors make sense of their social media disclosures and what those disclosures did for them?

Furthermore, in the context of disclosure in response to viral campaigns, Bogen et al.’s (2018) analysis additionally suggests that #NotOkay participants may have processed assault experiences to the point that they do not engage in self-blame for assault. While the veracity of this conjecture requires further investigation, it raises an interesting question regarding the role of social support in shaping motivation. Given that viral hashtags such as #NotOkay are driven by calls to action rather than individuals seeking resources for recovery, it may be that disclosure as activism, or disclosing for other-focused motivations such as supporting others, becomes available to survivors after they have received support or validation themselves (in other words, in order to support others one must first feel supported). This particular question extends beyond the scope of this project, yet exploring how online disclosures may be situated in broader, offline contexts of social support exchange is relevant in that this exploration sheds further light on the array of disclosure motivations perceived by sexual assault survivors who disclose on social media. As such, I also pose the following question:

**RQ 2:** What role(s) do sexual assault survivors report that social media context plays in sexual assault survivors' broader systems of coping and support?

I return to both RQ1 and RQ2 in Chapters 4 and 6.

### **Disclosure Audiences**

As suggested, disclosure of sexual assault often appears framed in relation to social support solicitation. That is, scholarship on offline sexual assault disclosure tends to position such disclosure as motivated by a need for support, such as validation of experience, or resources, such as medical care or legal services (Ullman, 1999). In considering to whom survivors disclose, scholarship has thus far tended to bifurcate the broader pool of disclosure recipients into categories of “formal” and “informal” support providers, in which the former refers to professionals and services, such as police, therapists, and medical professionals, and the latter to friends, family, and strangers, who may interact with sexual assault survivors (Ullman, 1996a). Although limited by a focus on social support, this formal-informal distinction aids in understanding to whom survivors initially disclose and why as well as informs understanding of reactions to disclosure and their impact on survivors.

Research indicates repeatedly the importance of informal support providers as recipients of sexual assault victimization disclosure. Ullman (1996a), for example, found that a vast majority of women surveyed (91.2%) disclosed to family or friends, and over half (59.9%) to mental health professionals, whereas less than 20% reported disclosing to other formal support providers, including physicians, police, and rape crisis centers (eight participants reported never disclosing prior to the survey). More recently, in a study of college women's disclosures of sexual assault, Orchowski and Gidycz (2012) found that 85% of participants “confided in a female peer,” whereas less than 15% disclosed to a parent. (The authors suggest that this is

perhaps explained by the fact that women in college spend more time with peers than with their parents.) Regarding first-time disclosures, Ahrens et al. (2007) similarly found that the majority (75%) of first disclosures of victimization were made to informal support providers, such as friends and family.

Friends and family may also be perceived as “safe” disclosure recipients regardless of disclosure motivation. Given the potential influence of perceived stigma and fear of judgment on disclosure decision-making explored previously, survivors may assess the likelihood of a potential recipient to believe their experience as well as likelihood to perpetuate blame, shame, and judgment. Indeed, findings from Ullman (1996b) indicate that negative reactions to disclosure may disproportionately and negatively impact sexual assault survivors as compared to positive or neutral reactions to disclosure; moreover, this discrepancy may be pronounced, as anecdotal evidence from Ullman’s study suggests that “victims report absence of negative reactions, such as ‘being blamed,’ as a positive reaction from others” (Ullman, 1999, p. 344). In combination, scholarship on sexual assault disclosure recipients emphasize both the deliberateness of disclosure as well as the disproportionately negative perception and impact of unsupportive and judgmental responses on survivors’ well-being.

By extension, these findings underscore the importance of audience consideration in disclosing sexual assault. Coupled with the reputation of public social media as hostile to women and women’s experiences of violence (Dhrodia, 2018; Vera-Gray, 2017), findings regarding the impact of negative responses do not depict social media as conducive to positive reception of sensitive disclosures. In this project, I emphasize public social media as a site of study, and in so doing bracket off closed online spaces intended for social support exchange as well as public forums intended for social support exchange. I do so in part due to an interest in considering a

more expansive range of motivations as well as to highlight the impact of visibility in risk-reward assessments (that is, how visibility amplifies risks and shapes motivations and benefits). Instead, I refer to individuals' public (i.e., not private or otherwise restricted to only "approved"/networked others) social media profiles, which further shape the conception of audience relevant to this project. I expand on this choice in the following section.

**Audience and social media.** The term "social media" refers to digital platforms that are defined in part by constituent elements as well as the capacity of a space to support socialness (Carr & Hayes, 2015). More concretely, social media are internet-based (rather than simply web-based), masspersonal communication channels that permit interaction between users without necessitating spatial or temporal co-presence as well as allow users to generate and share content (Carr & Hayes, 2015). Conceptually, social media and social networking sites are sometimes conflated, though, definitionally, the term "social networking site" describes a subset of the broader social media category and draws on additional definitional criteria that may be illuminating in this context.

Compared to social media, social networking sites are defined by unique and identifiable user profiles, publicly articulable connections, and the ability to interact (produce, consume) with user-generated content (Ellison & boyd, 2013). Users and user-generated content are thus central to both concepts, as is interactivity (to which I return momentarily). In contrast to social media, the term "social networking site" centers the individual user, indicated by the prominence of unique profiles as a defining criterion, as situated within a broader network of connections. In so doing, the relations between users are similarly highlighted.

I adopt the term "social media" in this project to cement the importance of interactivity, to consider audience as extending beyond networked connections (i.e., beyond formalized

“friends” and “followers”), and to include digital platforms that appear influential to sexual assault survivors but that do not meet the definitional criteria for social networking site (e.g., Reddit). That is, I consider *public* social media, which prescribes a broader visibility beyond the visibility of connections (Baym & boyd, 2012), but also, as boyd and Marwick (2009) note, introduces a “conundrum of visibility” as “most content online is obscure and consumed by few” (Baym & boyd, 2012, p. 322). The types of connections available on specific platforms indeed vary and thus inform audience considerations (Ellison & Vitak, 2015).

Interactivity, as a component of social media, refers to the potential ability of a user to engage with other users’ content (including posts, comments, and shared content). Carr and Hayes (2015) argue that *perceived* interactivity, simply knowing that one could interact or feeling as if one is present with other users, is sufficient in designating a platform as a form of social media. Interactivity thus makes social media users aware of other users regardless of actual interactions with other users; from the perspective of a user posting content, perceived interactivity is a reminder of the potential or imagined audience of other users.

The imagined audience, or “mental conceptualization of the people with whom we are communicating” (Litt, 2012, p. 331), thus additionally informs social media audiences to whom users envision disclosing. The imagined audience is not a stable concept, in that users may imagine multiple audiences or shifting audiences, depending on the type of information being shared. Additionally, imagined audience may be influenced by evidence of a user’s active audience (Litt, 2012; Litt & Hargittai, 2016; Marwick & boyd, 2014), such as comments, “likes,” and messages; the affordances available on particular social media sites (Litt, 2012); and a user’s motivation for posting (Marwick & boyd, 2010).

In an empirical analysis of social network site user's imagined audience, Litt and Hargittai (2016) suggest two predominant forms of imagined audience: abstract and targeted. Abstract refers to audiences considered in moments when individuals were "not thinking of anyone specifically" and attributed posting motivations to self-presentation or sentiments related to "putting it out there" (Litt & Hargittai, 2016, p. 5); targeted instead refers to a range of audiences, in which posters may imagine speaking directly to a specific individual (e.g., "my rapist") or to a more ambiguous sub-group of audience (e.g., "anyone who needs to see this") (Litt & Hargittai, 2016). Furthermore, individuals reporting targeted imagined audiences are more likely to have audience-related motivations and tend to focus on to whom they were speaking (Litt & Hargittai, 2016).

These types of audience are made available by the structure of social media platforms, which facilitate communication with similarities to both mass and interpersonal communication. Masspersonal, a concept intended to bridge the "false dichotomy" between the two spheres of communication (Reardon & Rogers, 1988), highlights communication characterized by aspects of both traditions, such as highly personalized messages viewable to a large audience (O'Sullivan & Carr, 2018). More specifically, masspersonal "challenges the assumption that the channel used determines the type of communication" and instead "recognizes [that] individuals can use traditional interpersonal channels for mass communication" (O'Sullivan & Carr, 2018, p. 1164).

The masspersonal communication model (MPCM) considers messages—namely dimensions of message access and message personalization—a distinguishing factor between mass and interpersonal communication (O'Sullivan & Carr, 2018). In this model, masspersonal communication is characterized by messages that are highly personalizable as well as more

public (i.e., more accessible to a greater number of people). In other words, messages may be directed to one person but viewable by a large number of people, as in the example of a marriage proposal broadcast on a jumbo screen at a sports event (O’Sullivan & Carr, 2018). The emphasis on communicative events rather than channel means that social media spaces may facilitate both masspersonal as well as interpersonal communication, such as through public comments and private messages. The concept of masspersonal communication thus helps contextualize how individuals may engage with broad and narrow audiences on social media and the channels (and associated visibility) through which to do so.

A final concept informing audience considerations on social media is context collapse, which helps explicate the trade-offs of engaging with a broad digital audience. As discussed previously, disclosers may be motivated by audience-related factors, and the breadth of audience available on social media may be seen as beneficial in realizing this motivation. Conversely, the breadth and diversity of social media may restrict individuals’ desire or perception of social media as a disclosure space, as disclosure may not be intended or appropriate for the entirety of the audience. Context collapse provides a term for the consequence of social media structures that encourage one-to-many communication but which simultaneously make it “difficult to maintain distinct self-presentations for different audiences” (Vitak, 2012, p. 454). Indeed, evidence suggests that this diversity may cause tension between individuals and audience groups by increasing the likelihood of negative consequences, such as an unintended audience member being offended by a post (Binder, Howes, & Sutcliffe, 2009). Consequently, individuals may leverage social media features and affordances, as well as other strategies (such as platform selection), to manage audience as well as the visibility of content to particular audiences. Indeed,

In combination, the ways that social media users perceive, engage with, and cognitively segment their audiences inform how users imagine and construct privacy boundaries as well as indicate a need for further research on how social media users disclosing stigmatized identities imagine their audience and assess the likelihood of negative reactions. That is, regardless of which type of audience is imagined, evidence suggests that, in contexts not specific to stigma disclosure, social media users imagine audiences to be largely sympathetic and non-judgmental, similar to imagining one's close friends as audience (Brake, 2012; Litt & Hargittai, 2016).

Research additionally indicates that anticipated reactions or consequences (in addition to realized reactions) affect how individuals judge “the adequacy of their privacy rules and the necessity of privacy rule readjustments”(Child, Petronio, Agyeman-Budu, & Westermann, 2011, p. 2024). Given the potentially significant and detrimental impact of negative responses to sexual assault disclosure discussed previously, it follows that sexual assault survivors may ascribe more weight to assessing how an audience is likely to react. By extension, survivors may draw on additional strategies in constructing privacy boundaries around sensitive disclosures. In the following section, I outline Communication Privacy Management (CPM) theory as an approach to further understanding the relationships between motivation, audience, and impact of responses, as well as the processes for drawing, enforcing, and adjusting privacy boundaries around disclosures of sexual assault victimization.

### **Visibility and Affordances**

As discussed previously in this chapter, disclosure, revelation and visibility, and vulnerability are intertwined concepts. The relationship between revelation and vulnerability—that revealing private information carries the risk of vulnerability—further suggests a connection between visibility and vulnerability (as revelation requires some degree of visibility) and, by

extension, between visibility and power (Brighenti, 2010; Thompson, 2005). Brighenti (2007) characterizes visibility as residing at the intersection of “relations of perception” and “relations of power” (p. 324). The relationship between visibility and power, however, is not a neat one, as “power does not rest univocally either with visibility or with invisibility” (Brighenti, 2007, p. 340).

This complex connection holds significant implications in a context such as sexual assault disclosure, in which power is already implicated in revelation, given the role of power in both the act of assault (as sexual assault is about power, not about sex) as well as social stigma that seeks to reinforce silence (and invisibility by extension) in response to assault. In online contexts, visibility is additionally implicated in disclosure, both in regards to the imagined audience and masspersonal qualities of communication as well as in regards to social media features and associated affordances that aid in managing (increasing, decreasing, maintaining) the visibility of users’ content.

In this section, I connect visibility as a multi-dimensional concept, as applied by Pearce, Vitak, and Barta (2018), to both disclosure processes as well as social media affordances. I do so to position visibility as a root affordance, in keeping with Flyverbom et al. (2016), as well as to frame affordances in terms of visibility management strategies. In later chapters, I argue that sexual assault survivors purposefully leverage visibility management strategies (presented in Chapter 6) in realizing motivations as well as in navigating issues of control and power.

**Visibility.** Conceptually, visibility refers to the degree to which something is “seeable” or perceptible by sight (Thompson, 2005). In a broad sense, visibility may be understood as situated, dependent upon “complex social, technical, and political arrangements” (Brighenti, 2010, p. 3) and “crucially connected to social territoriality” (p. 5), such that visibility is at once

ambiguous and dynamic. “Traditional” offline visibility and online or mediated visibility share several crucial dimensions that, in combination, describe visibility as relational, strategic, and outcome-driven (Pearce et al., 2018).

As Brighenti (2010) argues, visibility is inherently relational, as visibility requires both an object to be seen and an entity to perceive or see said object. In offline contexts, this relational dimension is often also framed as reciprocal, such as in face-to-face interactions between individuals, as well as defined by spatial and temporal co-presence (Thompson, 2005). Brighenti (2007) notes, however, that visibility is more often asymmetrical than perfectly symmetrical, despite spatial and temporal co-presence, such that reciprocity is “always imperfect and limited” (p. 326). Online or mediated visibility is “de-spatialized” such that the spatial and temporal properties of visibility are no longer salient in the same ways as offline contexts (Thompson, 2005, p. 38) given properties of online communication such as asynchronicity and digital co-presence that do not rely on geographic proximity (Treem & Leonardi, 2012). Instead, mediated visibility is shaped by “the distinctive properties of communication media,” including new forms of interaction facilitated by mediated contexts (Thompson, 2005, p. 35). Consequences of mediated interaction include new, more complex visibilities that are similarly relational and asymmetrical, but which implicate power and control in unique ways.

Asymmetrical visibility further indicates the relation between visibility and power, as considering who sees and who is seen often reveals a discrepancy in social status and power between seer and seen, informed by hierarchies of oppression such as gender and race or relations defined by differences in power (Brighenti, 2007). Foucault’s (1975/1995) analysis of Bentham’s panopticon, for instance, provides a classic illustration of both asymmetrical visibility (namely, surveillance) and the power relation implicated within it. In this scenario, a prison with

a central guard tower renders prisoners visible to guards at all times, while the guards themselves are always invisible to the prisoners; in theory, the prisoners' inability to know for certain when they are being watched discourages misbehavior and reinforces the guards' control over prisoners' behavior. Furthermore, scholarship addressing marginalized and vulnerable populations' use of social media for disclosure and self-presentation underscore the heightened association between visibility and vulnerability, in which the "seen" takes on considerable risk in becoming visible (Fritz & Gonzales, 2018; Pearce et al., 2018).

Beyond relational, visibility is also manipulatable and strategic. As such, visibility or revelation, in the case of disclosure, may be managed and leveraged in situations to the benefit of the seen. Brighenti (2007) draws on the example of patterned plumage in nature to argue, "[o]ften, the relationship of visibility is controlled not by the one who looks, but by the one who is looked at" (p. 331). Thompson (2005) argues, in the context of mediated visibility, that the act of making information visible "is also an explicit strategy of individuals who know very well that visibility can be a weapon in the struggles they wage in their day-to-day lives" (p. 31). Visibility may facilitate accountability, for instance, by bringing injustices to light (one example might be cell phone video footage of interactions with police).

A tension exists, however between strategic visibility as empowering and visibility as connected to vulnerability, in that one outcome does not exist without the other. As with disclosure of private information, mediated visibility also implicates control such that once information is made visible in mediated contexts, it is impossible to fully regain control over it (Lampinen et al., 2011; Thompson, 2005). That said, individuals enact visibility management strategies (discussed further later in this chapter), such as blocking users, using "friend lists," disclosing on a secondary social media platform (Vitak & Kim, 2014), and engaging in gradual

disclosure (Child & Starcher, 2016) or social “steganography” (i.e., coding messages such that they are only decipherable/meaningful to a few people; boyd & Marwick, 2011) to manage risks associated with disclosure. Whereas these strategies potentially limit risk, moments of boundary turbulence can still occur (Petronio, 2002). Taking the impact of such responses on sexual assault survivors as an example, visibility can thus be a “double-edged sword” for vulnerable or marginalized individuals (Brighenti, 2007, p. 335; Thompson, 2005).

That visibility is potentially strategic intimates that it is also outcome-driven, as strategy is engaged in pursuit of a goal or desired outcome. More broadly, visibility as outcome-driven acknowledges that visibility carries consequences, as previously noted, and that consequences may be positive or negative. In acknowledging that power does not always align with either the seer or the seen, Brighenti (2007) notes that “it is the style in which seeing and being seen take place that carries the most important consequences” (p. 339). Applying this comment to visibility more broadly suggests ways in which individuals may leverage visibility for their own benefit, in strategically selecting when, how, and to whom they make information visible.

In the context of organizational communication, Flyverbom et al. (2016) similarly liken visibility management with practices such as “what to disclose and to whom, how information flows, and how insight and scrutiny are controlled” (p. 99). In expanding on these practices, Flyverbom et al. (2016) point to affordances as a means for further understanding “the intersection between people’s goals and a technology’s material features” (p. 100). Visibility management strategies thus draw on abilities afforded by technology structures, including features of social media, to negotiate the relative visibility (how much, to whom, etc.) of information in connection with a particular outcome or goal.

**Affordances.** The term “affordances” refers to relationships between actors, tools, and actions between them (Treem & Leonardi, 2012). Broadly speaking, an affordance describes an ability of a tool or technology as perceived by an actor in pursuit of a desired outcome. As developed by Gibson (1979) in the context of ecological psychology, the affordance concept was intended to capture how an animal perceives and interacts with its environment. In other words, affordances refer to “what [the environment] offers the animal, what it provides or furnishes, either for good or ill” (p. 127). The term has since gained traction and complexity in myriad disciplines, including sociology, human-computer interaction, design, and communication technologies (cf. Treem et al., 2016).

In its current iteration, part of the concept’s utility lies in its alignment with a mutual shaping approach to technology, which argues against technologically deterministic and constructionist perspectives that emphasize technological and human agency, respectively (Evans, Pearce, Vitak, & Treem, 2017; Nagy & Neff, 2015). Affordances are relational, in the sense that they arise from arrangements between actor, object, and goal. In other words, different actors pursuing different goals may perceive different affordances arising from the same technology (e.g., the same way a rock may afford hammering as well as afford holding open a door).

Relatedly, Nagy and Neff (2015) suggest “imagined affordance” in order to refocus attention to the role of users’ “expectations for technology that are not fully realized in conscious, rational knowledge but are nonetheless concretized or materialized in socio-technical systems” (p. 1). Doing so creates space between users’ “rational participation” and technological outcomes in which to consider “features that are *not* about user action or sociality” as well as the influence of “users’ perceptions, expectations, or misperceptions” that inform what a user

believes is or is not possible with a particular tool (Nagy & Neff, 2015, p. 3). This understanding thus replicates an idea of affordance as arising from an interaction between an actor and object, but as additionally shaped and made available (or not) by “the material, mediated, and emotional aspects of technological artifacts” (Nagy & Neff, 2015, p. 7). Such a conceptualization thus expands the notion of affordance to consider the materiality of platforms as dynamic as well as informed by user perceptions (which are additionally informed by sociocultural narratives of appropriate use), interactions, and affective responses (Nagy & Neff, 2015).

Consequently, in this project I draw on Evans et al.’s (2017) definition of affordances as the relations “between an object/technology and the user that enables or constrains potential behavioral outcomes in a particular context” (p. 36) and nod to Nagy and Neff’s (2015) imagined affordance to further situate affordance as informed by user perception, experience, emotion, and technological materiality. Doing so further situates visibility management strategies as drawing on affordances as well as arising from the particular context of sexual assault disclosure. In applying this definition, it is necessary to bound affordances as distinct from technological features and outcomes (though affordances may be supported/made available through features and facilitate outcomes).

Indeed, in outlining an “affordance test,” Evans et al. (2017) detail a set of threshold criteria for determining affordances, including confirming that a proposed affordance is not a feature nor an outcome and that the proposed affordance has variability or range. A set of concepts that “passes the test” includes anonymity, persistence, and visibility, whereas concepts such as privacy and collaboration are determined to be outcomes rather than affordances (Evans et al., 2017).

**Visibility management.** Visibility is considered an affordance, though its significance extends beyond this designation. More specifically, as argued by Flyverbom et al. (2016), visibility constitutes a “root affordance” because of its ability to enable additional affordances. In other words, affordances such as persistence and editability are dependent upon visibility in some capacity, as content must first be visible (i.e., posted) to be perceived as persistent or to be edited/changed. Visibility, in turn, is afforded through disclosure or revelation of information (i.e., the process of making information visible) (Pearce et al., 2018). Social media users may leverage a host of affordances, features, and factors (e.g., platform choice) to manage disclosure visibility (Pearce et al., 2018; Vitak & Kim, 2014). I refer to these acts as *visibility management strategies* and explore the connections between affordances, features, and strategic use of visibility further in Chapters 5 and 6.

As suggested, visibility management pertains to both strategically increasing and decreasing the visibility of disclosive content to others. In this way, visibility management parallels communication privacy management, in that visibility can be strategically constrained to construct privacy boundaries around sensitive (or private) content. Social media users may, for instance, use multiple communicative channels, such as private messages, to recreate a dyadic or more intimate context for disclosure (Vitak & Kim, 2014). This supports the positioning of privacy as an outcome, rather than an affordance, in that both increased and constrained visibility impact the relative privacy of information.

As this discussion suggests, affordances may be important tools for social media users in pursuing disclosure motivations and associated privacy outcomes. As visibility management strategies, abilities afforded by social media may also be influential in drawing and enforcing

privacy boundaries surrounding disclosed private information. Consequently, another research question informing this project is as follows:

**RQ 3:** How do technological characteristics or factors particular to different social media platforms, such as visibility, inform sexual assault survivors' decisions to disclose on social media?

This question thus draws attention to the particular context of social media as well as the ways in which the dynamism of this context influences both disclosure decisions as well as strategies used to navigate visibility.

**Visibility and hashtags.** Of particular interest to this project's aims is the role that hashtags play in visibility management of sexual assault disclosure. A feature supported on Twitter, Tumblr, and Instagram, hashtags afford searchability, in that searching tags will return content including that hashtag, and connection, by extension. Hashtags also afford visibility by making content more likely to appear in search results. Research suggests that social support and activist communities can also form around hashtags in public social media spaces (Attai et al., 2015; Maas, McCauley, Bonomi, & Leija, 2018; Myrick, Holton, Himmelboim, & Love, 2016; Olson, 2016). As discussed in Appendix B: Orientation and Methods, social network analysis drawing on sexual assault-related hashtags informed both participant recruitment and the networks that form around sexual assault disclosure.

Scholarship detailing topical networks related to sexual assault and intimate partner violence has tended to focus on activist-oriented and often viral hashtags (Armstrong & Mahone, 2017; Bogen et al., 2018; Clark, 2017; Maas et al., 2018; Rentschler, 2015). These campaigns, including #MeToo and the more recent #ShoutYourAbortion, frequently call on hashtag participants to disclose as a means of raising awareness and challenging stigma. As such, this

body of research lends support to raising awareness and challenging stigma as motivations for disclosing sexual assault victimization. What remains to be seen, however, is if and how sexual assault survivors disclose sexual assault victimization in connection to more mundane hashtags and outside of viral moments. As such, this social network analysis seeks to respond to the question:

**RQ4:** What are the characteristics of the networks of users engaging with sexual assault disclosures on social media (including their social network size and density or connectedness)?

### **Conclusion**

Although extant scholarship suggests some motivation categories informing sexual assault disclosure in both offline and online contexts, I posit that these categories over-emphasize the relevance of help seeking, such as the desire for social support, as a motivation for social media disclosure. Scholarship addressing viral sexual assault-related hashtag moments, for instance, suggests the salience of raising awareness and fighting stigma as motivations for disclosure (Bogen et al., 2018). This project thus seeks to inform the range of motivations pertinent to sexual assault disclosure that occurs on social media but apart from these viral hashtags.

Given the particularities of social media as disclosure sites as well as sexual assault as a potentially stigmatized experience, I lean on Andalibi and Forte's (2018a) disclosure decision factors to capture motivations relevant to contexts with similar disclosure risk, audience, and visibility considerations. In this chapter, I begin to suggest that temporality, understood as relating to a timeline extending from incident (assault, pregnancy loss) to recovery, may be better

understood in the context of sexual assault as partly indicative of the ways in which offline systems of coping and social support interact with and facilitate online disclosure.

Communication Privacy Management theory provides a framework through which to analyze social media disclosure for several reasons, including its attention to multiple aspects of disclosure, translational properties, and alignment with visibility. That is, CPM contextualizes disclosure decision making with attention to motivation, disclosure recipients or audience, reactions to disclosure, and privacy management. Previous applications to online contexts indicate that this framework can be applied successfully to social media and as such is not limited to application in dyadic disclosure contexts. Furthermore, the role of risk and benefit as an inherent negotiation within disclosure creates space in which to situate visibility as a disclosure consideration. In other words, disclosure, understood as strategic and connected to loss of privacy and control as well as to vulnerability, parallels an understanding of visibility as similarly strategic and similarly connected to loss of control and to vulnerability. This, then, provides an opportunity to consider the features and abilities afforded by a social media context more fully through the lens of visibility management.

In this way, sexual assault disclosure on social media is framed as largely (a) a strategic behavior, (b) informed by both social contexts, which position sexual assault as a potentially stigmatized identity, as well as social media contexts, which make available unique abilities and tools, and (c) associated with risks and vulnerabilities (as well as benefits), which (d) that may be navigated or tempered through visibility management. That visibility is tied additionally to power further grounds this analysis and takes on additional significance in the context of sexual assault, which is, as defined in Chapter 1, ultimately a crime of power and control.

## Research Questions

**RQ1:** What are the reported motivations and goals of sexual assault survivors who choose to disclose on social media, and how do survivors make sense of their social media disclosures and what those disclosures did for them?

**RQ2:** What role(s) do sexual assault survivors report that social media context plays in sexual assault survivors' broader systems of coping and social support?

**RQ3:** What technological characteristics or factors particular to different social media platforms, such as visibility, inform sexual assault survivors' decisions to disclose on social media?

**RQ4:** What are the characteristics of the networks of users engaging with sexual assault disclosures on social media (including their social network size and density or connectedness)?

### Chapter 3: Social Media Landscape and Social Network Analysis

As discussed in Chapter 2, social media present complex contexts for disclosure and introduce characteristics, such as “masspersonal” communication (O’Sullivan & Carr, 2018), that distinguish platforms from face-to-face disclosure contexts. These characteristics provide a common ground across which to consider platforms, though the features, policies, and user perceptions belonging to each platform shape the perceived utilities, audiences, and abilities of each platform in important ways. This chapter draws on usage statistics and the particularities of each platform to illustrate the social media landscape centered in this project. Qualitative insights from interview participants presented in Chapter 5 expand on these particularities and contribute to user understandings of platform abilities (in regards to disclosure), audiences, and features associated with managing both.

Additionally, I present the results of social network analyses of hashtags on Twitter as a means for visualizing the public networks that emerge around hashtagged disclosures of sexual assault. Appendix B: Orientation and Methods details procedures for identifying and scraping hashtags. Results suggest that many of the tags included in scraping (i.e., #Rape, #SurvivorLoveLetter) are used in connection to disclosure, although disclosive tweets comprise a small fraction of tweets using the selected tags. Tentatively, identity-oriented tags (e.g., #SexualAssaultSurvivor) appear connected to disclosure more often than do descriptive (e.g., #SexualAssault) and advocacy-oriented tags (e.g., #SupportSurvivors). Among disclosive tweets, many received little to no visible engagement, appearing as “isolates” in the returned networks. On its face, this finding suggests that hashtagged disclosures do not necessarily spark conversation and that visibility does not necessarily equate to engagement. Qualitative findings presented in the following chapters however, indicate that survivors receive substantial response

to visible disclosures, including via private messages, which suggests that the impact of visible disclosures goes beyond that which can be ascertained through engagement such as retweets and “likes.”

Results presented in this chapter respond to RQ4 by detailing characteristics of hashtag networks and the prevalence of disclosive content within these networks. As indicated, these networks are partial at best, as they capture only direct responses to hashtagged, disclosive content, and not alternative response channels, such as private messages (e.g., direct messages or “DMs”), other social media platforms, and non-social media communicative channels (e.g., email, texting, face-to-face). As such, insights from qualitative participant interviews contribute valuable nuance to quantitative social network analysis findings. Previous mixed-methods investigations of sexual assault disclosure, such as Dworkin, Pittenger, and Allen’s (2016) work, have drawn on social network analysis to identify participants for qualitative interviews, though have focused on offline networks and disclosure. By tracing and analyzing online disclosure networks through social network analysis and participant interviews, this project utilizes a novel approach to sketch disclosure networks with a nuance that would not be discernable from either quantitative or qualitative methods alone (Howard, 2002).

### **Social Media Introduction**

According to Pew Research Center poll results, a majority of U.S. adults at least occasionally use a social media site. Their data extrapolate from telephone interviews conducted with a national sample of 2,002 U.S. adults (i.e., at least 18 years of age at time of polling), roughly 1,785 of whom reported being Internet users (the 2018 poll asks about social media use both online and through cellphone or app) (Smith & Anderson, 2018). Results from this

representative sample, coupled with a briefer 2019 “update” (Perrin & Anderson, 2019), provide a reasonable understanding of current social media usage within the U.S.

Although Twitter, Instagram, and Tumblr represent moderately popular social media platforms, Facebook and YouTube are by far the most used, with an estimated 68-69% and 73% of U.S. adults reportedly engaging with these respective platforms (Perrin & Anderson, 2019; Smith & Anderson, 2018). Many adults engage with multiple platforms, as an estimated 73% of U.S. adults use more than one social media platform (Smith & Anderson, 2018). Social media are especially popular with younger adults, however, with an estimated 88% of 18-29 year-olds using at least one form of social media (Smith & Anderson, 2018). Reciprocity across platforms is also substantial. For instance, 73% of Twitter users also use Instagram (and 50% of Instagram users also use Twitter); 90% of Twitter users also use Facebook (and 32% of Facebook users also use Twitter); and 91% of Instagram users also use Facebook (and 47% of Facebook users also use Instagram) (Smith & Anderson, 2018).

Cross-integration of platforms may shed light on use of multiple platforms. For instance, YouTube videos are easily shareable on Twitter, Facebook, Tumblr, and Reddit. Similarly, Instagram (acquired by Facebook in 2012) facilitates posting user-uploaded content to Facebook, Twitter, and Tumblr. This interconnectedness has implications for audience and privacy, as users potentially have access to a much broader audience for content posted across platforms, may have significant overlap in audience (e.g., Facebook friends and Instagram followers are similar), or they may strategically post content and maintain connections to shape unique audiences across platforms. Younger social media users, in particular, may engage in such practices or be attuned to such concerns, as data suggest median users aged 18-29 routinely use four social media

platforms compared to three platforms by 30-49 year-old users, and two by 50-64 year-old users (Smith & Anderson, 2018).

Social media are dynamic spaces, and updates to certain features may affect the control users have over their content as well as the visibility management strategies available to them. Platform updates may increase user control, as Facebook's iterative refinement of privacy settings suggest, though this control is again always partial and somewhat cursory (Thompson, 2005). Still, in the context of sexual assault disclosure, such features, combined with motivation and audience, inform where individuals disclose. Additionally, the ability to adjust privacy boundaries and control visibility to audience in light of responses to disclosure may shape individuals' decisions to continue disclosing on a particular platform or to seek another space.

Indeed, reactions to disclosure are facilitated by interactivity, a defining feature of social media. In the sites of interest to this project, interactivity is supported through three primary features: comments, private messages, and affective feedback (e.g., likes, favorites) leveraging paralinguistic digital affordances (Wohn, Carr, & Hayes, 2016). In combination with larger platform structures, including tie direction, interactivity shapes the types of networks that form on social media as well as the types of conversations that occur. The following section draws on this understanding to suggest the more prominent characteristics of social media spaces used by interview participants. By considering these characteristics in combination with user demographics of each platform, I consider the relative visibility afforded as well as the perceived utilities of each space. I further consider social media visibility in Chapters 6 and 7.

**Facebook.** Launched in 2004, Facebook originated as a means of connecting with college/university classmates, and required an academic email address to join. It has since expanded such that any individual may join, though retains shades of making geographically

proximate or other “known” offline connections (e.g., high school friends, former colleagues, extended family) digital. As mentioned, Facebook is one of the most used social media platforms, with an estimated 68% of U.S. adults using it; more specifically, 81% of adults aged 18-29 and 78% of adults 30-49 say they use Facebook, according to Pew (Smith & Anderson, 2018). Indeed, Facebook user demographics appear well distributed across economic, education, and geographic dimensions (Smith & Anderson, 2018).

Facebook connections are undirected, meaning they are reciprocated and require the consent of both the friend requester and recipient to activate. Facebook additionally requires users to provide their “real name” when building a profile; this practice affects visibility, as this identifies users and constrains their ability to leverage anonymity at this level of engagement (Haimson & Hoffman, 2016). Academics and others have suggested that the “real name” policy further marginalizes users with “non-normative” identities by enforcing a rather limited understanding of “authenticity” and how lived identity is presented online (Haimson & Hoffman, 2016); LGBTQ+ activists, for instance, have criticized the “real name” policy as perpetuating “deadnaming,” which harms and disproportionately increases the visibility and vulnerability of transgender individuals (Nichols, 2015). This is one example of how social media policy affects user visibility and how such visibility may unevenly affect user populations.

Facebook, however, affords users fairly nuanced control over the visibility of content to and from other users. That is, users may mute or block all or individual posts from being seen by specific networked others, as well as mute or block all or individual posts from specific networked others from appearing on one’s own feed. These settings may be used strategically to negotiate context collapse (i.e., multiple audiences being privy to content intended for a more narrow audience; Marwick & boyd, 2014). Affective feedback available is also somewhat more

nuanced, as “likes” have expanded to “reactions,” a set of emoticons displaying a range of emotions, allowing users greater specificity in reacting to content. Although Facebook was not included initially as a site of interest to this project, I use it here to contextualize responses from participants who recalled disclosing on the platform.

**YouTube.** Perhaps the most ubiquitous social media platform considered in this project, an estimated 73% of U.S. adults engage with YouTube (Smith & Anderson, 2018). YouTube is especially popular among adults age 18-29 (91%) and 30-49 (85%), and it skews slightly male (75% to 72% women), urban (80% to 74% suburban, 59% rural), and educated (85% college or more, to 74% some college and 65% high school or less) (Smith & Anderson, 2018).

Primarily a video-hosting site, YouTube users maintain a profile and can follow or “subscribe” to other users (directed/unreciprocated connection), “friend” other users (undirected/reciprocated connection), and comment on others’ posts. Users may also “block” others, although this prevents a blocked user from sending direct messages and commenting on one’s videos, but doesn’t prevent a blocked user from seeing the blocking user’s new content. Users, however, may control the visibility of their video content slightly by making videos public, private, or unlisted; unlisted content requires a direct link to access, as unlisted content will not appear in search returns or on the posting user’s channel. Users may provide affective feedback by clicking “thumbs up” and “thumbs down” icons and by “favoriting” a video. Content on YouTube is relatively static, in that users cannot easily repost others’ videos to their own profile or playlists, but they can embed links to other users’ videos in their own videos. This contrasts with content mobility on platforms like Twitter, Tumblr, and Facebook, which allows users to share others’ content to their own profiles. YouTube was also not included initially as a

site of interest, though I again use it here to contextualize responses from participants who utilized the platform to post disclosive video content.

**Instagram.** According to Pew data, Instagram continues to increase in popularity, with an estimated 35-37% of U.S. adults using the platform in 2018, compared to 32% in 2016 (Greenwood, Perrin, & Duggan, 2016; Perrin & Anderson, 2019; Smith & Anderson, 2018b). Currently, Instagram users skew female (39% to 30% male), younger (71% age 18-24, compared to 54% age 25-29 and 40% age 30-49), urban (42% to 34% urban and 25% rural), and educated (42% college or more, 36% some college, and 29% high school or less) (Smith & Anderson, 2018).

Although acquired by Facebook in 2012, Instagram does not share a “real name” policy and instead allows users to customize usernames. Instagram posts are based around images to which users may add captions and/or hashtags and tag other Instagram users. Connections on Instagram are directed and unreciprocated, and content posted by followed users appears on a feed; more recently, in 2016, Instagram introduced “stories,” a supplementary feed for videos, livestreamed content, text, images, and music available only for 24 hours after posting (“Introducing Instagram stories,” 2016). Content appearing on one’s feed is not presented chronologically but instead ordered by an algorithm that, despite clarification, promotes certain content over others somewhat opaquely (Constine, 2018). Content also differs in mobility from other platforms, as sharing content across profiles is less feasible. Users cannot share a post from another user, but they may be able to post another user’s content to their story (doing so automatically attributes the shared content to the original poster). The ability to do so depends on the content creator’s privacy settings; if the creator has a private profile, their content cannot be

shared to another user's stories. The ability to share content, however, is made available by third party apps and other means (e.g., screenshots) not specifically supported by Instagram.

Hashtags are searchable and widely used on Instagram. Users can add up to 30 hashtags to a single post, each of which will return the tagged content in search results. Users enter hashtags into a caption field (which may also include a text caption), or into a comment following posting; the latter method allows hashtags to still be searchable, but they do not appear to other users immediately as comments are hidden until clicked on. As such, users may adjust the visibility of hashtags. Users may comment on and/or "like" both their own and other users' content.

**Tumblr.** Tumblr's classification as a social media site (as opposed to a blog platform) is somewhat inconsistent, and thus data comparing it to other platforms are limited. In 2015, an estimated 10% of Internet users used Tumblr (Duggan, 2015). At the time, the platform skewed slightly female, with 11% female users compared to 10% male users; urban (16%), compared to 8% suburban and 3% rural; under 30 years of age (20%), compared to 11% aged 30-49 and 7% 50 years old or above; and some college or less (13%, 10% respectively), compared to 9% with college graduates (Duggan, 2015). Tumblr users maintain a blog comprised of their own content or content "reblogged" by other users, which includes text, photo, link, audio, video, chat, and/or "quote" varieties of posts. Users may also "like" posts, similar to on Facebook or Instagram; "likes" are tracked on each post as part of "notes," which includes likes as well as comments on a piece of content. Connections are directed/unreciprocated, and content from "followed" users is curated into a "dashboard" or scrollable chronology of content.

The platform is known for use and generation of "reaction GIFs" that "communicate emotions ("feels"), reactions, and everyday events" and memes (Bourlai & Herring, 2014, p.

171). Additionally, hashtags on Tumblr differ slightly from hashtags on other social media sites, as Tumblr hashtags may contain spaces and punctuation without interrupting the tag as a unit. That is, on Twitter, tags must be uninterrupted—“#WhyIStayed”—to be searchable, whereas on Tumblr, “#Why did I stay?” is also searchable. Additionally, when content is reblogged, tags entered in the “tags” field by the original poster are not also reblogged. This affords Tumblr users an additional space for captions or explanation that is potentially less visible than the rest of their content.

**Twitter.** Perhaps a more public social media than others (Tufekci, 2014), Twitter is used by an estimated 22% of U.S. adults (Perrin & Anderson, 2019). This estimate marks a slight decrease in popularity, compared to 24% earlier in 2018 (Smith & Anderson, 2018) and 21% in 2016 (Greenwood, Perrin, & Duggan, 2016). Twitter users tend to skew urban (29%), educated (25% with some college, 32% college or more), and younger (45% under 25 years of age) (Smith & Anderson, 2018).

Twitter is a directed network, meaning connections are unreciprocated and users can easily share content posted by others. On Twitter, a unit of content is a “tweet,” and a defining feature of the platform is that tweets are limited to 280 characters in length. Tweets may be “threaded,” however, such that longer posts may be constructed out of strings of tweets. Public content may be “retweeted” by other users, with or without comment, which allows content to be reposted to another user’s timeline and visible to their followers. Content may also be “favorited,” similar to Tumblr, which functions as affective feedback to the original poster as well as allows the “favorite” to return to favorited content easily; such tweets are not reposted to one’s timeline. Hashtags are widely-used and searchable on Twitter, and the platform was one of the first to adopt hashtags as a searchable and connective feature.

## Social Network Analysis

Hashtags provide an object through which to tap into and trace networks engaged with a particular topic. Networks mapped using hashtags are snapshots, rather than comprehensive, given the limitations of this method of data collection as well as the fact that social media conversations are dynamic and constantly in-flux. As suggested in Appendix B: Orientation and Methods in connection with hashtag selection, tags may reflect orientations to a topic and by extension motivations informing disclosure attached to that topic (cf. Berry et al., 2017). I include a hashtag analysis in this project to (a) demonstrate that there are social media users and user networks engaging in disclosure with these tags, (b) identify disclosure content within hashtag networks, and (c) purposively sample potential interview participants.

Twenty-three hashtags with slightly different emphases were selected initially for inclusion. These emphases—personal, topical, advocacy/other-oriented—were used in an effort to draw a broader sampling of the conversations potentially arising around sexual assault, and with a nod to touching on a broad array of motivations (i.e., challenging stigma, self-clarification). These tags were chosen due to topical relevance and previous association with sexual assault. Of these 23 hashtags, seven tags returned no results with repeated sampling attempts: #ItsNeveraVictimsFault, #MaleSexualAssault, #RapeStory, #SexualAbuse, #TWRapeVictim, #TWSexualAssault, and #TWSexualAssaultVictim. Additionally, hashtags are available to all Twitter users, and, as such, single tags may be used in reference to a host of issues or perspectives on an issue (Kosenko, Winderman, & Pugh, 2019). This breadth of issue appeared especially prominent with advocacy-related hashtags, such as #BreaktheSilence and #YouAreNotAlone, which returned tweets addressing multiple stigmatized identities and provided reassurance for situations beyond sexual assault, respectively.

In the following sections, I summarize results from the hashtag analysis using NodeXL. I include the total number of vertices (nodes or users), unique edges (connections between nodes), and duplicate edges (reiterated connections between nodes) to provide a sense of size and activity of each returned network. Additionally, given my interest in network-level characteristics, as opposed to the role of a particular user within a network, I draw on measures of network density as an indicator of network interconnectivity (Kadushin, 2012); modularity as an indicator of interconnectivity between clusters within the network (Himmelboim et al., 2017); and isolates, or “individuals with no ties to others in the network,” as further indicative of interactivity and connections within the network (Himmelboim, Smith, Rainie, Shneiderman, & Espina, 2017, p. 4).

Density is calculated as the ratio of realized connections between users to total connections possible, and thus returns values between 0 and 1, in which higher values indicate higher-density networks (Kadushin, 2012). Modularity, calculated using the algorithm included in NodeXL software, similarly returns values between 0 and 1, in which higher values indicate less interconnected clusters within networks (Himmelboim et al., 2017). In considering isolates, I draw on “self-loops” as indicated in NodeXL to identify users disconnected from others in the hashtag network. Himmelboim et al. (2017) define isolates in Twitter hashtag networks as “users who tweeted about a given topic but did not mention or replied [sic] to others who tweeted about the topic and were not mentioned or replied to by others in that topic-network” (p. 6). Importantly, this understanding defines isolates in relation to others within the hashtag network, such that interaction with users not similarly using the hashtag is not considered. NodeXL includes data on the number of likes and retweets a tweet has received at the time of scraping, and I include this as indicative of interaction with disclosive hashtagged content more broadly.

In combination, these measures carry implications for information flow within a network. That is, high-density and low-modularity networks are rather unified and facilitate easy flow of information between network members; in contrast, low-density and high-modularity networks may be characterized by slow flow of information (Himmelboim et al., 2017). The proportion of isolates present in a low-density network aids in further distinguishing between network structure types (Smith, Rainie, Shneiderman, & Himmelboim, 2014). I draw on Himmelboim et al.'s (2017) method of determining network structure using these measures to further describe resultant networks.

I present metrics for the entire network and position disclosive content within these frames in an effort to contextualize engagement with these hashtags more broadly as well as to more specifically situate disclosive content within this context. I coded tweets based on whether they clearly identified the poster as a survivor of sexual assault or rape and constituted disclosure. Tweets considered disclosive include either declarative statements (e.g., "I was raped #Rape") or statements that align the poster with survivorship (e.g., "Four years ago I was almost broken, but now I'm strong #SexualAssaultSurvivor"). In some instances, tweets using multiple tags that specified sexual assault were also considered disclosive (e.g., "It's a new day! #SexualAssault #ImaSurvivor #SupportSurvivors"). Because tweets can include additional media or quote existing tweets, I viewed posted content whenever possible to determine if an ambiguous statement was disclosive or not. Tweets that shared news articles, expressed support for survivors, or condemned sexual assault but did not additionally and clearly identify the poster as a survivor were not considered disclosive (e.g., "Cosby goes to trial: [link to news story] #BelieveSurvivors," "Make sure you get consent every step of the way! #NoMeansNo"). For

privacy purposes, no identifying information about network constituents, including usernames, is reported here. Appendix B: SNA Results includes a table of these results.

### **Identity-oriented Tags**

**#MaleSexualAssault.** With a total of four (4) vertices and nine (9) unique edges, this tag returned one of the smallest but also highest density networks. Density was calculated as 0.75 and modularity as 0.22. Given the low number of users engaged in this network, these values indicate a network that is relatively interconnected. In terms of content, this network represents a situation in which one user tagged three users in a tweet encouraging retweets. The tweet content was not itself disclosive, but rather encouraging disclosure to the original tweeter for a professional project. As such, user disclosure was not visible in this network.

**#RapeSurvivor.** Although containing more disclosive content, the #RapeSurvivor tag reflects a less dense and more modular network. The returned network contained 25 vertices, 20 unique edges (6 duplicate edges), and 13 isolates. Density was calculated as 0.02 and modularity as 0.573. Seven tweets were coded as disclosive of personal experience(s) with sexual violence, one of which appeared in connection to a recent news event, and all seven represented isolates. That is, disclosive tweets received little to no engagement (the most engaged disclosive tweet received two favorites).

**#RapeVictim.** In contrast to #RapeSurvivor, the #RapeVictim tag returned a slightly larger, less dense, and more modular network. The returned network contained 33 vertices, 25 unique edges (4 duplicate edges), and 16 isolates. Density was calculated as 0.012 and modularity as 0.645. As such, the #RapeVictim network appears more dispersed and less connected than #RapeSurvivor. Additionally, tagged tweets often focused on news stories, rather than disclosure. Only one tweet contained disclosive content, though received some engagement

(three favorites, four retweets). This level of engagement may be due to the tweeter's status as a media figure.

**#SexualAssaultSurvivor.** This network contained 11 vertices, 11 unique edges (three duplicate edges), and 12 isolates. As this high proportion of isolates suggest, #SexualAssautSurvivor represents a low-density network, with density calculated at 0.018. Modularity was calculated at 0.459. The network contained six tweets coded as disclosive, from five unique users. Of these, one tweet received three retweets with the hashtag, and the original poster engaged in mutual retweeting of another tweet included in the network. That is, this interactivity between two users accounts in part for the relatively moderate level of modularity observable in this network. Aside from this mutual retweeting, however, the remaining disclosive posts represent self-loops.

**#SexualAssaultVictim.** This tag returned a network of two vertices, with one unique edge (two duplicate edges) and two isolates. Density was thus calculated at 0.5 and modularity at 0.25. The network represents a user tweeting and retweeting a single post, and one retweet by another user. The post in question was not coded as disclosive.

Overall, individual or identity-focused tags returned small, generally low-density networks. Disclosive content was apparent in three of the five considered networks, and represented a larger proportion of content connected to tags that position sexual assault in terms of survivorship, rather than victimhood. In Chapter 5 I present participant perceptions of “victim” and “survivor” terms, and suggest that the relatively greater alignment of disclosure with “survivor” terms is in keeping with a differentiation that positions survivor as one who has processed assault and reached a certain point in recovery.

## Descriptive Tags

**#Rape.** This tag returned a network of 770 vertices, 807 unique edges (181 duplicate edges), and 274 isolates. A very low density, calculated at 0.001, and a rather high modularity of 0.753 characterize this network. Given the breadth of this topical tag, it is perhaps unsurprising that the resultant network indicates myriad attitudes toward rape. For instance, pornographic material tagged #Rape appeared common, as did material leveraging rape to promote Islamophobic attitudes. News articles about advances in date rape drug-detection technology also appeared prominent. Disclosive content was non-existent in this network, save for a single self-loop tweet that could be interpreted as a partial or subtle disclosure.

**#SexualAssault.** Another dispersed network, this tag returned 1317 vertices, 1410 unique edges (643 duplicate edges), and 661 isolates. Density was calculated at 0.0007 and modularity at 0.642. Although the least dense of the networks considered here, the moderate level of modularity coupled with a relatively high proportion of duplicate edges suggest that users are repeatedly engaging with the tag and/or others in the network. Of the included tweets, 15 were coded as disclosive of personal sexual assault experience. Again, most disclosive tweets were isolates with low levels of engagement, as seven tweets received no favorites or retweets, and another six received fewer than nine favorites and retweets. Two disclosive tweets stand out for their relative engagement: One tweet responded to a prominent women's organization and received 37 favorites and 15 retweets, whereas the other received 58 favorites and 12 retweets. The account associated with the latter was suspended before I was able to confirm that media associated with the tweet were indeed disclosive (though text and tags indicated so). It is thus possible that this tweet was miscoded.

**#TWRape.** This tag returned a network of 2 vertices, 2 unique edges (0 duplicate edges), and 1 isolate. Density was calculated at 0.5 and modularity at 0.1875. None of the included tweets were coded as disclosive, but rather shared a news article about sexual assault.

It is worth reiterating that three of the hashtags originally considered in this category (**#RapeStory**, **#SexualAbuse**, **#TWSexualAssault**) repeatedly returned no results. Of those presented here, **#SexualAssault** was the only network that appeared conducive to disclosure. Even so, disclosive tweets constituted a small percentage of content included in the network (approx. 0.73%), and most disclosive tweets represent isolates or have little engagement, with one notable exception.

### **Advocacy-oriented Tags**

**#BelieveSurvivors.** Although not specific to sexual assault survivors per se, the phrase “believe survivors” is often used in connection with sexual assault advocacy. That said, the returned network did not include any instances of personally disclosive content. The tag returned a network of 42 vertices, 44 unique edges (8 duplicate edges), and 13 isolates. Density was calculated at 0.023 and modularity at 0.669. At the time of collection, the Bill Cosby trial had just begun, and a large proportion of tweets engaged with trial news.

**#BreaktheSilence.** Again not specific to sexual assault, **#BreaktheSilence** was included to touch on the stigma associated with sexual assault. The returned network confirmed an association between the tag and stigmatized identities, though the range of reflected identities goes far beyond sexual assault. Tweets touched on stigma surrounding menstruation, child abuse (not disclosive), sickle cell anemia, pregnancy loss, mental health more broadly, global warming, substance abuse and addiction, and a musical album release. The network characteristics reflect this topic diversity. The tag returned 446 vertices, 474 unique edges (279 duplicate edges), and

197 isolates. Density was calculated at 0.002 and modularity at 0.605. One tweet indicated sexual assault disclosure and included a link to the user's content on another social media platform.

**#NoMeansNo.** Associated with the issue of consent more broadly, the #NoMeansNo network appears similarly low-density and relatively modular. The tag returned 594 vertices, 598 unique edges (77 duplicate edges), and 174 isolates. Density was calculated at 0.001 and modularity at 0.777. Topics included in tagged tweets touched on land use and mining rights, UK politics, sexual harassment, and a topical incident at the time of scraping involving Jerry Seinfeld refusing a hug from musician Kesha. In one instance, a disclosive but untagged tweet was retweeted by another user, and in another a user retweeted a disclosive tweet created two years prior. In the latter case, the tweet had gathered 61 favorites and 44 retweets over the course of two years.

**#NotOkay.** Similar to #NoMeansNo, #NotOkay speaks to a broader consent issue beyond sexual assault. In October 2016, however, writer Kelly Oxford recreated the tag in response to U.S. presidential candidate Donald Trump's comments about complicity in sexual assault, and (in a similar vein as #MeToo) invited women to "share their first experiences of sexual assault to validate the many forms of sexual violence against women" (Maas et al., 2018, p. 3). As such, the tag became associated specifically with sexual assault prior to collection for this project. The resultant network contained 462 vertices, 382 unique edges (61 duplicate edges), and 182 isolates. Density was calculated at 0.001 and modularity at 0.7128. Of the returned tweets, five were coded as disclosive, although three of these pertained more specifically to incidents of sexual harassment, rather than assault. Of the remaining two, one promoted a personal story on another platform, and the other represented a contribution to

Oxford's campaign (i.e., protesting Trump's behavior). Despite being connected to a network of similarly disclosive and activist-oriented tweets theoretically, this tweet received no engagement. This is perhaps indicative of how quickly viral issue hashtags may cycle and conversation moves to a different corner of the Internet.

**#SupportSurvivors.** This tag returned 112 vertices, 102 unique edges (41 duplicate edges), and 42 isolates. Density was calculated at 0.0076 and modularity at 0.6225. None of the included tweets were coded as personally disclosive. What appears notable about this network, however, is that survivor-serving organizations, such as Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network (RAINN), National Sexual Violence Resource Center (NSVRC), and local organizations within the U.S., were engaging with this tag. This further orients the tag to specifically sexual assault survivors and also importantly identifies a tag used by resource organizations.

**#SurvivorLoveLetter.** In contrast, the tag #SurvivorLoveLetter was launched on February 14, 2012, specifically for survivors of sexual assault, despite a lack of specificity in the tag ("Survivor Love Letter," 2018). This tag returned a network of six vertices, eight unique edges (0 duplicate edges), and four isolates. Density was calculated at 0.1333 and modularity at 0.398. Two tweets were coded as personally disclosive, including one retweeted by the tag's founder. That #SurvivorLoveLetter is associated with Valentine's Day may provide an explanation for the low level of engagement with this tag, as scraping occurred in July.

**#WeHealTogether.** This tag returned only one tweet after repeated sampling attempts, and as such network measurements are not calculable. That said, the one tweet returned was coded as disclosive and was retweeted once by the original poster.

**#YouAreNotAlone.** Similar to #BelieveSurvivors and #BreaktheSilence, content tagged #YouAreNotAlone addressed myriad identities and stigmas, including mental health and suicide.

This tag also appeared attached to messages of religious faith. The returned network included 1302 vertices, 1386 unique edges (294 duplicate edges), and 454 isolates. Density was calculated at 0.00068 and modularity at 0.7362. One tweet appeared to disclose personal experience with child sexual abuse, and another referenced sexual assault; aside from these, no other content explicitly engaged with sexual assault.

### **Insights and Limitations**

These networks provide insight into the nature of hashtagged disclosure of sexual assault victimization, including the utility of certain hashtags for disclosure, the role of disclosive tweets within networks, and a baseline level of engagement with disclosive tweets. In terms of utility, tags that are more descriptive and indicative of survivorship appeared more often in connection to disclosive content. That is, identity-oriented tags appeared attached to disclosure more often than descriptive and advocacy-oriented tags (with the exception of #SexualAssault).

Furthermore, more specific tags, such as #MaleSexualAssault, and survivor-oriented tags such as #SexualAssaultSurvivor and #RapeSurvivor, appeared in connection with disclosure more often than victim-oriented tags (#RapeVictim, #SexualAssaultVictim). In contrast, descriptive tags appeared less utilized (three tags selected from this category did not return results) for disclosure, with the exception of #SexualAssault.

The #SexualAssault network was one of the largest considered, and as such its association with disclosure could be attributed to frequency of use as well as topical specificity. #YouAreNotAlone, for instance, similarly returned an expansive network, but included comparatively fewer disclosive tweets and appeared less specific to sexual assault given the range of topics attached to it. Advocacy-oriented tags by nature appear less specific to sexual assault, as such tags tend to address issues, such as stigma and consent, relevant to a number of

identities and situations. Tags such as #SupportSurvivors, however, appear to be used by sexual assault advocacy and resource organizations, which may interrupt some disclosures. That is, organizations' use of masspersonal communicative channels such as Twitter may negate the need for survivors seeking support to disclose and self-identify in order to benefit from such resources. While this specific question regarding the relationship between visible advocacy/support and disclosure as help-seeking is beyond the scope of this project, it begins to suggest the ways in which others may leverage the visibility afforded by hashtags to provide resources without necessitating survivors to request resources via disclosure.

Regarding the role of and interaction with disclosive tweets in hashtag networks, it is both significant and not surprising that the majority of disclosive tweets were isolates and/or received low levels of engagement. By low levels of engagement, I refer both to the number of likes and retweets associated with disclosive tweets as well as the number of comments or replies on such tweets. Digital content understood to be personal or disclosive in nature has been associated previously with low levels of engagement. In the context of blogging platform LiveJournal, for instance, Kendall (2007) notes that, "LiveJournal posts are essentially broadcasts" and often intend "more declamation than conversation." Alrajebah, Carr, and Tiropanis (2018) observed a similar phenomenon on Tumblr, in that users favorite and reblog posts but are less likely to leave comments. That said, social media users' intentions inform the importance assigned to and satisfaction gleaned from audience feedback (French & Bazarova, 2017) and potentially shape if and where sexual assault survivors disclose again.

In Chapter 4, I present insights from participant interviews regarding audience, which suggest that when users had friends or known connections in mind, low engagement was sometimes perceived as disappointing. In cases where the audience constituted invisible similar

others or survivors at large, however, affective feedback and interactivity were not necessarily granted similar levels of importance. I suggest, then, that disclosive, hashtagged isolates such as those observed in the above networks, serve an important function and capitalize on the searchability, rather than the connectivity, afforded by hashtags (Zappavigna, 2018). Namely, such isolates function as beacons rather than bridges in which a disclosive post is intentionally made searchable and thus does not necessarily require connection to similarly tagged content. Furthermore, the “success” of a beacon disclosure is not necessarily determined by, nor discernable from, publicly visible feedback from one’s audience. I expand on the particular relationship between motivation and audience that further informs this functionality in Chapter 4 and more fully explore this concept in Chapter 6.

As discussed in Appendix B: Orientation and Methods, this analysis is limited in several ways. It bears repeating that these networks represent snapshots and do not capture the reality of hashtag use as ongoing and spanning multiple platforms. Furthermore, these hashtags are not comprehensive of the tags attached to sexual assault disclosure, and despite appearing associated with disclosure during tag selection, may not ultimately represent the most popular sexual assault hashtags at the time. The date range of scraped tweets was convenient in terms of supporting interview recruitment, though undoubtedly further shaped resultant networks. For instance, #NotOkay went viral as a disclosive hashtag in October 2016, though this moment was not readily apparent from results from July 2017. Similarly, as noted above, #SurvivorLoveLetter may be more active in February given its association with Valentine’s Day.

### **Chapter 4: Motivations, Audiences, and Consequences of Disclosure**

As discussed in Chapter 2, disclosure is a strategic and motivated behavior (Omarzu, 2000). Exploring participants' motivations for disclosure on social media sheds light on not only sexual assault survivors' intended outcomes of disclosure, but also the ways in which audience, anticipated response, and offline support are intricately intertwined. It is thus difficult to fully isolate motivational effects on choices surrounding disclosure, and yet outlining categories of motivation is useful in further understanding what makes social media spaces in particular attractive for disclosure.

Participants reported myriad motivations for disclosure, including (a) self-expression, (b) self-clarification/updating others, (c) seeking social support, (d) raising awareness, (e) educating and challenging stigma, and (f) seeking justice/holding perpetrators accountable. The salience of these categories lends further support to similar motivational categories identified in extant scholarship (Ahrens et al., 2007; Andalibi & Forte, 2018a; Bogen et al., 2018; O'Neill, 2018). Holding perpetrators of violence accountable is a motivation that is particularly salient in the context of sexual assault (though is not unique to it) and was referenced by participants. This motivation goes beyond the categories described by Derlega and Grzelak (1979) used to inform CPM (Petronio, 2002), though it has been addressed by feminist criminology scholars such as Powell (2015) who frames the practice of "outing" a perpetrator as an informal justice tactic. As related in this chapter, participants spoke to perpetrators both directly and indirectly, leveraging a host of visibility management strategies in doing so. I discuss this motivation in more depth later in this chapter and associated visibility management strategies in Chapter 5.

Participants also reported multiple motivations, sometimes held simultaneously (e.g., self-expression and supporting other survivors), as well as shifting motivations. This finding

lends support to Ahrens et al.'s (2007) suggestion that sexual assault survivors manage multiple disclosure motivations, and further underscores the importance of understanding disclosure motivations beyond social support seeking. That is, whereas support seeking was referenced, more participants cited a motivation to support other survivors. In some cases, these two motivations were held simultaneously, as in the example of participant 14, who turned to social media to create and share the resources they needed for their own recovery. Several participants noted that, aside from other-focused motivations (such as supporting others), they perceived a personal benefit associated with disclosure. In other words, perceiving disclosure as also aiding them in some way—or alternatively, if they perceived disclosure as too personally risky—constituted an important precursor to disclosure. As noted in Chapter 2, supporting others through disclosure and resource provision (e.g., validating others' experiences, sharing information) may positively impact well-being and thus benefit the support provider (Brown et al., 2003; Liang et al., 2001; Weinstein & Ryan, 2010).

Audience considerations are also informed by motivation in that participants reported that to whom they disclosed was influenced by what they sought to accomplish (i.e., their motivation for disclosure). For instance, a motivation to support other survivors generally accompanies a target audience of survivors. Participants reported both very specific target audiences and rather amorphous audiences, sometimes better defined by considering who was not the audience (see Participant 11 below). Similar to motivations, participants sometimes reported targeting multiple audiences simultaneously, as in speaking to both survivors as well as survivors' support networks of friends and family. Social media, as defined in the previous chapter, is characterized by masspersonal communication, in which personalized messages may be broadcast to many recipients. In examining participants' understandings of audience, the reality of masspersonal

communication (of reaching many) begins to come into focus. Namely, the consequences of visible disclosure become clearer as do strategies for managing audience and visibility (discussed in Chapter 5).

Participants reported consequences, framed here as reactions, to disclosure, ranging from reciprocated disclosure and affirmation/validation to disappointment, shaming, and open hostility. This is not surprising, though nonetheless supports scholarship detailing reactions to disclosure and suggesting that negative responses may be especially impactful on survivors of sexual assault (Ullman, 1996c; Ullman, 1999). Findings from this project, however, extend this thinking by suggesting that from whom such reactions come may also influence the impact of responses. That is, several participants reported receiving negative responses from non-networked others (i.e., strangers online) but finding these less upsetting than negative reactions from friends and family. This is in keeping with CPM, as already-networked known others have been brought into a privacy boundary surrounding information shared on a social media platform effectively; negative reactions framed thusly constitute boundary turbulence and may require boundary adjustment (Petronio, 2002). This is not to suggest that negative responses from non-networked others are not impactful; indeed, participants confirmed that they are. Rather, survivors may anticipate these reactions, given social media's reputation as a space frequently and openly hostile to women. In other words, negative reactions from others may be somewhat expected.

In presenting participants' insights regarding disclosure motivation, audience, and consequence, I aim to both contribute nuance to understandings of online disclosure of stigmatized identities as well as begin to sketch the connections and influences across these aspects of disclosure decision-making. I isolate motivation, audience, and responses to disclosure

here as understanding sexual assault survivors' decision-making around to whom to disclose and why are foundational to further understanding similar decision-making around where to disclose and how to do so. In exploring these topics, insights as to when disclosure occurs and with what results additionally come to light, and are also considered in this chapter. I do so to further underscore disclosure as a dynamic, ongoing process, in which the components of motivation, imagined audience, and anticipated response are always present (even if not prioritized), as well as to highlight especially impactful responses to disclosure and suggest their effects on subsequent disclosures. As such, insights presented in this chapter respond to RQ1 by detailing reported motivations of disclosure and reflecting on reactions and consequences to disclosure.

### **Motivations**

According to CPM, disclosure motivations are informed by risk-benefit ratio criteria, which consider the dialectical tensions between secrecy and disclosure as well as benefit and vulnerability (Petronio, 2002). Petronio outlines several potential benefits of disclosure (broadly-defined, as opposed to regarding a particular topic or type of disclosure), including expression, self-clarification, social validation, relationship development, and social control. Associated risks pertain to consequences of "opening privacy boundaries" through disclosure (Petronio, 2002, p. 66), and are largely variations on "increased vulnerability," such as exposing weakness, having one's beliefs disconfirmed, hampering personal growth, and being considered manipulative by those one is trying to influence. The level of risk experienced is particular to and varies according to the individual, rather than the nature of the event, meaning the stakes of disclosure are individually defined, as opposed to all disclosures related to sexual assault carrying a similar risk level (Petronio, 2002).

One of several criteria informing privacy rule development, risk-benefit ratio is especially pertinent to this context, given the assumption of an invisible audience able to interact with disclosive content. That is, disclosure risks relate to vulnerability, yet it may be more accurate to suggest that disclosure risks relate to the consequences of vulnerability. Considering the benefit types outlined by Petronio (2002) aids in sketching a set of motivation factors that influence an individual's decision to disclose, while considering such motivations in conjunction with imagined audiences furthers understanding of disclosure risks and benefits in online contexts and how such considerations differ from offline, dyadic contexts.

Andalibi and Forte (2018a) offer more specific motivation categories in proposing six “decision factors” that inform pregnancy loss disclosure on identified social network sites (e.g., Facebook). Although pregnancy loss differs in significant ways from sexual assault, both experiences constitute concealable stigmas, as defined in Chapter 2. As a result, these factors provide a useful framework through which to further structure the disclosure motivations held by sexual assault survivors. The factors Andalibi and Forte (2018a) lay out are self-related, which speak to personal needs for remembrance, narrative control, and healing; audience-related, which speak to preventive disclosure and controlling interactions about the topic; societal, or disclosure as activism, challenging stigma, and increasing awareness; network-level, which include “disclosures to one's network that are motivated by observing others' disclosures” as well as “being a source of support for current, past, and future invisible similar others in one's network” (p. 5); platform and affordance-focused, including disclosures informed by anonymity and broadcastability; and temporal, or disclosures made in consideration of a timeline, such as in regards to one's expected due date, for instance.

I draw on Andalibi and Forte's (2018a) categories to aid in organizing the disclosure motivations expressed by participant sexual assault survivors, and point to motivations that pursue the disclosure benefits outlined by Petronio (2002). That said, in contrast to Andalibi and Forte, I understand platform and affordance considerations as not motivations, per se, but as informing one's willingness to disclose and where. As the way in which social media features and affordances act upon privacy boundaries is of particular interest to this project, I bracket this category and expand on the influence of platforms, features, and affordances in the following chapter. Additionally, temporality as understood by Andalibi and Forte (2018a) differs significantly between contexts of pregnancy loss and sexual assault; while temporality may exert pressure on women or couples experiencing pregnancy loss to disclose before an expected due date, for instance, this pressure was not apparent in the accounts of sexual assault survivor participants. That said, temporality does appear influential in this context, albeit in terms of informing at what point in one's recovery process to disclose. The influence of temporality on disclosure is thus discussed in relation to the interplay between online disclosure and offline support/coping systems.

The following sections explore motivation categories, informed by Andalibi and Forte's (2018a) framework, and provide participant insights into the motivations and goals influential in sexual assault disclosure decision-making.

**Self-focused motivations.** Motivations in this category emphasize personal goals for disclosure, minimizing the role of a specified, imagined audience for that disclosure. Self-focused motivations speak to disclosure as satisfying personal needs for acknowledging trauma, sharing as part of healing, and releasing grief from the body (Andalibi & Forte, 2018a). In the context of sexual assault, these particular motivations appeared salient, and also spoke to the

expression benefit category outlined by Petronio (2002). Additionally, participants demonstrated a “personal record” variant of self-focused motivations, which uniquely leverages social media affordances (Vitak & Kim, 2014).

Some participants expressed a visceral feeling of needing to release the story of their sexual assault from their bodies to someone. As Participant 3 explained, “I really feel like it was that I had sat with it for so long and kind of suffered by myself for so long with it that I felt like I was going to implode.” The belief that speaking about one’s trauma would help release one from its lingering effects is further supported by a sense of relief accompanied by a vague, imagined someone receiving it. Participant 18, a musician, expanded on this idea:

I think the rape kind of lived inside me, if that makes sense, because I’d suppressed it for two years and [had] literally never spoken about it or dealt with it, and so all of that pain and all those feelings lived in me. And writing the song, and then telling my best friends, it was this domino effect of telling more and more people and getting it out, [it] just really made it feel like it was getting further away from me, and like it was getting out of my body.

In this case, disclosing on social media actually amplified the participant’s audience and also increased the perceived distance, so to speak, between the participant and their trauma.

The need to release one’s story was not limited to initial disclosures. Participants, such as 12, expressed that in especially stressful moments, such as preparing to take a perpetrator to court, this form of public release or venting was also useful. “On Instagram, a lot of what I’ve been writing lately is—my court case is coming up, so it’s just been really heavy on my brain. And it’s the only way to get it out.” Participant 12’s explanation is a reminder that recovering

from sexual assault is a lengthy and complex process, shaped by the circumstances of assault as well as decisions (e.g., whether to press charges) made in the wake of violence.

Indeed, several participants noted that their motivation to continue (beyond initial disclosure) disclosing survivorship online stemmed in some part from the personal benefits gained through posting. Participant 8 reiterated the value of emotional release through disclosure, noting, “Even if I don’t get a response from anyone, I feel like somehow I’ve expressed some of the emotional burden I feel in relation to my trauma and the recovery process by posting on social media.” That interactivity is perhaps expected but not needed distinguishes this motivation from others that appear more reliant on audience response for validation.

Participants also expressed a “personal record” motivation, as defined by Vitak and Kim (2014), which describes how social media users leverage affordances to “create a new form of self-expression” that essentially makes journaling visible (p. 465). This visibility, coupled with persistence of social media content, provided an important timeline for participant 8:

I post being grateful for certain things that a year and a half ago, I thought I would never be able to do again or handle again. And now, here I am, feeling really great. And I’ve worked really hard. And I want to acknowledge that so that when I am scrolling back through things, if I’m feeling bad, like, hey, here’s a post [from] a month ago I was feeling really good about myself. And it’s a reminder that I can get there again.

This use of social media additionally supports the importance of simply being able to tell one’s story without assigning particular weight to audience considerations or fear of audience reaction.

In other cases, the perception of a more specific audience, as I explore further later in this chapter, and perceived interactivity, facilitated self-focused motivations. For others, social media facilitated the benefit of one’s story going beyond their self. As participant 11 explained,

I feel like I owe it to my younger self to talk openly about it, because I can't confront the person who did that to me, because like I said, they're dead. It's like this story that lives inside me, so in a way there's part of me that wants to give life to it, so I can honor the girl that that happened to. Then there's another part that wants to post about it, so that I can help other people if they have been through something like that.

For participant 11, the inability to seek accountability directly from their perpetrator made a self-focused motivation for disclosure more salient; the unique masspersonal quality of social media supports the additional and simultaneously held motivation of supporting invisible. I expand on this overlap in a following section on survivor-focused motivations.

In combination, these insights suggest some ways in which social media features and affordances support self-focused motivations as well as the varying role of audience in shaping motivations and disclosure strategies. Highlighting the interactions between factors such as audience and motivation aids in understanding disclosure as an assemblage of negotiations, in which no single attribute (such as motivation) completely accounts for a decision. The following sections further explore this interplay in considering additional motivations as well as implicated audiences.

**Audience-focused motivations.** Thematically, the reported motivation of wanting to express one's story was often considered in terms of self-focused motivations, although as the above illustrates, telling one's story could also be informed by a motivation to reach a particular audience. As a result, disclosures informed by self-focused motivational factors but also implicating a particular audience also appeared similar to those in Andalibi and Forte's (2018) audience-related factors, as well as touched on Petronio's (2002) benefit categories of self-clarification, social control, and relationship development (or maintenance).

For instance, participant 6's legal case involving a perpetrator at a college gained notoriety on campus and in the local media, and thus prompted others in their college network to discuss it on social media. Aware of not only this conversation, but also misinformation circulating as a result, participant 6 turned to social media as a way to retake control over their own story:

So, I felt very bad about myself. And I felt like people didn't know what actually happened, because he was a very likable person and had lied about a lot of things that had happened. I took my social media standing and, on Facebook specifically, reposted the article and basically told my side of the story and said that he wasn't going to get away from it, away with it. And that I am pursuing legal action. The school's taking it seriously. The court is taking it seriously. And if you don't support me, that's fine. You don't have to be a part of my life. But, this is my story, and you don't have a right to talk about it without it coming from my mouth first.

Telling one's story in one's own words offers survivors a means of regaining a semblance of control over their trauma experience. In the case of participant 13, disclosing on social media was tied to updating family and friends about a hospitalization related to the consequences of sexual assault:

When I actually came out and shared the whole story, it was on Facebook and I think and then I also copied it to Twitter just to save time. I was actually admitted to the hospital for suicidal thoughts due to post-traumatic stress disorder from the sexual assault. And I just was tired of faking it and people thinking my life was fine when I was so broken. And I just wanted people to know that what you see on the outside or on social media for that matter, isn't necessarily what's going on. ... And I was in the headspace that I

needed to, as I call it, break the silence and to say, “I’m not okay, I need help, I need your support.”

Participant 13 thus acknowledged trauma, informed audience, and pursued awareness raising simultaneously through a particularly impactful disclosure made on multiple platforms.

Participant 22 also disclosed details regarding their assault and recovery experiences, and noted a motivation/desire to explain something about themselves and their behavior to friends. In so doing, they pursued self-clarification as well as relational development/maintenance:

I was speaking to my friends and hoping they would understand because it was such a sharp shift in the way I was behaving. I just...I don’t know, for the first couple of months after that happened I couldn’t focus on what anybody was saying to me. So, it was kind of a dual, like, I wanted people to hear me and understand and also, it almost felt like an apology. Like, this is why I haven’t been paying attention to you.

By offering an explanation and apology for their post-trauma behavior, participant 22 engages disclosure as relational maintenance (Krasnova et al., 2010). In dyadic contexts, disclosure is thought to facilitate relational maintenance by increasing a sense of intimacy in the relationship. Petronio (2002) cautions, however, that disclosure does not always equate neatly with intimacy. Regardless of the outcome, that participant 22 felt motivated to disclose because of a reported desire to explain behavior and (presumably) maintain communication in important relationships points to the viability of this motivation in the context of social media disclosure of sexual assault and recovery.

***Support-seeking motivations.*** Although a corpus of scholarship ties disclosure and social support seeking closely (see Chapter 2), this did not appear a prominent reported motivation on most social media platforms. That said, several participants did express support-seeking

motivations. When support was sought, it was often via more specialized platforms such as Reddit (participants 23, 24, 25, 27). Reddit differs substantially from public social media profiles in that Reddit discussion boards are focused on a particular topic, and members are primed to expect disclosures and/or requests for support or have experienced/are experiencing similar stressors for which they also seek or have sought support. On platforms such as Facebook, participants reported creating similar spaces for support through “Groups” functions and privacy settings that constrained access and visibility. I explore these spaces further as attached to survivor-focused motivations below as well as in relation to visibility management strategies in Chapter 6.

Additionally, participants who were motivated, reportedly, by a need for support discussed seeking support elsewhere before turning online. As participant 14 noted, “I wasn’t really getting the support I needed locally. So basically, for the last few months I’ve really been using social media just as a place for people to connect.” A lack of offline support prompted participant 14 to create their own sexual assault blog as a place for others to gather. As such, the outcome of disclosure in this example also importantly differs from what seeking social support online usually looks like, in that participant 14 created the resources they needed as a social support strategy, rather than seeking support from members of their existing social networks or turning to existing online spaces dedicated to support.

**Survivor-focused motivations.** The boundary between self- and audience-focused motivations is imprecise, as the previous sections suggest. Wanting to specifically support other survivors was often present with other motivations, regardless of self or audience-focus. Several participants noted wanting to disclose on social media for self-focused purposes, such as letting go of their story, with the additional hope that their stories might help someone else. These

motivations largely fall under Andalibi and Forte's (2018a) network-level factors category, which includes both wanting to support invisible others with similar experiences in one's network, as well as being inspired by others' disclosures to also disclose. For clarity, I consider these co-categories independently.

Survivor-focused motivations as a category also deviates slightly from the benefit types outlined by Petronio (2002): Disclosing to support another would likely fall under "social validation"—albeit validating one's conversation partner rather than seeking validation—or relational development. In this case, supporting others was often abstracted from a specific conversational other to a more general population of "anyone who needs to hear this," and thus is not in pursuit of maintaining any particular relationship. Providing similar others with validation of their experiences does appear relevant, though again this is often generalized to survivors more broadly and not in response to a specific other.

*Supporting others.* The sentiment of wanting to support other survivors was expressed with varying degrees of specificity, including more generalized desires, such as the feeling that "something good should come from a bad situation." Participant 7 explained,

I want to live a life where what I went through was not for nothing. I want to live a life where I use that in any way I can with whatever platform, whatever soap box I have to stand on, and whatever audience I can gather at any given point to kind of help both the victims and the survivors of this stuff, and then [also] those who are in positions to support them, and are kind of going to be that support network for that person during the journey, and probably even after it.

For participant 7, wanting something good to come from trauma manifested as supporting other survivors, both directly as well as indirectly by reaching those in survivors' support circles.

Supporting others was also related to the reported motivation of challenging the stigma and isolation associated with being a sexual assault survivor; posts addressing this facet of survivorship emphasized a range of experiences particular to being a survivor of sexual assault and trauma. That is, some participants, such as participant 6, simply “want people to feel like they’re not alone when it comes to these different things.” This sense of wanting others to not feel alone also appeared informed by a personal experience of feeling alone and isolated following assault. As participant 10 reflected,

I know when it happened to me it was really hard because I didn't know anyone else who had gone through it, and nobody was really there for me while I was still recovering. I mean, my family was very supportive, but they were also like, “It’s been two months. I need you to be over this already.”

At this point, participant 10 turned to social media to be the person they needed for others. “I try to use social media as like, ‘I’m here if you need to talk. I’m here with the resources.’ And mainly like, ‘You're not alone.’”

A variation on this theme was that of leading by example. That is, some participants expressed that simply being visible online as a survivor might support someone else. Participant 20 noted,

I just wanted people to know, you know, you can be strong. And I mean, even though I wasn’t very strong—like I didn’t feel like I was strong—I wanted to let people know that you can be. And there’s still hope, you know. [X] months after I was assaulted I went off to college and I’m still in college. So I’m doing really well, and I feel that I’ve accomplished so much since then.

By chronicling the fact that life continues post-assault, posters like participant 20 expressed the hope to inspire others feeling doubtful about recovery.

Whereas supporting other survivors through visible solidarity and challenging stigma informed motivations for many participants, fewer individuals referred specifically to disclosing to an audience of survivors with the motivation of building or engaging with a community of survivors. When community was referenced, it appeared in conjunction with other variations on the broader “supporting others” theme. Participant 17 explained that disclosure was “both therapeutic as well as spreading awareness to others, and it provides, again, the platform for other people in my situation that may have experienced similar circumstances to form, I guess, kind of a little community.” Disclosure in this instance thus appears motivated by self-focused factors, such as therapeutic benefits, as well as survivor-focused motivations, such as raising awareness and providing a space for survivors.

In slight contrast, some participants did report starting private discussion groups on social media, primarily Facebook, specifically for survivors of sexual assault. Such groups differ from other examples considered here in terms of visibility and privacy, though indicate an additional, viable strategy for building community on social media. Participant 7 explained,

Some of the best places that I found on Facebook have been kind of private groups, where you have to be invited in, or you have to pass at least a little bit of a screening to be like, okay, this person might actually be an addition to this group.

This example suggests that private groups may be seen as more directed, intentional, and perhaps geared toward motivations oriented toward social support exchange. Although lacking the visibility of public individual disclosures, private groups may thus also serve to reduce a sense of isolation felt by survivors, as the group is material testament to the fact that they are not alone.

In addition to challenging the isolation felt by many survivors, some participants chronicled the realities of dealing with assault as a way to further normalize the experiences of recovery. Participant 13, for instance, described “not being okay” as part of trauma recovery, and hoped, by describing their ups and downs in captions and hashtags, that “if someone’s searching these hashtags, they’ll see someone out there that might not be okay all the time, but that it’s okay to talk about it and it’s okay to reach out.” Similarly, participant 19 reflected on creating an anonymous Tumblr:

[I did that] so that I can post about my experiences with my sexual assault. Because right after I was sexually assaulted I felt that I was very alone and I wasn’t sure if what I was feeling and the thoughts I was having were normal and I wanted to reach out and kind of post my experiences so that other people who’ve experienced what I have know that it’s completely normal and that they’re not alone.

In facing their own self-doubt and seeking validation for their feelings, participant 19 expressed a hope to simultaneously validate those feelings in others as normal and appropriate responses to sexual assault.

In terms of supporting more specific others, some participants expressed feeling an additional isolation due to the nature of their assault, and described a motivation to reach out to others like them, in particular. Participant 7 referred to their assault experience(s) as “not hetero-normative,” and felt a need to communicate to others with that particular similar experience that they were not alone. Similarly, participant 5 targeted disclosure toward those with the experience of conceiving a child through assault and/or being conceived through assault:

My main motivation was to encourage women who were pregnant by assault conception, but also to change people's minds about the fact that I was a person as soon as I was conceived and so I deserved as much right to life as any other person.

In supporting and advocating for others, participants like 5 and 7 additionally advocated for themselves.

As these examples underscore, the division between motivations and audiences is inherently messy. Several survivors indicated disclosures as a means to provide what they also sought for themselves; in challenging stigma and silence, they also asserted their own voices and identities as survivors.

*Disclosure as inspiration to disclose.* A few participants noted knowing someone or following someone on social media who also disclosed a sexual assault experience. Participant 17, for instance, recalled that, "a colleague that I work with had experienced something similar, and she started writing about it, and I just felt that was very brave, so I eventually followed her." Following their colleague eventually inspired them to use disclosive hashtags on their own posts. For others, inspiration reportedly came from online strangers, rather than those already part of their personal networks.

As noted, the #MeToo hashtag went viral on Twitter after data collection for this project began. As a result, some participants noted #MeToo as an influence, although not all participants who disclosed after the hashtag's virality mentioned it as a motivation for disclosure. Participant 11, for instance, disclosed a sexual assault experience from some 15 years prior after sensing a cultural shift:

I really feel like that [#MeToo] was the first event where it was just like, "Whoa, these people are all speaking up." As soon as that happened, it felt like the climate was right,

because it just—maybe it felt like it would have been out of left field to just start talking about rape when you don't normally talk about it. [...] It just felt right to speak out since everyone else is speaking out and to join the movement, so to speak.

#MeToo also provided a means to disclose subtly, as survivors could engage the hashtag to proclaim survivorship without feeling the need to disclose intimate details. In other words, #MeToo created a context in which it was assumed that participation itself communicated identification as a sexual assault survivor. Participant 20 also reported using #MeToo to subtly disclose through a poem and caption tagged with #MeToo. They explained:

You couldn't really link [the poem] with rape or sexual assault, but I posted a little caption that was saying like, "I refuse to be silenced. I want to stand tall," you know, just talking about how strong I want to be, how strong I feel like I can be throughout all the struggles. And at the end of that I put #MeToo.

Aside from #MeToo, a number of participants noted receiving disclosures in response to disclosures, suggesting that their disclosures did in fact inspire others to disclose similar experiences. This phenomenon is explored in more depth in discussion of responses to disclosure, but it is worth noting that this "cultural shift," as participant 11 referred to it, can be marked by something as small as a single disclosure. That is, according to some participants, simply hearing one person disclose can be sufficient to make them feel secure enough to also disclose, sometimes in direct response to the initial disclosure/discloser.

Following their own public disclosure and subsequent disclosures across multiple forms of public media (social media, podcasts, media interviews) participant 9 recalled an experience in a grocery store in which an older woman disclosed her own experience with sexual violence. Participant 9 explained,

And she, in the milk aisle at [grocery store] in a small town where everybody walking through that milk aisle knows each other, she starts disclosing her experience of assault to me. And I'm like, "I'm just trying to buy milk here." And I realized really quickly that however uncomfortable I am she has to be way more uncomfortable. But that was how desperately she needed to talk about that and share that. And it wasn't a recent experience; it was something that had happened to her probably two decades earlier. But, that's not an isolated incident in my experience. I just have a sense that people who carry these stories don't feel like they can tell them to anyone. Maybe they don't feel like they'll be believed. I'm not quite sure how to articulate all of that. But it's like when you see somebody speaking out publicly all of a sudden it just kind of opens a floodgate.

The idea that disclosures encourage additional disclosure is supported in the literature, as in network-level factors (Andalibi & Forte, 2018a), though reciprocated disclosures may still be unexpected or surprising, as in this example.

**Society-focused motivations.** Society-focused motivations are informed by advocacy-directed goals, such as educating others about the prevalence and incidence of sexual assault, or otherwise raising awareness; providing a space intended for conversation about sexual assault; challenging stigma and sexual assault myths (e.g., victim blaming); breaking silence about sexual assault; calling others to act; and confronting rapists or otherwise conveying that perpetrators are in the wrong. This final motivation understandably deviates from Andalibi and Forte's (2018a) category, as in pregnancy loss there is generally no perpetrator responsible, in the way that perpetrators are always responsible for sexually assault.

Confronting perpetrators is similar to breaking silence, with the added focus of specifically targeting perpetrators of sexual violence as many participants were networked with

or otherwise connected to perpetrators. As discussed in Chapter 2, identifying perpetrators of sexual assault is a strategy often associated with feminist activism (Powell, 2015). Understood as an informal justice tactic, naming perpetrators of violence “may go some way to empowering victim-survivors and facilitating a sense of justice” (Powell, 2015, p. 577). In the present study, participants’ reported experiences went beyond just naming perpetrators to confronting perpetrators, in which participants addressed networked or otherwise known perpetrators of sexual assault directly. These messages to perpetrators took multiple forms, including YouTube videos, Facebook or other text posts, comments in response to a perpetrator’s post, and private messages with a perpetrator.

From a CPM standpoint, this particular motivation may also be understood through the lens of risk-reward ratio. For those who addressed perpetrators through disclosures, doing so online ameliorated numerous risk factors that could be present in a non-mediated confrontation, such as emotional and physical vulnerabilities. Participants also partially disclosed, such as by keeping details about the perpetrator or sexual assault obscured, to further temper these risks. As participant 26 explained,

I didn’t name drop him just because I felt like that was way too much drama for me to handle as a freshman in college, but I definitely called him out in that post [...] being like, “If you’re reading this, I hope you realize what you’ve done” and “I hope you’ve learned.”

This explanation implies that the participant’s rapist is still a member of their online network, either directly-connected or connected via mutual connections. The partial disclosure of “calling him out” but not by name aims to ensure that only those already within the privacy boundary

surrounding details of the participant's assault will fully comprehend the post, thus reducing the likelihood of boundary leakage and violation (Vitak & Kim, 2014).

Others said that they relied on additional boundaries and partial disclosure when speaking to their perpetrator. Participant 20 posted poems to a Tumblr not associated with, or traceable through, their other social media profiles and not known to offline friends. Aside from a post title that identified the author as a survivor and which indicate the participant is speaking to their rapist, there is little other disclosive content contained in the post. "I don't think people would know that that's what the poem is about without reading the title" (20). In this example, the perpetrator is engaged in a more figurative than literal sense, as it is unlikely that the perpetrator would view the content or assume it was about them. This figurative engagement suggests that reaching a desired audience is less prominent in relation to a more self-focused motivation of confrontation as healing practice.

Reaching one's perpetrator and healing were certainly co-present motivations, however. Participant 21 posted a YouTube video addressing their rapist, explaining,

I thought I would be able to express myself better in a video instead of trying to hand write something and, you know, getting upset...So I said, you know what, I'm just going to set the camera up and I'm going to sit there and I'm going to talk to them and I'm going to yell at them and I'm going to cuss them and I'm going to tell them exactly how I feel about what they did to me. Whether they ever see it or not.

As evident in this statement, interactivity with their rapist was a possibility, but not one that caused alarm for participant 21. Additionally, participant 21 shared that the idea to write/read a letter to the perpetrator arose from a therapy session, further underscoring the exercise's potential for facilitating healing rather than literal confrontation.

For some participants, network members relaying the message to the perpetrator seemed almost inevitable. “Even though he’s not on my Facebook, I knew it would get back to him at some point” participant 6 said about a disclosive post confronting their perpetrator. They continued:

I told him that I would not accept the fact that what you say happened was sex, and that I hope you enjoy being a registered sex offender. [I said,] “You took something from both of us, and when you did that, you made a decision not only for yourself, but for me, and you deserve everything that comes from this.” [...] And while he doesn’t follow me on Instagram—I don’t even know if he has an Instagram, I have him blocked on all social media so that he can’t contact me, and his family can’t contact me—I know that those things get around to him. And I really do hope that someone who follows me who is friends with him showed him that.

Participant 6 reported disclosing on multiple platforms and leveraging the assumption that the privacy boundaries around their online networks would be leaky. The sense that participant 6’s communication with their perpetrator was non-reciprocated (meaning the perpetrator could not directly contact the participant) further reduces the perceived risk involved in speaking to the perpetrator and perhaps also indicates a sense of reclaimed control over the situation.

As these excerpts imply, the perpetrator of assault was still a member of some participants’ online networks or was otherwise reachable, and thus speaking directly to them was a distinct possibility. For others, there was no possibility of interaction, as participants had either constructed privacy boundaries that excluded them from such disclosures, or, because the perpetrator was no longer living; though addressing them through disclosure was still reportedly perceived as beneficial.

**Temporality.** As mentioned, temporality as it relates to disclosure motivations of sexual assault survivors differs from the understanding of temporality in Andalibi and Forte's (2018a) framework of disclosure motivation factors in the context of pregnancy loss. This distinction is informed by the relative timeline of events particular to both contexts. That is, disclosure of pregnancy is assumed to precede disclosure of pregnancy loss, whereas there is no preceding disclosure in the context of sexual assault. In certain contexts, however, there may be a time-sensitive element to disclosure following sexual assault. For instance, participant 12 noted a sense of urgency in warning others of a potentially dangerous individual:

My first big thing that I posted was [date], and that was actually the day after I was raped. I found his picture and I shared it with a short story—basically saying who he was and what he had done—to warn people, because at that point in time I had no idea how long he was going to be in jail. I had no idea what was happening with the case, and I just, I did not want anybody else to go through what I went through.

In this case, participant 12 said they viewed the risk of personal vulnerability associated with disclosure as outweighed by the potential reduction of others' vulnerability and risk of danger. Additionally, disclosing may have impacted the participant's sense of control in that disclosing to warn or protect others aid in shifting the balance of power between perpetrator and victim/survivor. Beyond instances of urgency, temporality appears to influence disclosure in several ways that expand on this category of motivation and raise questions for future research.

**Recovery timeline.** Several participants expressed delaying disclosure until they were at a point in their recovery where they felt able to speak confidently and prepared to pursue their motivation of supporting other survivors, calling out their rapist, raising awareness, etc.

Participant 8, for instance, noted the impact of recovery progress on their ability to fulfill their motivation of supporting others:

I feel like, now that I'm strong enough, I can be more of a voice for the people that are where I was at a year and a half ago, who don't have it in them right now to stand up for themselves and say, "that's really harmful for you to say that."

This example points to prioritizing one's own recovery progress over supporting others prematurely, which was also apparent in considering the role of offline support systems in disclosure motivations and decision-making. That is, the responses of many participants lend evidence to the idea that formal therapy or some form of offline support (supportive family, friends, etc.) often precedes online disclosure. For some, this connection was rather direct, as therapists recommended disclosure or "assigned" clients disclosive exercises (participant 21's YouTube letter to their rapist developed from a therapist's suggestion), whereas for others therapy was instrumental in getting to that point in their recovery where disclosure felt more appropriate. Participant 16, for instance, recalled a moment with their therapist in which they related feeling frustrated by a lack of resources:

I was talking to her [my therapist] about my struggles with sex because they are numerous, and I said, "I just wish there was a fucking book or something that will tell me how to be a human again because I can't and it is infuriating." She was like, "Well, why don't you write it?" And I'm like, "Why don't you get off my nuts?" And she was like, "No, why don't you write it? If it's so hard for you to find what you need, then you need to be what you need."

Although this interaction was not the catalyst for Participant 16's initial social media disclosure, it informed and reinforced their broader motivations to "talk about sexual assault on social

media” as a means of challenging blame and to inspire “compassion for people who have gone through similar things.”

The importance some participants gave to therapy as an influence in disclosing serves to further illustrate how “offline contexts permeate online activities, and online activities bleed endlessly back to reshape what happens offline” (Baym & boyd, 2012, p. 327). As discussed later in this chapter, reactions to disclosure—both on- and offline—were said to have impacted participants’ decisions to continue disclosing similarly.

*Shifting motivations.* The passage of time also appeared to influence motivations as well, such as a shift from disclosures for sense making or healing purposes to educating and supporting others. As participant 14 explained, “It’s not about me anymore, it’s more about empowering other people and hoping that we can raise awareness about this because it’s something that gets brushed under the rug way too often.” In addition to expressing the sense that “it’s not about me anymore,” participants echoed the sentiment that “it’s not about this yet.” That is, some participants expressed not yet being in a place where they felt ready to support other survivors or disclose to particular audiences (e.g., parents), having already disclosed to some.

Participant 11, for example, disclosed survivorship in hashtags (discussed further in Chapter 6) and, though they held a position of authority in working with young women, felt they were not yet ready to be a “model survivor,” so to speak:

Part of me doesn’t want to let them down by being a rape survivor, which sounds kind of crazy, because again, it is what it is. I can talk about it, [or] I can not talk about it. It happened, it’s part of who I am. I’m at this point where I struggle with how to be empowering to women, but to not, in some way, harm them. [...] Because when I see

other women do it, I think, “Oh, good for you, you’re brave, you’ve overcome, and you’re stronger for it,” but I’m not quite there, I guess.

This participant appeared to have already internalized sexual assault survivorship into their identity but had not yet resolved how to perform this identity for others positively. Such reported tension hints at a shifting motivation, in which a self-focused motivation of identifying as and claiming “survivor” had been realized, but the additional survivor-focused motivation of empowering others had not yet. In the case of disclosing to some but not others, participant 27, for instance, reported being quite active on social media in terms of posting about sexual assault and responding to others, yet had not told their mother about an assault that occurred years prior. These examples indicate that survivors who disclose on social media may still be processing experiences, and serve as a reminder that both disclosure and privacy boundaries are dynamic and change over time.

***Shifting labels.*** In interviews, I attempted to be cognizant of how participants related to and named themselves in light of their assault experiences, as victims or survivors of sexual assault, or if another term better described their identity in relation to assault. Often, participants expressed comfort with or preference for a “survivor” label. Though they frequently did not expand on the distinctions between a “victim” and a “survivor,” one participant offered that a victim refers to someone who cannot talk about their trauma and who still lives in pain because of their trauma. They explained:

A victim is someone who, at least from my experience and what I’ve learned, dwells on what happened, who can’t talk about it, who still hides and flinches, and I didn’t want to be that person. I wanted to be the person who said, “Yeah, this happened to me, but I’m still living my life. I’m still going on.” They don’t get to win and destroy me. They

destroyed me long enough. Now I'm taking back my power and my self-esteem and my confidence and I'm going to be a survivor. (21)

Participant 25 expressed a similar understanding of the contrast in terms in noting that they did not want to be “treated like a victim.” They elaborated:

I don't want to be seen as someone who's broken or weak or less strong because of what happened. I think that because of what happened I've actually become a stronger person, but I think that a lot of people who haven't experienced it just see you as someone who's easily breakable.

These examples suggest connotative differences between “victim” and “survivor,” including an association between “survivor” and strength, as well as with recovery. That is, the notion of “this happened to me, but I'm still living my life” suggests an integration of assault into one's life experiences that mirrors the process of adaptation associated with recovery from trauma (see Appendix: Legend of Cautions for elaboration). Whereas many participants embraced the personal label “survivor,” some, however, did not. Participant 9 reflected on a comment they received in response to their use of “survivor” in posts, in which the commenter explained, “I don't feel like a survivor. I am still suffering with depression and suicidal ideation and I don't know if I'm going to survive this. [...] I want you to call me a person who was raped.” Participant 22 expressed a similar dissatisfaction with “survivor” as a label for their own experience, saying, “I will, in my head, often put it as ‘someone who lived through rape.’”

Regardless of preferred label, implied in this discussion is the ability for labels and self-identification to evolve. As with any other social label, “victim” and “survivor” carry culturally informed connotative meanings, and may not align with an individual's understanding of self until or after a particular point in their recovery. Furthermore, as recovery is not necessarily

linear, comfort with labels may increase, wane, or otherwise change in accordance with personal assessment of one's recovery more generally. The potential for labels to shift, coupled with an understanding such as participant 21's suggestion that one is a victim before one is a survivor, implies the potential impact of temporality on self-identity and terminology.

### **Audience**

As implied by the array of reported motivations informing disclosure of sexual assault victimization on social media, participants addressed myriad audiences through their disclosive content. Participants often said that they had a particular audience in mind for their disclosures or person they imagined addressing through their disclosures. In some cases this was rather direct, such as disclosing through a comment in response to another user's post or comment (as opposed to one's own original post) or posting a YouTube video in which one is hypothetically speaking directly to their rapist. In contrast, some participants said they envisioned a much broader audience situation in which "anyone" seeing their post would be a welcome outcome.

The previous sections demonstrate that imagined audiences of disclosure often aligned with stated motivations and goals. For instance, if one intended disclosures to be educational, then a "bystander" audience was imagined. In this section, I consider the motivation-audience relationship from another angle, and further suggest how participants perceived audiences. Perceived interactivity as a defining feature of social media (Carr & Hayes, 2015) further informs this relationship, as participants often noted that they considered the potential reactions or consequences of posting on a particular platform. Audiences additionally related to or further elucidated privacy boundaries and their dynamics following received responses/interactivity (e.g., comments, "likes," private messages). In some cases, these boundaries were made clear through considering which audiences were not privy to disclosures (maintaining privacy

boundary with family, for instance); in others, these boundaries were rather generous and permeable.

The following sections outline the major audience categories described by participants. The motivations associated with these audiences are again also addressed, and multiple audiences and motivations could again be simultaneously addressed. The connections between audience and platform choice are explored in more depth in the following chapter.

**Self.** Some participants described having no specific audience in mind when they disclosed, instead finding benefit in simply posting for themselves. In this case, the audience is not so much nonexistent as it is extremely generalized. When asked whom they imagined seeing their disclosive posts, participant 15 said, “I wasn’t [imagining anyone] in the beginning. I had no idea who was out there and who would see it. I was just doing it for myself because it was empowering for me.” Participant 14 echoed this focus on self, noting, “When I write I definitely get into a zone and I’m writing. I’m writing from my perspective and when I was in that situation. So I don’t know. I guess my audience is just everyone.” Again, an important distinction to make is that the absence of a reported-desired audience is not synonymous with the absence of an audience. That is, the posts were still public and available for anyone to read, but given a self-focused motivation, consumption by or interaction with an audience was not said to be prioritized. As such, the boundaries drawn are rather broad and inclusive, and intentionally so.

Others who expressed that they were writing primarily for themselves acknowledged the potential for an audience but still did not prioritize or specify imagined readers. Participant 16, for instance, quite clearly wrote for and to their self, but understood that others like them might connect with their posts. They explained:

In all honesty, it's a little easier for me to talk out in to the world as though I'm talking to somebody who either needed somebody like me or just is me from maybe 10 minutes ago. It's hard for me sometimes to really relate to people, but what I talk about, I hope the people who hear me are those that are similar to me.

For some, writing with no specific audience in mind became more difficult when members of the imagined audience began interacting with content. Participant 8, for instance, initially disclosed in a diary-like form to a general Instagram following:

Definitely at first I think it was just for me. It was like, I want to save this so I can come back and look at it again when I'm feeling this way again. But I also was aware obviously that other people would be seeing it. I had at least a couple hundred followers, most of which were dog accounts at that point. So I knew that some of my acquaintances that I'd interacted with over the last couple years would see it. But I guess I felt a certain safety within that. And I do know, I have a couple family members that follow me. But it didn't really occur to me [that] they were looking at them until a month or so in when my dad texted me or called me and said he liked the poems I was posting. And I was like, "Oh, you see those, huh?" So it was sort of after that that I became more aware that people were taking it in.

In this case, the audience becoming "real" did not deter the participant from disclosing further, as subsequent reported interactions with audience members indicated that others were benefiting from participant 8's content. They noted:

I did become much more aware that people were taking in what I was posting. But I still try to just internally feel if it's what I want to post and if I'm feeling it, and then that's why I post it.

Rather, self-focused motivations informed disclosures more than audience-focused motivations.

**Friends and family.** In addition to disclosing to an imagined audience that centered self, participants also noted sharing disclosures with friends and family, or addressing friends and family directly through disclosive content. According to participants' reports, family appeared as a polarizing audience, and privacy boundaries varied according to whether family constituted a welcome audience or not.

**Updating and explaining.** When this target audience was imagined, participants thought of disclosive posts as providing updates to friends about their recovery status. In some cases, this represented the extension of a self-focused disclosure boundary to trusted others. Participant 23 described their disclosive space as, "almost like a diary. It's like a place for me to put my thoughts...like so my friends can understand and see it and stuff." Similar to participant 14 and participant 15, participant 23 indicates a self-focused goal of maintaining a space in which to process; the difference in these cases appears to be participant 23's deliberate expansion of the privacy boundary to supportive friends, which is absent from participant 14's and participant 15's accounts. Participant 13 also expressed expanding the privacy boundary surrounding their disclosures to supportive friends and family:

I kind of just post little updates for my friends and family, like how things are going with counseling or saying, "Man, it was a really hard day, I had nightmares or flashbacks," or just keeping that dialogue open and being real. [...] Getting them involved in my journey, I guess.

Beyond expanding the privacy boundary surrounding disclosures, participant 13 intimates the potential for interactivity in referencing "dialogue." For some, interactivity was desirable but not necessary in pursuing motivations, as long as the content was viewed by the desired audience. As

participant 8 explained, “I almost feel like, okay, maybe my dad or my whoever that I know follows me will see that. And even if we don’t have a conversation, it’s hopefully given them something to think about.”

In keeping with the benefit of self-clarification (Petronio, 2002), disclosive posts provided an opportunity to explain something about oneself to friends and family. Participant 10 viewed their initial social media disclosures as, “my way of just clarifying everything.” They continued:

Like, this is why I vanished. And people who know me now, this is the reason that I am the way that I am. These are the reasons I have anxiety attacks. These are the reasons that I don’t go out and party. Like that kind of stuff.

As such, disclosing on social media to friends and family reportedly allowed participant 10 to clarify their behavior as impacted by sexual assault selectively, in a way that differs from attempting to reclaim control over one’s story in the face of misinformation. This understanding of audience is similar to “narrowcasting,” or “letting others know how they were and what they were doing...rather than to maintain relationships through a reciprocal exchange” (Brake, 2012, p. 1062). As such, this treatment of audience puts forth an expectation of attention from one’s audience, but not necessarily interaction and reciprocated information exchange.

***Family as restricted audience.*** In contrast to desiring family and friends as an audience, many participants noted intentionally excluding family or particular known connections in their networks from disclosive content. For example, participant 22 permitted only certain family members to be audience to disclosure. “I was worried about my family finding out, besides my sister, so I blocked them from seeing that post.” (I explore blocking as a feature related to privacy boundaries in Chapter 6.) In some cases, the privacy boundary surrounding disclosure

was negotiated in advance of and in anticipation of reactions from family. “I think I was more worried about my family seeing it, like my extended family,” Participant 3 recalled. They continued:

I think that’s what kept me from posting for a while, and I don’t know why. I felt like they would...because I have to deal with them, I guess, on a more personal level, that they would somehow be negative about it.

Participant 3 thus reported controlling the boundary surrounding assault disclosure by not disclosing online at all, and then disclosing online gradually (Andalibi, Morris, & Forte, 2018).

In other cases, the boundary excluding family was constructed as a result of consideration of the risk-reward ratio associated with disclosing. Participant 16, for instance, explained:

There’s always the fear that any parental units would react, but by that time I had been out of the house for four years and the only fear that I had was that their calm, Christian sensibilities would be irritated enough to call me.

Participant 16 indicates that the physical distance between them and their parents lessened the risk incurred by disclosing, as did the realization that a negative reaction was likely limited to a phone call.

For others, the boundary excluding family is not enforced through the use of platform features or offline risk management, but is said to be merely preferred. “I don’t really want all my aunts and uncles and my in-laws to see,” Participant 11 explained. “If they do, that’s okay, because obviously it’s public.” In this example, Participant 11 indicates awareness of the rather expansive privacy boundary surrounding their disclosive content. The content is public and thus there is a real possibility that extended family in their online network will encounter it. This possibility was realized in the case of Participant 26, who explained that their concern came not

from family members knowing about their assault, but from the intimacy of the disclosure. They said:

No, they already knew that I was sexually assaulted before I made that post, but I guess it was just the idea of them seeing that I was being so open about, I guess something so personal in my life. I'm just not very close with [my parents], so that was definitely a part of my anxiety of making that post, just revealing more of my life to them that I would be comfortable with doing in person.

This response underscores the salience of degree, or intimacy, as a dimension of disclosure decision-making processes, as well as suggests that what constitutes an “appropriate” depth of disclosure may vary in online and offline contexts.

**Other survivors.** As previously indicated, supporting survivors of sexual assault is a significant motivation category informing disclosure. In pursuit of this motivation, some participants imagined speaking to an audience of survivors. Participant 18, for instance, wrote songs exploring “different emotion[s]” experienced as a result of sexual assault and posted them on social media. They explained:

A big focus of mine is aiming for other survivors in order to make them feel less alone [...] And so the audience that I'm reaching for is largely survivors, to make them feel—to show that someone else is going through this, has gone through this, and to make people feel less alone.

This text indicates that an audience of survivors was informed and supported by the particular motivation of supporting survivors through demonstration of shared experience.

Participant 9 shared a similar interest in speaking to and supporting other survivors, though did so by also engaging a secondary audience of survivor's support networks. They explained:

I'm really deliberate that my target audience, or maybe the most important audience, are people who have experienced sexual violence. But, I share things, especially on Facebook where I share articles, I will share articles that will be like, "10 ways to support someone who has PTSD." And so those are things that aren't necessarily targeted towards the person who's experiencing those symptoms. Those are targeted towards the people who love us. And so, I feel like I probably am speaking to both of those audiences.

For others, the imagined audience is defined more clearly by considering who the audience does not include. Participant 11, for instance, recalled:

I definitely wasn't speaking to the person who raped me. I wasn't speaking to my family, and I wasn't speaking to my husband. I feel like I was speaking to anyone who felt lost, or sad, or as if they couldn't ever heal from trauma or PTSD. Maybe I was speaking to anyone who felt hopeless that could relate.

Although participant 11 does not specify "other survivors of sexual assault" as an audience, they focus instead on the experiences of hopelessness, trauma, and PTSD that survivors of assault may experience, and further shape their audience by excluding those who are not empathetic to and have not shared these experiences.

**Perpetrators.** As some participants expressed a motivation to disclose informed by a desire to "call out" or speak to their perpetrator, it follows that rapists and other perpetrators of violence constitute a relevant audience in this context. In addition to engaging perpetrators

directly, through poems, letters, videos, and comments, as noted, participants also expressed concerns over perpetrators accessing their content, and accordingly adjusted their disclosure. In participant 18's case, their rapist was connected to others in their online networks and thus was potentially privy to assault-related disclosures:

In some ways, I wanted him to see it, but I was also concerned about it, because obviously I didn't know how he would respond or what that would mean. I was actually very concerned in general about posting it, just because obviously, at the time, it was such a huge thing to post, and I was scared about anyone knowing it. But yeah, specifically, the attacker himself, and my friends who knew him was who I was most concerned about seeing it.

Although the perpetrator was not named in the post, the participant reported assessing potential reactions from both the perpetrator as well as friends as unpredictable and potentially negative, noting "I was pretty scared of whether it would get to a point where they'd [friends] be like, 'Oh my god, who did this?' And then I'd have to have that conversation" (18). Participant 18 thus seems to have anticipated boundary turbulence in the form of friends asking them to reveal additional private information and sought to manage this risk through partial disclosure (Ahrens et al., 2010; Petronio, 2002).

**Bystanders and others.** The motivation of supporting other survivors comprises several strategies, including raising awareness about the incidence, prevalence, and realities of sexual assault and sexual assault recovery. In pursuing this set of strategies, participants reported engaging multiple audiences, which may be collectively described as a "bystander" audience. In sexual violence prevention and advocacy, a bystander is an individual who witnesses and has the potential to interrupt behaviors that fall along the spectrum of violence against women

(Tabachnick, 2009). Speaking up against sexist jokes, dissuading someone from pressuring an intoxicated partygoer into sexual activity, and asking someone who is being harassed if they need assistance are all examples of behavior modeled by “active bystanders.” Participants invoking a bystander audience described speaking to “the general public” (18), “anybody that says, ‘It wouldn’t happen to me’” (21), and “people who need to hear” (9). As a category, bystander is thus defined broadly, perhaps better understood by examining who it does not include: survivors, perpetrators, and intimate friends and family (as distinct from more casual or distant connections). In combination with the goal of raising awareness, however, this amalgam audience becomes akin to bystanders: individuals armed with awareness of the realities of sexual violence and the potential ability to intervene and act against violence.

As these sections imply, motivation and audience are related considerations that, in combination, inform how sexual assault survivors think about and manage visibility as well as how they construct and adjust privacy boundaries to realize motivations and/or control exposure to particular audiences. These negotiations are further shaped by not only anticipated reactions from audience members, but also by realized responses to disclosure. I review the array and impact of responses to disclosures received by participants in the following section.

### **Responses to Disclosure**

Scholarship addressing disclosure of sexual assault victimization indicates repeatedly that responses, particularly negative responses, can be extremely impactful psychologically (Ullman, 1999). As discussed in the context of family as audience, anticipated or imagined reactions shape disclosure in terms of how much is disclosed, to whom, how, and when. Received or realized imagined responses additionally shape subsequent disclosures in that responses can validate the poster’s motivations or indicate the need for a privacy boundary adjustment (e.g., block a person,

restrict details, post on a different platform) (Petronio, 2002). In considering potential consequences/responses, some participants mentioned thinking through “what’s the worst that could happen?” In some cases “the worst” was limited to what actions might occur on social media (e.g., “what are you going to do, unfriend me?”), whereas in other instances “the worst” potentially included offline confrontations, physical vulnerability, and legal concerns.

Participants reported myriad responses to disclosures, including both positive and negative. The impact of a response appears to vary according to factors such as alignment of the response with the poster’s response expectations, familiarity with the responder (i.e., if they were a known connection of the poster), response location (offline or online, publicly or privately, as well as platform), and the nature of the response (positive, negative, or absent). This section explores these factors further and presents an array of the types of responses participants said they received. It bears reiterating that received responses may have informed willingness to participate in this project; in other words, participant responses may over-represent positive reactions to sexual assault disclosure, as those who received predominantly or severely negative reactions may have felt unsafe or were simply not interested in being interviewed for this project. This is not to suggest the absence of negative reactions to disclosure (as the following sections make clear, these were very much part of participants’ reported experiences), but, rather, to consider the influence of reactions to disclosure on subsequent disclosures more expansively.

The reported impact of responses, referring to the impression responses left on participants, varies considerably and appears influenced by a number of factors, including the magnitude of the reaction and who issued the reaction. This is in keeping with literature on sexual assault disclosure that indicates negative responses to disclosure may be especially

detrimental to survivors, more so than positive or neutral disclosure responses are beneficial (Ullman, 1999).

In some accounts, negative responses sparked boundary turbulence and boundary adjustment, often enacted by severing network connections via “unfriending” or blocking features on various platforms. As discussed in Chapter 2, CPM theory positions disclosers and disclosure recipients as co-owners of private information and, by extension, the boundary that surrounds them (Petronio, 2002). It is interesting to note, then, that boundary adjustment is reported to be initiated by disclosers, seeking to exclude unsupportive others, as well as disclosure recipients, seeking to excuse themselves from a conversation.

**Anticipated reactions.** Both disclosure motivations and intended audiences inform participants’ reported expectations of reactions to disclosure posts. As discussed, theories of disclosure, including CPM, identify considering reactions to one’s disclosure as part of a risk-assessment process in determining if, how, when, where, and how much to disclose (audience and motivations informing to whom and why, respectively). This risk-assessment process is also individuated, in that these factors vary depending on an individual’s goals and to whom they have chosen to disclose. In an online context, one’s intended audience may be part of a much broader audience, due to context collapse (Marwick & boyd, 2014). Anticipating reactions thus involves considering possible or likely reactions from not only one’s audience of interest, but also the entirety of the audience given the relative visibility of the disclosure. As discussed, some survivors, such as Participant 6, noted not being directly connected to their perpetrator but still hoping to engage their perpetrator as an audience indirectly (e.g., “I know this stuff gets back to him”).

In considering anticipated reactions to disclosure, participants expressed varying degrees of specificity and complexity. Participant 18, for instance, expected little engagement with disclosive content pertaining to sexual assault, saying, “I’m always consciously like, ‘Ah, should I post this? Probably not going to get many likes.’ And yeah, it never does. People just don’t want to hear it, which is just really sad.” In this case, the participant equates a general lack of engagement with a lack of interest, which consequently discourages them from posting sexual assault-related content.

Other participants considered the potential extremity of reactions, adopting a “worst case scenario” mindset, as previously mentioned. These anticipated reactions were often reported as limited to actions taken on social media, understood as relatively minor consequences, which tempered their perceived severity and potential impact on the discloser. As participant 5 noted, “What are you going to do? Unfriend me?” This response implies that social media as a venue for disclosure may buffer some of the impact incurred by negative responses, in that the consequences on social media—severing a connection, muting a conversation—are perceived as less dramatic, perhaps, than offline counterparts.

Participant 7 further intimated this buffering effect as connected to in noting their anxieties about disclosing to their parents:

They kind of knew a little bit about what was going on, but that was the first time that they really got it. And, they were actually happy that it was, that now we can talk about it. They were actually pretty happy that it was done in a written form so they could just kind of read it, and digest, as opposed to being face to face, because that stuff’s very difficult, I’ve learned. Even if someone’s going to be supportive, it’s just really difficult to hold

those kinds of conversations. Especially without any party or multiple parties kind of getting emotional because that's what this stuff does.

In this case, physical distance was said to have allowed for emotional processing, which is understood as a benefit of disclosing via social media granted to the recipient of disclosure; though as will be explored in the next chapter, the affordances implied here—asynchronous communication, relative detachment—were leveraged by survivors for personal benefit as well.

In considering anticipated reactions, maintaining a self-focused motivation may additionally buffer survivors from the impact of negative reactions. Participant 15, for instance, reflected on “thinking about, like, oh my God what would people say? How would people react? But now my reaction is, fuck them. I don't care how they react. Because I'm doing this for me and other survivors and if someone doesn't like it, they can unfollow me or block me or do whatever they want.” In this instance, both social media-centered consequences (unfollowing, blocking) as well as a self-focus motivation appear to mute the potential sting of anticipated negative reactions. Participant 21 echoed the importance of self-focus in putting responses in perspective, saying, “You know, if someone takes something from it [my disclosive post], that's great. If not, you know, fine too. It helps me, also. It's not just about the others. It does help me also to share my story and to put things out there.” These examples underscore the role holding multiple motivations (from multiple motivation categories) in mind may play in informing anticipated reactions and their impacts.

**From whom as influence: Known connections.** Apart from the valence ascribed to responses, participants also noted that from whom the response came was influential. This manifested as distinctions between known connections and strangers, family and friends, and online and offline (which overlaps with known connections). These comparisons also lent

nuance to the forms responses took (comments, likes, etc.). As the impact of reactions is also informed by individuals' reaction expectations (anticipated reactions) and motivations, however, there was no clear consensus as to which reactions/reactions from whom were most impactful. That is, participants reported being both pleasantly surprised by reactions from family as well as unpleasantly surprised by reactions from family, and similarly so regarding reactions from strangers.

***Silence and silencing from known connections.*** Although individual circumstances varied, silence and silencing as a negative response to disclosure was a theme in interviews. Silence in this context refers to the absence of acknowledgment or response from notable connections and members of one's imagined audience. In other words, participants took note of who did not engage with disclosive posts. "I get a lot of strangers who will reach out and post, which is really nice, and which is what I really want," participant 10 explained. "But I have noticed that my friends, the people who actually know me, will not comment as much." Participant 15 echoed this sentiment regarding reactions from family, saying, "I noticed that the only people who comment are people who, typically are people who don't know me personally, like the people who I've never met. Like cousins I used to be connected with and whatnot would never even like my posts because probably, and I'm guessing, that they're probably just, like, uncomfortable or didn't know what to do with it." In participant 15's case, however, the perpetrator had familial ties, which may further inform the lack of comments explicitly supporting disclosure. Whereas offline connections additionally privy to online disclosure may comment or otherwise support the poster offline, participants' reflected that a lack of visible online support was noticeable.

Additionally, participants reported that a lack of response contributed to a sense of discouragement about posting. Participant 20 noted, “I haven’t gotten a lot of reaction about it and I don’t know if it is due to me not having a bunch of followers or maybe it’s just because unfortunately it’s, it’s sexual assault as something that’s kind of normalized nowadays, and that’s unfortunate.” This participant clarified that they did receive “likes” in response to disclosive content, but did not consider this to be meaningful engagement. As such, the impact of responses to disclosure, including lack thereof, may additionally vary according to discloser expectations regarding “meaningful” response.

In addition to silence, participants such as participant 3 noted receiving comments actively discouraging disclosure or discussion of sexual assault and sexual exploitation: “I’ve also had those that have [gone] silent or private messaged and said, ‘That’s a little too personal to share, don’t you think?’” Such comments may indicate a norm violation, in that disclosure recipients may feel social media is too public or otherwise an appropriate place for such content (Buehler, 2017; McLaughlin & Vitak, 2012). In posing questions about the propriety of content, however, such commenters reinforce stigma of sexual assault survivorship, the impact of which can be quite damaging. Participant 9 noted, “There’s been a little bit of, I don’t know, ‘Can we just put the lid back on this,’ is sort of what it has felt like. And it hasn’t been real strong and it hasn’t come from a huge number of people. But definitely, there’s been some pushback.” This example underscores that negative reactions such as silence and silencing can carry such weight that even one or just a few comments can leave a significant imprint on survivors. Additionally, survivors who disclose may be especially sensitive to silence and silencing as a negative response to disclosure.

*Negative reactions from known connections.* Even when participants anticipated negative reactions, they report, understandably, that they were still affected by them. Participant 6 noted, “I knew I was going to get, not as much hate, but hate along with positivity.” Within this, participant 6 differentiated between responses from Internet strangers and known network connections, explaining, “I think the in-person [hate] is what hurts the most. But the random people online, I’m not so sure that it really bothers me.” In this case, however, “in-person” reactions included further instances of violence and intimidation, according to participant 6, such as vandalism, break in attempts, and isolation on their college campus. “I’ve also had people say that they don’t care what I have to say, and they don’t understand why anybody would care what I have to say because I’m a liar and all of that” (6). Prior to this example, “in-person” reactions have largely involved known connections in the form of reciprocated relationships, such as friends and family. Participant 6, however, received “in-person” responses from unknown others who attended the same college and thus were networked by geographic proximity. This example underscores the reality that sexual assault survivors can receive offline negative reactions to disclosure from proximate but unknown others that are physically and emotionally impactful.

Negative reactions from known connections were not uncommon in participants’ reports. Participant 22 noted experiencing a negative reaction from a family member, in which a relative “started lashing out at me, sa[ying] awful things about what a hypocrite I am for trying to raise awareness about sexual assault because I didn’t go to the police right away, so my rapists are out there raping other people and everyone who gets hurt as a result is my fault.” This instance links negative responses to sexual assault with perpetuation of rape myths and negative stereotypes clearly (Deitz et al., 2015). Participant 7 similarly found negative reactions from known connections challenging:

There've been some relationships that have been strained, or just turned off by me and that's upsetting. [...] So I've had to remove people kind of from my life, which has been bittersweet, and very sad, and sometimes very angering. Or it's maddening because I expected more out of them, [from] certain people I expected more. But at the same time, it's kind of liberating. Because you're kind of shuffling them off, kind of like fleas a little bit.

As participant 7 intimates, a potential benefit, so to speak, of negative reactions from known connections is a better understanding of whom to exclude from future disclosures.

Boundary turbulence and adjustment, however, are reportedly complicated by numerous factors, including the closeness of the relationship between discloser and disclosure recipient. In deciding to expand the privacy boundary by becoming more politically active and increasing disclosure about their experiences with sexual exploitation, participant 4 noted that jeopardizing familial relationships was a major risk that warranted careful consideration in deciding to become more visible as a survivor, explaining, "I had to make that decision in my heart before I approached somebody about it." They continued:

I wasn't seeking a permission, I was informing them of my decision. [...] I went to my family and let them know where I was with all of this, and how important it was to me and my resolution. At the time, everybody was supportive. As it turned out, some were, some were not.

In other cases, participants attempted to minimize boundary turbulence. Participant 14, for instance, added trigger warnings to their disclosive posts such that disclosure recipients could exercise discretion in choosing to view potentially upsetting content. Despite this strategy, boundary turbulence still was reported to occur:

One of my friends who is not in a good place, she wrote me a couple of really, really mean messages saying that it seemed like I was bragging or gloating about, you know, how I'm having a good life now, and my posts triggered her and she didn't want to see them. I told her, you know, "I know they're going to trigger you, honey, I put trigger warnings on everything, but it's—that's what my blog is about, you know, if you don't like it, just don't look at it at all then, ok?" And that turned into a big disaster. We're not friends anymore or speaking. I had to block her because she's just sending me mean messages.

As this example illustrates, boundary turbulence can still occur despite attempts at boundary coordination with networked others (Petronio, 2002) and potentially results in the suspension or dissolution of relational ties. Participant 4's reported experience also suggests that the effects of boundary turbulence extend beyond altering privacy rules and potentially affects the availability of resources, such as social support, from one's network. Participant 14 revealed that they ultimately resolved turbulence by leveraging the "block" feature (discussed further in Chapter 5) to further adjust the privacy boundary surrounding their disclosures.

***Positive reactions from known connections.*** In addition to negative reactions, participants reported receiving positive reactions from known connections. Participant 10, for instance, considered validation from friends as a positive response, noting "the first time I ever posted anything about it, I got a plethora of people coming out in support, a lot of my friends saying how strong they think I am, and all that kind of stuff." Participant 8 similarly reflected on positive reactions from multiple known connections:

My dad, a couple of times, has commented to me in person or over the phone saying he likes the poems that I'm sharing, although he never directly says anything about the

assault aspect. I've had one friend from high school who I haven't seen in a decade direct message me on Instagram and say, "I noticed that you acknowledged that you were assaulted and I just want to tell you I was too, and I've had a really hard time sharing that with anyone." And I guess telling me, basically, that they feel like they can tell me because I'm being open about it. I also had a friend's significant other message me and say my vulnerability in my posts has helped them open up with their significant other about things they've been sort of pushing under the rug.

In this case, reported positive responses include not only validation of content, such as from the participant's father, but also validation of experience and expression, as from a high school friend believing the participant's experience and reciprocating disclosure. Indeed, in two of these three recalled instances, positive reactions included reciprocated disclosure through private communication channels. Responses and reciprocated disclosure through private channels suggests something intriguing about the way additional privacy boundaries are further constructed in response to disclosure. I expand on this idea in Chapter 6.

In some cases, positive responses validated stated motivations directly, such as informing friends and others of something personally important to the disclosure. As discussed, participant 22 expressed the disclosure motivation of informing known connections of assault because it explained something about their behavior at the time. Responses to disclosure suggest this goal was met, as "a lot of people said they knew something was wrong and that this post helped them understand, and actually it's positive in the way it got people to open up." In this case, responses also included multiple reciprocal disclosures, which participant 22 considered somewhat bittersweet. They continued:

[It's also] negative because this happens to so many people, but ever since I started publicly talking about it, publicly on social media, I got so many comments or messages or had so many conversations with them where they told me about their experiences as well. More than a few told me this was the first time they had ever told anyone about what happened to them.

The theme of silencing as a response to sexual assault disclosure is thus additionally present in positive responses, as disclosing for the first time in response to disclosure suggests a powerful compulsion to keep quiet, one that is overcome in this context by seeing another claim a similar experience.

**Reactions from unknown others.** Encouraging silence or challenging the validity of disclosures was also a tactic utilized by strangers in responding to participants' disclosures. The significance of such reported responses varied by individual, though there was a sense across participants that negative reactions from strangers were less impactful, perhaps because they were somewhat expected. As discussed, several participants expressed surprise at not receiving negative comments from unknown others, as encountering trolls was considered an inevitable outcome of discussing sexual assault on public social media. Anticipating negative reactions or finding them outnumbered by positive reactions did not negate their effect, however, as several participants recalled. Participant 5, for instance, disclosed personal experiences with conception through sexual assault and explained that responses to such posts, "Var[y] from 'You're so brave,' 'God bless you,' to 'Well, your mother should have killed you before you were born. [...]' Oh yeah, and everything in between, and vitriol frequently." They attribute an influx of negative comments to local news media reposting and increasing traffic to a post from their personal blog, which increased the visibility of their disclosive content to a broader, less curated audience.

Such vitriolic reported responses seek to discredit survivors and reinforce the stigma associated with sexual assault victimization, thus reinforcing silence. Participant 12 recalled an experience several years ago on Twitter that impacted their willingness and decision to disclose more recently on social media:

I no longer use my Twitter account. I think it was during one of the first #MeToo things, and this was several years ago. But I posted about [a “game” that was actually child sexual abuse]. And basically the only responses I got on Twitter were guys talking about how much of a fun game it sounds like and it just, I was pretty horrified.

As implied, this response prompted the individual to turn away from social media as a disclosure space for a time and entirely away from Twitter as a viable platform for social activity. This example points to shifting platforms as a response to boundary violation and a strategy for controlling one’s privacy boundary around disclosure.

Although negative responses are hurtful and discouraging, to say the least, it is significant that participants who recalled such responses did not, in fact, cease disclosing as a consequence. Whereas negative responses—from strangers and family alike—could somewhat derail or delay subsequent disclosures, even for years, participants suggested that the desire to fulfill their motivations outweighed the pressure to stop disclosing. Participant 20, for instance, expressed dissatisfaction with responses to their initial disclosure, and leveraged this feeling as additional motivation to continue speaking out. They reflected,

I got a few comments with a heart on it or like, “Sending my love to you.” But it wasn’t, it wasn’t a direct like, “Wow, this has really helped me.” And I feel like because of that, I’m not done, you know, I’m not going to stop and I’m never going to stop posting about

stuff like that, that I'm passionate about, [like] healing and about recovery afterwards, the aftermath. I feel like I haven't reached people yet and that's what I want to do.

As this example illustrates, reaching one's intended audience can affect the impact of positive and supportive comments received in response to disclosure.

**Reactions from survivors.** I have underscored supporting other survivors as a major motivation for sexual assault disclosure. It perhaps follows that responses from this intended audience and affirming this motivation are said to feel especially positive and validating (Mendes, Ringrose, & Keller, 2018). Participant 18, for instance, noted:

It's amazing when I get a message or a call or something from someone saying, "Oh my God, I heard your song," or "I read your post, and you inspired me to tell someone about it," or "You inspired me to go to therapy," or "You made me feel less bad than I felt." So I got a lot of reactions like that, and that was really just comforting, and just...I just felt so happy that I'd done it, and I was actually about to make somewhat of a difference by putting myself through that.

This response alludes to several consequences of receiving disclosure (i.e., consuming disclosive content), such as validation of one's own assault experience; reciprocating disclosure (either to the initial discloser or to someone else); and feeling called to healing action, such as seeking therapy. For participant 18, feedback that confirmed impact importantly reaffirmed their motivations for disclosing.

Participant 12's experience disclosing assault and pursuit of legal action against their perpetrator sparked a slightly different, albeit still validating, response from survivors. They noted:

I have so many girls messaging me saying that they were so glad that I had stood up and said what happened, and that I was trying to pursue court action, because so many of them had been through similar experiences and had done nothing.

As participant 22's experience, discussed earlier, suggests, there persists a social assumption that survivors are obligated to report assault to police or other authorities. Pursuing legal action against a perpetrator of sexual assault through the U.S. criminal justice system is complicated by several realities, however, including that the justice system is not equally available or fair to all victims across categories of race, class, gender, and other forms of social oppression. Numerous studies repeatedly attest to the reluctance of many survivors of sexual assault to report assault to formal responders, including law enforcement (see Chapter 2). Thus, affirming and positive responses to participant 12 may also indicate personal regret at not engaging the justice system, or may aim to validate a pathway to accountability and justice that was not available to other survivors.

This reported projection onto a discloser's experience was also present in other ways in responses from other survivors. Since their initial disclosure, for instance, participant 6 reflected:

I have had hundreds of people, since I started posting about this two years ago, reach out to me telling me their story, or telling me, "I'm a victim of so-and-so. I find your post really inspirational, thank you so much for being so honest with something that I can't be honest with."

Such responses point to an implicit "bigger picture," in which disclosures from others are understood as working toward a larger, agreed upon goal of breaking silence and standing up in the face of sexual assault.

That supporting other survivors was thus present in responses to disclosures, in addition to informing disclosures, further suggests the prominence of this motivation, as well as suggests multiple viable pathways for pursuing it. For instance, participant 13 alluded to a sense of community gained through disclosure, saying:

These people on Twitter have even private messaged me and said, “Thank you for sharing,” and [that] they’ve been through similar situations and if I need someone to talk to, they’re there, which is huge for people you’ve never met to do that. It’s such a great thing to hear.

In this way, supporting survivors reportedly manifests in a direct way, in the sense that disclosing can result in supportive bonds even without formal social support requests.

Connections formed through disclosure thus potentially provide support either in the sense that the discloser supports their audience, or in the sense that the audience supports the discloser, in the case of the above example. In the case of the former, such support may appear, as previously discussed, in the form of validation, silence-breaking, awareness raising, etc. It may also, however, take the form of more direct action, as in the case of participant 6:

I even had a girl that had messaged me. She was like, “I’ve gone through something similar to what you’ve gone through, [and] I’m contemplating suicide right now,” which is something that I have gone through, so I completely understood, and talked her through it. I actually got her to go to the hospital that same night because she was feeling so bad.

The reported impact and importance of such interactions to disclosure posters such as participant 6, is understandably monumental, and, at least in cases coded as “successful,” may fuel a motivation to continue disclosing. “That’s kind of what keeps me going on Instagram, I think,

the most, is knowing that what I say has an influence on people” participant 6 explained. “It really inspires people to be comfortable with telling their own story.”

Interactions such as this one were rarely reported in interviews, though participants did report engaging with other survivors and supporters who responded to their posts. Participant 22 explained,

I don’t get a lot of messages often, but when I do it’s usually people who have experienced something similar and they either thank me for posting or they just want to vent some things that they’re just not comfortable telling people in their lives. Sometimes people will disclose what happened and ask for help or advice and I do the best I can to help.

These examples again point to the potential impact of both positive responses from survivors as well as the utility of private messaging channels as additional disclosure spaces.

**Responses shape content.** In addition to the reported effects of responses already discussed, such as blocking negative known connections and shifting platforms, responses further appeared to shape posted content through validating and encouraging additional disclosure, and withholding potentially triggering content. As indicated, validating responses often encouraged additional disclosure and were reported to be present both online and offline. Participants such as 12 and 17 noted that likes and supportive comments spurred them to keep posting. “When there’s more likes or comments or DMs about my work I’m more likely to post more, and it makes me feel more comfortable posting personal stuff.” Similarly, participant 17 noted, “the comments and I guess the feedback that I have gotten have kind of encouraged me to keep posting.” In slight contrast, participant 15 noted the influence of their sisters’ offline reactions in shaping their decision to disclose:

I was like, “What do you think?” and they were like, “It’s freaking awesome.” [...] In the beginning I’d be like, “Oh my God, is it too much? Did I say too much? Did I go too far?” and they’re like, “No, not at all, say what you want to say; if you’re comfortable saying it, say it.” And they’d remind me like, if someone’s uncomfortable, that’s on them.

In this way, validation from others challenges stigma and perhaps tempers the perceived risk of anticipated negative reactions from others.

Responses also were reported to shape content in that audience members sometimes expressed feeling triggered by content or pointed out inaccuracies in content that resulted in editing or deleting the content. Participant 9, for instance, recalled posting an infographic on sexual violence that lacked a nuanced understanding of sex work:

I don’t remember any more exactly what the statistic was, but somebody called it out and pointed out that there’s a difference between people who enter sex work voluntarily and people who were trafficked into sex work, and I thought about it and I thought, “Yeah, I’m not interested in adding to that stigma.” And so I deleted it and I just posted something [in explanation].

As mentioned, participant 14 described a falling out with a friend who responded negatively to content they found triggering. In addition to blocking this individual, participant 14 reported creating a post to address the situation with their remaining audience, saying:

I did post something after the fact, after I had that kind of fall out with my friend, just, you know, stating that there are different triggers for everyone and let’s all love each other and try to get past this.

In responding to their friend, participant 14 thus adjusted the privacy boundary surrounding their disclosive content by blocking the individual, as well as exerted control over their space by reasserting the individuation of assault experiences and “love” as a guiding rule for interactions in the space.

### **Conclusion**

Considering participants’ insights on disclosure motivation, audience, and consequence again underscores the ways in which these considerations are intricately connected. In centering audience and consequences as integral to understanding disclosure, this chapter aligns with CPM’s tenet that “we not only have to consider the individual who is revealing or concealing, but we must also focus on how the decision affects other people” (Petronio, 2002, p. 2). In this case, the context of disclosure is expanded beyond a dyadic interaction, though discussions of boundary access and boundary protection apply similarly. From included excerpts regarding audience, it is clear that sexual assault survivors engage tacit privacy rules in determining to whom and what to disclose to others (boundary access and linkage), while considering from whom to restrict disclosure (boundary protection and permeability) (Petronio, 2002). In moments of potential boundary turbulence, such as negative responses to disclosure, survivors additionally report that they coordinate and adjust boundaries through communicative practices, such as trigger warnings and encouraging “love,” as well as through features, such as “blocking” others from disclosive content (Petronio, 2002).

The array of reported motivations presented here deviate slightly from those apparent in extant scholarship on disclosure of sexual assault victimization. This difference stems in part from the fact that many participants included here had reported disclosing to at least one intimate other or had otherwise sought support from others prior to online disclosure; as such, the

experiences related here do not necessarily capture initial disclosures of sexual assault victimization but, rather, initial and subsequent online disclosures. In the context of motivations for revealing concealable stigmatized identities, the included examples affirm the relevance of motivations such as taking control of one's narrative, sense-making, seeking healing or catharsis, informing others, challenging stigma, and providing a source of support for similar others (Andalibi & Forte, 2018a; Chaudoir & Quinn, 2010). They additionally suggest nuances within categories, such as attaching the motivation of naming, speaking out against, or otherwise responding to one's perpetrator to societal factors, which include fighting stigma (Andalibi & Forte, 2018a), to the specific context of sexual assault disclosure.

Considering audience, both in terms of likely and ideal (e.g., reaching out to all Facebook connections with hopes of reaching survivors among them), in combination with expected and realized reactions aids in illuminating how sexual assault survivors draw privacy boundaries and why. In many of the examples presented here, participants appeared most concerned about known offline connections, especially family, encountering and reacting to disclosure. This concern was validated in several cases by extreme negative reported reactions from family and friends. In these cases, participants determined that the risk of consequences resulting from inciting such reactions (e.g., "what are you going to do, unfriend me?") was outweighed by the potential benefits to themselves and others. Indeed, survivors' needs appear centered, even when motivations appear other-oriented. This is significant in that it not only underscores the persistent relevance of risk-reward assessments, but also supports the idea that motivations may be layered or mutually informative. In the following chapter, I consider the ways that motivation, audience, and anticipated reactions are further informed by platform choice as well as the ways in which

visibility management strategies informed by platform features and affordances appear to further shape disclosure decision-making.

## **Chapter 5: Platform Choices and Visibility Management Strategies**

In addition to motivation, audience, and reaction to disclosure, decisions regarding where to disclose shape reported disclosure decision-making processes. In both face-to-face and mediated contexts, where disclosure occurs implicates varying degrees of visibility. That is, spaces are perceived as varying in the degree of privacy and visibility they afford. Social media spaces complicate this assessment by affording myriad abilities for managing both privacy boundaries and content visibility. As discussed in Chapter 3, social media platforms share many similar features, though how these features are configured affects users' perception of these spaces. For instance, Facebook's reciprocated network and "real name" policy facilitate a space with low anonymity, whereas Tumblr's non-reciprocated network structure and pseudonymous usernames facilitate a space that affords a greater degree of anonymity. Audience perceptions vary according to platform as well, as individuals may view a platform such as Facebook as more appropriate for family and "real life" friends, whereas Tumblr may be more appropriate for "Internet friends." In combination, these factors, along with assessments of likely reactions (i.e., risk assessment), may aid in determining where disclosure occurs.

Social media users also leverage the abilities afforded by features to further manage visibility and risk associated with disclosure. Visibility management refers to the strategic use of social media features and affordances to increase, decrease, or maintain the visibility of content to the audience of interest. For example, as discussed later in this chapter, hashtags afford searchability and increased visibility of content. Participants reported several strategies, including previously-identified strategies such as blocking other users from content and disclosing on a secondary platform (Vitak & Kim, 2014), to further adjust privacy boundaries.

Reported strategies also suggest that visibility management may be multifaceted, in that users may limit the visibility of their identity (i.e., through anonymity) and/or their content (i.e., blocking specific users from seeing disclosive posts). In expanding on visibility management strategies, this chapter responds to RQ3 regarding the technological characteristics of social media platforms that shape disclosure decisions. Considering platform choices and visibility management strategies lends depth of understanding to decision-making surrounding to whom and where one discloses as well as points to mechanisms and features leveraged in adjusting and controlling visibility and privacy boundaries surrounding disclosure. I also consider some of the ways in which social media platform structures and policies affect user control over visibility. Instagram's community guidelines, for instance, inform which hashtags are searchable, and thus which hashtags actually afford increased visibility of content. I discuss the implications of these policies further in the following chapter.

### **Platform Choices**

The interactions among motivation, audience, and response are further informed by platform choice, as certain platforms are “understood” to host particular audiences or facilitate certain motivations attached to audience. Instagram, Tumblr, and Twitter were primary collection sites for the social network analysis presented in Chapter 3, though participants reported utilizing numerous additional platforms for disclosure, such as Facebook, blog sites, YouTube, and Reddit. In selecting a platform for disclosure, participants reflected on the differences across platforms more generally and in so doing demonstrated an understanding of the features and affordances available on each. Reviewing these understandings and briefly explicating the differences participants perceived across platforms aids in further refining

understanding of particular functionalities of social media sites that sexual assault survivors may leverage when disclosing.

Scholarship indicates that social media users regard platforms as somewhat unique in their utilities (Zhao et al., 2016), and hold assumptions regarding the appropriate purposes and expected audiences associated with each social media platform. These assumptions may be reinforced or amended according to the types of interactions and experiences users have within these spaces; thus, platforms themselves (and associated expectations) may play a role in the types of reactions expected or received, and perhaps also why such reactions were received. Comments such as “People like my posts more on Instagram, but I get more heartfelt responses on my Facebook” (14) and “[Tumblr] is just that kind of community” (24), speak to expectations of interaction types, informed by experience and observation, for instance. Expectations are also informed by understandings of audience, and of which audience segments correspond to which platforms. As Participant 2 explained:

A lot of adults all over the spectrum have a Facebook page, unlike LinkedIn where it’s mostly older adults who are business professionals, versus Twitter, which is mainly men between the ages of 18 and, I think it’s 25, or something like that. [...] Instagram is mostly female. It’s kind of male and female, but it’s mostly female. And then, also too, YouTube is mostly a male sector.

Participant 15 suggested similar divisions in describing their personal use of platforms:

“LinkedIn is for professional stuff. Instagram is for therapy stuff, like abuse stuff. Facebook is for like, family and friends stuff. I need to have those separate.” These comments suggest differences across platforms in terms of audience and utility; diving deeper into participant

responses exposes additional nuances of each platform and begins to suggest a set of features and social media affordances that affect disclosure choices.

**Facebook.** There appeared somewhat of a consensus that Facebook is where one connected with family, “in real life” friends, and other personal connections forged over multiple life stages (e.g., occupations, schools). This assumption is further informed by Facebook’s terms of use, which limit users to one profile, associated with their “real” name (see Chapter 3). These policies functionally reduce anonymity on the platform as well as allow individuals to recreate offline networks online. Consequently, participants with reported motivations targeting this scope of audience or known connections audience viewed Facebook as a favorable disclosure site. Participant 26, for instance, stated that they disclosed on Facebook in part because of this context collapse:

I suppose it’s because Facebook was, I guess, so far my longest running account on social media. I’m friends with all these people that I don’t even talk to anymore. I’ve had this since I was in middle school or even younger than that possibly. But, I knew that it would somehow reach all these people that I both still talk to and still not talk to, to this day, just because a topic like this is important for anyone to read, everyone needs to be careful about what they say.

Participants also commented on Facebook being a somewhat foundational platform due to its staying power, popularity, and reach, and how this status made the space attractive for disclosure. Participant 18 explained, “I wanted to post on Facebook first because I knew that that would be the easiest way to access everybody in my life,” which included “friends who I haven’t seen in like ten years, who I went to primary school with, or my parents’ best friends, or certain friends I have who are in their 40s or 50s, like old school teachers of mine, or just everyone.”

Indeed, some participants suggested that Facebook's utility and novelty had waned since they joined the platform but remained the best means for maintaining and engaging with such a diverse network. Participant 26 commented, "I feel like Facebook is definitely a dying social media in that nobody really uses it that much in terms of posts anymore, but for events and communication with Facebook messenger it's pretty convenient."

As these examples indicate, the audience of known others believed to be reachable on Facebook surpasses that available on any other platform. For those motivated by a reported desire to inform friends and family of assault, or inform friends as efficiently as possible, Facebook provided an ideal site for disclosure. This interaction between audience and motivation points to an affordance of the platform, namely broadcastability. That is, Facebook affords users the ability to reach a broad audience through a single post. Participant 13 explained their decision to disclose on Facebook in saying, "I think it was to get it out in one piece to as many people as possible, to be honest. Just kind of a blast." Many social media platforms potentially afford broadcastability, or the ability to share content simultaneously to one's entire audience, as is discussed later in this chapter, and it is only through considering audience alongside affordance that "Why Facebook?" becomes clear.

The assumption (or realization) of a broad, context-collapsed audience additionally informed why some participants did not consider Facebook a viable disclosure site. For some, this stemmed from reports that they did not wish to include family, extended friend circles, or other known connections in their disclosure audience. This distinction is stark in the contexts of sex work and sexual exploitation victimization (as opposed to sexual assault disclosure), in which disclosers also had interest in not informing family of their occupation or experiences; as Participant 1 explained, "The saying back then was, pardon my language, but, 'You Tweet your

twat, and you Facebook your family.’” This quote underscores participants’ understandings of audience, not only in reinforcing Facebook as a more private place for familial and other known connections, but also in presenting Twitter as a platform with a more public reach to mostly unknown or business-oriented connections.

For others, the breadth of audience, coupled with the reciprocated, undirected nature of Facebook connections, made Facebook an unattractive space for disclosure. As participant 8 explained:

The person that I was raped by was on Facebook and reached out to me on that following the assault, as well as many of the people that we had mutual—we had common acquaintances, I guess, who followed me on Facebook, or were friends with me on Facebook. And it became just really, really triggering for me to see anything they posted, or to be fearful that I’d have a message from him if I were to log on. So I just stopped using it.

In this case, the reach of Facebook connections and audience prevented the participant from finding the distance between themselves and the memory of assault necessary for healing.

Other participants commented on a lack of control around interactivity with a broad audience, which often intersected with audiences of known connections. Participant 11, for instance, noted:

I’ll get comments on Facebook sometimes from people, they’re older, they’re more the baby boomer generation, where they will just say stuff, and it’s like, “I didn’t post this so that you could make some kind of stupid comment,” you know? [...] I just feel like the conversation, I wouldn’t find the conversation would go where I wanted it to go.

Participant 7 echoed a similar sentiment:

There's some really weird stuff that goes on there, and then it's funny because that's one of the places where people are the least anonymous, because a lot of times their real names and pictures and faces are up there. But they actually tend to be kind of the coldest there, at times. [...] I think that there's a lot of people there who think that they understand what people are talking about, and they don't.

From these responses emerges a sense that a broad audience potentially indicates an uninformed audience, perhaps especially on a platform where networks are organized according to familial and friend relationships rather than according to shared interest.

**Twitter.** In contrast to Facebook, Twitter appeared a space perceived to be conducive to forging connections with unknown others. As participant 27 explained, "I don't really know anybody that personally uses Twitter a lot, so that's more just kind of interacting with the world, not my friends." Some participants, such as participant 10, leveraged this difference in audience to develop networks based on shared interest or experience, rather than offline connection or familial relation. They explained:

I see [discussions of sexual assault] a lot more on Twitter than I do on any of my other social media platforms. ...I follow a lot of people who talk about it, who want to talk about it. And I feel like it's easier and it's a more useful space to talk about it.

Participant 21 reported finding a similar captive audience interested in discussing or listening to stories of sexual assault:

I felt that it was a way to reach more people, especially with—not only am I trying to get out the story of my sexual assault and how I've coped with it, but also mental illness and trying to break the stigma of that. So to me it's a really good way to reach more people, even people I don't know personally, in hopes that my story can help someone else.

These examples speak to the potential value of Twitter as a disclosure space in facilitating motivations pertaining to awareness, challenging stigma, and supporting (unknown) other survivors. Although beyond the scope of this project, several participants noted using Twitter in a professional context to raise awareness of issues and legislation pertaining to sexual exploitation.

Whereas a number of participants reported having a Twitter account, fewer participants reported disclosing on the platform. For some, Twitter usage appeared shaped primarily by the abilities to consume news and “retweet” content. Participant 10, for instance, also reported “a lot of retweeting” in their use of the site; participant 23 similarly noted, “I’m mostly like, retweeting or looking at news organizations and stuff, or like looking at tweets my friends send me, mostly. So not really my own thoughts, usually.” As such, Twitter appears to additionally function as a news outlet, or means to keep updated on current issues of interest; these functions do not require users to write content in order to benefit from or engage with the platform. Additionally, these functions maintain an association between users and content they retweet or favorite; this affords users an ability to gradually disclose, as users can repost informative content or survivor accounts with which they identify without actually identifying as a sexual assault survivor through a personal post. Indeed, the hashtag function of Twitter furthers this ability, and is discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

**Instagram.** Instagram platform appeared both attractive and unattractive to users as a result of this visual component. Participant 18, for instance, explained, “I like the images. I think it’s a great way to get things across, to see what other people are up to. I like to see images instead of just reading.” Others, such as participant 9, who engaged in and posted visual artistry, echoed this sentiment. In contrast, participants like participant 7 said they found Instagram “a

little hit or miss because sometimes it's much more visual, the pictures, and writing can kind of get a little lost, there. And I like to kind of talk, and I like to write." The platform's features thus vary in attractiveness and utility depending on one's preferred form of expression, as well as on assumptions of how audience engaged with content.

Instagram limits users to one account per email address, meaning that users could potentially utilize multiple email addresses to support multiple accounts and profiles without technically violating the platform's terms of use. Facebook acquired Instagram in 2012, and, as such, many users' Instagram networks bear some resemblance to Facebook audiences in that they include known connections. Some participants reported creating secondary "fake Instagram" accounts or "finstas" for disclosure purposes; they said that doing so allowed them to continue to use the platform normally as well as disclose to a more limited and curated audience.

Participant 23 explained:

I have like, a fake Instagram where I just like, post about my thoughts and feelings and stuff, and only my closest friends follow me on that. And so I post a lot about my assault on there, like more about what's going on.

Participant 23 thus said they used a second profile to segment their broader audience and curate a specific audience for disclosure, additionally citing the motivation of updating close friends.

Indeed, this curated and more narrower audience may additionally affect the responses to disclosure received on the platform. Participant 9 explained, "I find that people, strangers, are more likely to message me through Instagram than Facebook, and I think it's because Instagram doesn't make you use your real name. So lots of people on Instagram have secret accounts."

Thus, the naming policy on Instagram may afford not only the ability to navigate context

collapse in audience through maintaining multiple accounts, but also anonymity, which in turn may affect willingness to comment on or interact with other posts/accounts.

Additionally, the ability to curate an audience based on topics of personal importance or interest may result in a greater association between those topics and one's identity on the platform. For instance, participant 9 further explained that posting about sexual assault attracted a particular type of interaction in addition to audience. "Once people know you're doing things about sexual violence, they send you all the things about sexual violence. And so, I sort of feel like my personal page is just like a giant pile of sexual violence anyways" (9). Posted content and interactions with a curated audience may thus reinforce a particular shaping of personal identity on the platform.

Aside from "finstas," participants also reported leveraging the privacy settings on Instagram to control the privacy boundary surrounding content and identity. Participant 11 reported having multiple profiles and keeping their "personal" account private: "I basically just post family pictures [...] I only let people that I know into that private, personal account." In contrast, participant 11 utilized their public profile as a "professional" page and also posted sexual assault disclosures to this public profile. In this way, participant 11 maintained a privacy boundary around their familial life, and, by disclosing elsewhere, maintained a privacy boundary around their sexual assault experiences that removed such content from view of family and known connections.

In further contrast to audiences present on Facebook, participants expressed a sense that audiences on Instagram could also be determined or curated through interest, rather than because of offline association. That is, several participants expressed disclosing on Instagram, with the stated motivation of supporting other survivors, because they felt there was an audience of

survivors already on the platform. This awareness further shaped disclosure, in that some participants were more willing to disclose in the interest of attracting this audience. Participant 15 noted that in contrast to Facebook, where they engaged privacy settings to limit their visibility and did not disclose their sexual assault experience, on Instagram, “I’m completely the opposite. Totally open, because I want other survivors to be able to find me.”

**YouTube.** Although most participants did not report engaging with YouTube, those who did reported doing so to capitalize on the audio-visual qualities of the platform. That is, when participant 21 decided to record rather than write a letter to their rapist, YouTube facilitated distribution of a video with sound. It is worth noting that YouTube videos may be shared to other platforms via links to content or through embedded videos. As such, YouTube videos may potentially be shared with audiences on any other platform listed here. Although participant interviews did not provide sufficient data to comment further on YouTube’s utility as a disclosure site, participants did suggest that it potentially supports important features and affordances, such as a unique type of visibility that affords the communication of paralinguistic cues and emotionality, which may support specific motivations, such as conveying anger toward one’s perpetrator.

**Tumblr.** Often referred to as blogs, Tumblr profiles bear similarities with many of the platforms discussed previously. Users may choose unique user names, provide user-supplied information such as a description or “bio” associated with their blog, and post content from other platforms. Tumblr users may also create multiple blogs under one account (similar to finstas but without the work-around of additional email addresses), and post links, videos, images, audio, etc. without requiring importing from another social media platform. Similar to Facebook, participants considered Tumblr to be somewhat waning in popularity, though even at the height

of Tumblr's popularity it never reached Facebook levels of ubiquity. As a result, Tumblr provided an anonymous space that additionally felt more private, despite default "public" settings. Participant 19 explained:

I know that I have my parents and other relatives on Facebook and even on Instagram, but you don't really see a lot of close relatives on Tumblr. It's a lot of teens just posting different poems. It's a little more personal and more creative for us.

Audiences on Tumblr may thus appear curated according to interest, with perhaps a greater assumption of similar demographic backgrounds (such as age).

Tumblr provided an ideal disclosure space for those seeking an audience of sympathetic others or space to process while also desiring anonymity or privacy from known connections. In elaborating on their use of Tumblr for disclosure, Participant 19 explained:

I decided to make a Tumblr and post some poems, because that was my way of coping. I would write a lot of short stories or poetry, and I figured that that was going to be an easy way to reach out to other survivors who didn't really think about this either or who didn't know how to communicate what they're feeling or what they were experiencing.

This participant's reported motivation to disclose was informed by finding it challenging to process and cope with the apparent reality that their perpetrator faced no significant consequences for assault (e.g., "it didn't occur to me the kind of pain I would feel seeing that he's perfectly fine"). In turning to Tumblr, they thus hoped to process their experiences, seek information, and connect with other survivors of sexual assault. Participant 22 shared a similar experience, explaining, "I tried searching for all these resources, just trying to find an answer. So that's kind of what prompted me to start with Tumblr. It was just, it must be people like me."

Aside from engaging or seeking to engage with others, participants reported finding Tumblr a safe space for processing. Participant 26 viewed Tumblr as a reflective space supportive of a self-focused disclosure motivation, saying:

That was definitely sort of a diary of sorts, a way to express my feelings about the sexual assault case just because I was 16, 17 years old, far too young to be dealing with a sexual assault case and it was a lot of these feelings that I didn't really know how to process. So, writing them down on my Tumblr blog was, I guess, an easy way to communicate those feelings just for myself, it wasn't really for anybody.

Other participants shared an understanding of Tumblr as both a space for processing as well as a creative outlet. Participant 24, for instance, referred to the platform as useful for “venting.” In terms of creativity, participant 20 commented on both the freedom of form available as well as the anonymity of the platform:

My Tumblr is literally for creative writing. That's why I made it. So I feel like I have a bit more freedom to express myself and express my emotional and personal struggles just because there's more of a mask in front of your face, you know.

In addition to creative writing as coping and venting, creative content encountered on Tumblr could also be educational. Participant 7 reflected on consuming others' content and learning more about their own experiences as a result:

I mean, over the course of a couple of years, I learned most of the DSM through memes. Which is hysterical, but it's like, there are these memes, and you're looking at it like, “That's really funny, I do that,” and then in the meme they're going, “Oh by the way, that's dissociation.” It's like, “Well, shit. Now I know what I've been doing for 25 years.”

The propagation of memes occurs on multiple social media platforms, so this is not necessarily unique to Tumblr. That said, the supportive environment assumed by many participant users suggests that memes, or perhaps health-related content more broadly, encountered in this space may have an additional layer of good faith or helpfulness associated with them.

**Blog.** In addition to disclosing on social network sites, some participants reported disclosing on personal blog platforms, such as WordPress. Participants who did so also disclosed on social media sites like Facebook or Twitter, but reported that blogging sites allowed them to journal their experiences as well as engage with particular communities. Participant 14, for instance, noted, “My blog is a lot more personal and it tells quite a few of my memoirs, my domestic abuse memoirs and sexual abuse. I’d say it’s just a lot more private, well, not private, but personal.” Participant 14 started the blog in an effort to raise awareness and access support that was not available offline; their explanation suggests that the blog platform provided a space for important reflection as well as for cultivating a particular and interested audience not appropriate to or available on other platforms. Creating a disclosive space on a platform away from their established networks also allowed participant 14 to draw a privacy boundary separating these networks from their target community as well as to disclose in more depth (Petronio, 2002).

Participant 3 additionally alluded to using a blog to access and contribute to a particular community:

I like to keep up to date with what other leaders in the movement are doing and where they’re speaking and maybe something that is going on in their nonprofit, but I also like to read other people’s things, too, as well as post.

Reportedly, blogs allowed both participant 14 and participant 3 to engage with a specific community they perceived as absent from other platforms. Leveraging blogs as disclosure sites afforded these participants increased visibility to a community/audience of interest; as their established networks were mostly on other platforms, disclosing on blogs also allowed participant 14 and participant 3 to draw a privacy boundary around disclosive content (Vitak & Kim, 2014). Such boundaries are perhaps not as firm as those enforced by blocking individual users; instead, they reduce the likelihood of other users encountering disclosive content unintended for them.

**Reddit.** Distinct from other platforms addressed in this project, Reddit does not meet the definitional criteria of a social media site (see Chapter 4). Several participants, however, reported disclosing on the site and finding it useful in fulfilling their goals. Reddit allows users to create unique usernames and as such is considered a highly anonymous platform. Additionally, “Redditors” interact with each other in comment threads, organized by topic, that allow users to post, respond to, and provide affective feedback on content in the form of up/down votes. As such, networks are organized by topic/interest and audiences are curated based on thread topics. These factors— anonymity and ease of finding like-minded or similar others—seemed to inform participants’ motivation to disclose on Reddit. Participant 23 explained, “Reddit was a good forum for me to talk to other survivors, and also kind of get some answers from people who’d been through a similar situation.” Participant 27 compared the attractiveness of Reddit to other platforms, noting, “I posted openly on Reddit—again because it was anonymous, you know—full details. That’s not something I do on Facebook or Twitter where people can see my face, and my mom might see it.”

As these examples make clear, Reddit is perceived as both anonymous and detached from other social media spaces, as well as more conducive to open expression experience as posters assume the audience is familiar with what the poster is experiencing. As with blogs, Tumblr, and finstas, Reddit was said to be used as a secondary platform by participants, which aided in segmenting their online audiences (Vitak & Kim, 2014). Shifting audience contexts affects users' perception of risks associated with disclosure (Ahrens et al., 2007); the anonymity afforded by Reddit's policies (e.g., pseudonymous usernames) and features (e.g., "throwaway" accounts) may further impact this assessment.

Audience is perhaps especially customizable on Reddit, as users may form "sub-Reddits," or threads dedicated to a particular topic. As participant 7 notes, sub-Reddits can support niche communities that highlight particular facets of trauma experience:

Reddit also has some really good sub-Reddits that are specific to certain types of abuse, narcissistic abuse, complex post-traumatic stress disorder, so I can get into smaller hives of people, in a way, who are very well-versed, whether they know it or not, in the experience. So I can talk there and again, kind of feel safe and comfortable [...] and kind of heard, and maybe more understood.

This assumed familiarity and specificity reportedly allowed participants to easily find similar others that aligned more deeply with the experience for which they sought validation or support; it also allowed a more direct solicitation of support or support exchange, as there is a high probability that there are other survivors in the audience. For those who said they valued anonymity and sought specific information, validation, or a survivor community in which to exchange social support, Reddit provided a valuable platform for disclosure.

A final asset of Reddit worth noting is a sort of do-it-yourself content moderation. That is, discussion spaces (called “sub-Reddits”) are user-created and user-managed, with one or more users designated as moderators. Moderators can instate custom rules for participation in a sub-Reddit. This system contrasts with content moderation on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, which relies on contracted employees to moderate content flagged by users. Reddit moderators police comment threads, approve new members in the case of private sub-Reddits, and mediate conflicts. As such, moderators can have an active role in boundary permeability (e.g., granting new members access to private sub-Reddits) and boundary coordination (e.g., other members grant moderator control over information privacy) (McNealy & Mullis, 2019).

Participant 25 alluded to the impact of effective boundary management by moderators on maintaining a safe-feeling space for disclosure:

I think that Reddit as a community is very supportive and I very rarely see any victim blaming or anything like that on the different sub-Reddits [I follow], and if someone tries to troll someone, they usually get banned within a couple of minutes of posting something negative.

This example, as well as others in which participants describe disclosing on a secondary platform, suggests that effective boundary control (i.e., drawing and enforcing privacy rules and boundaries, delivering sanctions for violation) may make a platform more attractive for disclosure. Participants’ assumptions of platforms (alongside experiences and reactions, as described in the previous chapter), lend further detail to understanding why participants disclose where they do, to whom, and what risks or vulnerabilities they associate with each platform.

### **Visibility Management Strategies**

As defined in Chapter 2, visibility management strategies refer to social media users' deliberate use of social media features and affordances to increase or decrease the relative visibility of disclosive content and associated reactions. In keeping with visibility's position as affordance, visibility is variable (Evans et al., 2016), and as such, strategies afford and constrain, or maintain, increase, and decrease, visibility. Affordances, including those made available through social media features, arise in relation to particular users with particular goals, and as such different users may leverage the same social media feature toward unique ends. Vitak and Kim (2014) considered social media affordances in managing privacy and disclosure risk on Facebook and indicate that users engage in network regulation (e.g., rejecting Friend requests), targeted disclosure (e.g., using Friend Lists), self-censorship (e.g., considering and tailoring content to audience), and content regulation (e.g., using multiple profiles or communication channels, social stenography). These strategies demonstrate that the features and affordances of social media can be strategically leveraged to control privacy boundaries around disclosure, including managing disclosure risks. I frame similar use of features and affordances in terms of visibility management strategies.

In interviews, participants alluded to social media features and functionalities that contributed to or complicated their ability to realize disclosure motivations, reach intended audiences, and manage reactions to disclosure. In this section, I present insights from interviews that connected features to affording or constraining visibility in some capacity, and thus frame visibility as a social media affordance. I also point to interactions between other social media affordances, such as anonymity, and visibility, to suggest how affordances may be combined to manage visibility and risk surrounding disclosure. In highlighting the following strategies, I

indicate “default” status for features to suggest a baseline visibility and point to the primary visibility effect of each.

**Privacy settings: Affording visibility of self.** The ability to toggle public and private settings for user profiles and posted content affords social media users increased control over their visibility on a given platform. That is, public profiles allow users to be relatively more visible to non-networked others, whereas private profiles limit visibility to a user-approved audience. (There are, of course, ways to leverage additional functions of technology, such as screen captures, to share content beyond a private space, though this nuance goes beyond the scope of this project.) All social media platforms considered in this project have privacy features that allow users to make profiles and content private to some degree as well as make content publicly visible to networked as well as un-networked users.

In configuring such settings to “public” or the most permissible options, the visibility of content (and often of the user’s profile information) increases, which facilitates multiple audience-related motivations. Participants reported making content public to leverage increased visibility in pursuit of distributing content to a wider audience. Participant 12 summarized the direct relationship between publicness, visibility, and sharing, in saying “I made it public so that it could be shared.” This relationship further suggests the importance of shareability afforded by social media platforms, in that other users can not only consume content, but they can share it with their own audience through features such as retweeting (Twitter), reblogging (Tumblr), and sharing (Facebook). These features are influenced to some extent by privacy settings but are also determined by platform structure. On Twitter, for instance, protected (private) tweets cannot be retweeted. Instagram does not support a “share” function in that users cannot directly share each other’s posts to their own profiles without use of a third-party application; that said, users may

share others' posts by adding them to their "story," a more ephemeral composite of video or text posts available for only 24 hours after posting. Public settings thus appear associated with greater visibility of self, though the degree of visibility may vary by platform.

Publicness also connects with additional features/aspects of social media, such as sharing and reach, which further informs the degree and specificity of visibility associated with publicness. For instance, participants reported counting on the increased visibility associated with public content to reach specific audiences, including other survivors. "[I'm] totally open. Because I want other survivors to be able to find me," participant 15 explained. Here, visibility of content is associated with visibility of the user more specifically. "That's why I took to social media, because it was the biggest voice I could find to express myself without taking to a microphone in front of [city redacted]," participant 4 echoed. "So I was sitting at home, safely behind a screen and I could reach. I hit public on my setting, and I said what I wanted to say in the fewest words possible." For participant 4, the benefits of social media reach extend beyond other-oriented motivations, as they relate reach to healing directly:

I would probably never have achieved the level of healing that I have, had it not been for the wide reach of people that I have managed to obtain through social media, had I not found it or started using it. [...] Not only am I able to do my job in a way that would not be possible otherwise, but it has impacted me personally in my life, in a way that would have otherwise not been possible.

In these instances, publicness as well as the reach of social media, in which reach refers to the size and perhaps breadth of the audience to whom a user's content is visible, support perceived increased visibility. Several participants indicated that a large audience was a defining feature of social media, something nonreplicable in any other venue. "I'm not sure that there is

another platform [that's] similar," participant 5 explained. "I could put a public service announcement in the newspaper or something." That participants perceived social media as unique in its audience and reach is significant in untangling why, despite vulnerabilities that accompany visibility, disclose on social media; for audience-related and network-related factors such as reaching invisible similar others and raising awareness, there is no comparable space.

The publicness of platforms also afforded a strategy for responding to extreme negative reactions. That is, the multimodality of social media support sharing images of threats and harassment received privately to disclosure or advocacy-related content. Increasing the visibility of threats by posting them publicly afforded participant 4 a degree of control over vulnerability: "It's kind of a measure of protection," they explained. "People think that when you threaten them you'll be quiet, and I think the best place to hide is in public. So I post those kinds of responses" (4). Whereas openness and visibility consequential from permissive privacy settings come with risks, the same settings can be leveraged to increase visibility of and accountability for threats and harassment.

It is important to note that, whereas participants such as 4 and 5 appeared motivated by a desire to speak publicly about assault, not every participant who engaged social media for its reach shared an interest in full publicness. Participant 22, for instance, expressed that Facebook was an appropriate disclosure space because the platform afforded access to known connections, which differed from a fully public audience inclusive of unknown connections. "It wasn't something I was ready to publicly own," they explained (22). "Instead of having conversations a million times with my extended group of friends, it just seemed easier to make a post and tell them that way" (22). This example aids in further underscoring visibility as relative and variable, as participant 22 implies that Facebook is not entirely "public" but rather an already restricted

audience on one side of a site-wide privacy boundary. Thus, disclosing publicly *on Facebook* may not be perceived as synonymous with disclosing publicly.

**Hashtags.** As discussed in Chapter 4, hashtags afford searchability by tagging content with a searchable term as well as connectivity with similarly tagged content. Users do not need to know or follow another user to view tagged content, or even be users of the platform in the case of Twitter (Small, 2011). As such, hashtags intersect with and influence the relative visibility of both disclosures and disclosers in a number of ways; depending on platform, hashtags do not necessarily unilaterally afford visibility, although this appears the primary association.

*Affording visibility.* Hashtags as a social media feature directly affect visibility, as the feature connects content with matching tags and makes this connected content more easily searchable. Some participants drew a direct connection between hashtags and increased visibility, similar to that described above between reach and visibility, such as participant 12's explanation that they used a hashtag "just to gain attention. It makes [a post] show up a lot more and in more places." Participants also found that hashtags increased one's ability to strategically target visibility to particular communities or interests. Participant 14 explained:

I've noticed the hashtags on Instagram really promote [posts]. [...] I kind of study what will reach the people I'm trying to reach; I will Google which hashtags people are posting for domestic violence or sexual assault or sexual abuse, or things that are motivational. And I kind of try to pull those hashtags, and I've seen my Instagram has shot through the roof because of that.

By engaging hashtags of interest to their audience, Participant 14 reportedly and effectively leveraged hashtags to locate and attract their audience. This strategy assumes that the audience of

interest is actively searching those tags, as this is the primary mechanism through which hashtags connect content. As evident in these comments, however, the strategic use of hashtags can indeed increase engagement and interest by affording greater visibility of content.

As the above implies, hashtags are especially useful in making content visible to non-networked users as well as sexual assault survivors more broadly. “If anybody random is going to find my Twitter, it would probably be through a hashtag,” participant 27 noted. Participant 19 connected this practice with a motivation to reach survivors specifically, saying, “I chose those hashtags because I felt like those are the ones that are going to reach out to the sexual assault survivors more directly.” These insights highlight the ability of hashtags to connect users with similar interests, and by extension, further network-level (and survivor-focused, more specifically) motivations (Andalibi & Forte, 2018a). Indeed, participant 6, reportedly motivated by a goal of advocating for survivors and sexual assault awareness, indicated, “I started going to my Instagram, which is my main source of advocacy, because you can reach a lot of people with different hashtags.” Thus, hashtags afford visibility of content in the context of network-level and survivor-focused motivations, such as advocacy, educating others, and supporting survivors (Andalibi & Forte, 2018a).

Importantly, hashtags were discussed not only for aiding in making content visible, but in making users visible as well. This distinction aids in highlighting the ways that hashtags can be leveraged to delineate community and connection, strategic ends supported by the interactivity of social media. Whereas hashtags aid in finding similar others, as discussed above, this does not necessarily translate into material connection or interaction, as viewing a profile does not guarantee or necessitate connection/interaction. That said, some participants noted that even

seeing others post content with a hashtag related to sexual assault could be enough to spark a sense of community. Participant 17 explained:

The fact that you can use the hashtag and you can search, you know, other posts that people may post online that are similar to yours, [...] if you click on that, or if you use that as a hashtag you'll see other people posting and that there is a community, an online community that pertains specifically to that, whatever topic it is that you're searching for [with] the hashtag.

Participant 12 similarly explained, "Sometimes when you're feeling bad you search things, just to kind of gain that community around you, I guess." These examples underscore that, for a topic such as sexual assault, which is subject to powerful silencing and social stigma, simply witnessing others talk about the subject can feel encouraging.

Additional insights further link visibility and encouragement. Participant 21 noted, "I saw how [#MeToo] grew and to me, I felt like people were coming together to support those brave enough to say, 'You know what? It's happened to me, too.'" In thinking about how disclosive posts might help or support other survivors, participant 13 viewed hashtags as a way to boost the availability of their posts in pursuit of this purpose. They explained:

Mostly [I'm] just using keywords and phrases just so that if someone's searching these hashtags, that they'll see someone out there that might not be okay all the time, but that it's okay to talk about it and it's okay to reach out and just to show my support that way as well.

As these suggest, hashtags can boost the visibility of content as well as increase community.

The consequences of reaching out to survivors via hashtags are often unrealized or imperceptible, however, in that posters may not receive direct feedback linking hashtags with

connection. Some participants, however, did directly attribute connection and interactions with others to hashtags. Participant 6, for instance, explained:

I know that a lot of people have found me through them [hashtags]. A bunch of people have actually said that they searched the hashtag [redacted], which is something that I frequently use on my advocacy posts. And they looked through my posts, looked through my profile, and they were like, “This is someone who has gone through something similar.” And they felt comfortable enough with what I was saying to message me.

Others drew a similar connection between #MeToo and perceived heightened discussion and interaction around sexual assault. Participant 11, for instance, noted, “I feel like since October [when #MeToo went viral] I only get messages from women that tell me they love my artwork, or they’re inspired by me, or they love what I have to say.” To observe others speaking more openly and freely about a topic functionally “breaks the silence” and begins the process of destigmatizing the topic (Andalibi, 2019); feeling as though others are speaking more openly about sexual assault may also reduce the sense of alienation felt by survivors, as suggested in discussion of #MeToo’s influence on disclosure in the previous chapter.

***Gradual disclosure as managing and constraining visibility.*** In addition to searchability and facilitating connection, hashtags afford posters a greater degree of control over disclosure by providing a means for gradual disclosure. That is, a number of participants reported using hashtags as a way to test the waters, so to speak, or to associate their experience with sexual assault without a declarative statement. “I still don’t outwardly reference it, but I always include it in my hashtags, always,” participant 15 said. Participant 11 expanded on this usage by explaining:

It's like, I'm saying it, [but] I'm not really saying it. [...] I could just be talking to these people, because I want to join this conversation. I guess it just feels like a softer blow if I talk about it from a between the lines kind of way.

In this way, participants said that they drew on topical tags to align their identification as a sexual assault victim/survivor with an ambiguously disclosive post. In other words, posts could reference an aspect of assault recovery, such as experiencing nightmares or panic attacks, that is not necessarily specific to sexual assault, with a more declarative tag to at once cement one's identification with sexual assault experience while also buffering oneself from risks associated with more declarative disclosure.

Platform choices additionally inform how hashtags relate to content and ambiguity. That is, on Twitter, hashtags appear as part of the tagged tweet, providing minimal separation between content and tags (reinforced by the brevity of tweets), whereas on Instagram, hashtags may be separated entirely from a user's caption and instead be included in a comment by the user on their own post. Doing so allows the post to still be searchable under included tags, but it alters the visibility of tags by requiring readers to open comments to view them. Thus, in addition to topically aligning ambiguous posts with sexual assault to make gradual or partial disclosures visible, hashtags can themselves be made less visible through platform structures to also support gradual/partial disclosures. Considering that hashtags are especially well-suited in making content visible to non-networked others, strategies that downplay the visibility of tags themselves may provide a method for negotiating context collapse in one's imagined audience; in other words, these strategies may be utilized to make disclosure less visible to already networked others.

Participants who used Tumblr reported similar strategies using hashtags to partially or subtly disclose, though the unique structure of hashtags on Tumblr supports additional nuance in this regard. That is, they alluded to a “culture” of “writing in the hashtags what you don’t want to write in the full post,” as participant 24 explained. On Tumblr, hashtags may include spaces and punctuation, similar to natural writing (on other platforms, including spaces or punctuation interrupts and effectively ends the tag); this translates into the ability to write complete thoughts as hashtags and use them to clarify the content of a post, rather than simply associate content with a topical hashtag. Additionally, hashtags on Tumblr do not “stick” to posts, meaning that if another user reblogs (shares) tagged content, only the post content and not the tags will be reblogged. This grants hashtags on Tumblr flexibility in form and ephemerality distinct from other platforms. Given this flexibility, participants such as 24 reported using hashtags on Tumblr to engage with different audiences:

For certain [tags], like ones where I clarify, it’d be more for the people that are seeing it on my dashboard, so people who follow me. Whereas when I use common nouns or anything pertaining—like if I just did “#anxiety” or something like that, then it’d be more for the community, for people who just look through that hashtag regularly.

At least for participant 24, clarifying hashtags appear intended for an existing audience of followers or friends, while topical hashtags appear intended to boost the visibility of posts for users searching particular tags.

The flexibility of hashtags on certain platforms suggests that hashtags afford numerous abilities beyond visibility and ambiguity/clarification. Participant 8, for instance, explained that hashtags afforded more than just gradual disclosure; they afforded a gentler tool for processing, a

sense of control over interactivity and privacy, and a mechanism for receiving support as well as providing it.

It was like a quiet way for me to say, “this is what I relate it to” or “this is why I’m connecting with this,” without having to say or feel like I was shouting, like, “I was raped,” you know? Or, “I am a victim of sexual assault.” I could just use a hashtag as this little blip of, okay, there it is. And it was almost for me, looking back—I didn’t think all of this at the time—But it just felt right because I think it was a way for me to start accepting the reality of that and not keeping it so internalized because I had a lot of shame around it, which is really normal. But I just felt so much shame. Using a caption in a way almost felt like it was asking people to respond to it, and that would’ve been too much. It would’ve been like, I would’ve felt that pressure to explain myself, or felt like I had somehow invited conversation about it that I wasn’t comfortable having. Whereas a hashtag, it was like, okay, here’s this little thing. Some people won’t even notice it. If they do, they might not necessarily assume it’s intimately connected to me. But if they did realize that, that’s okay. Then it’s like, there it is. They know but I didn’t have to tell them directly. And the other part was that I would search a hashtag like that to see that I wasn’t alone, I guess. I would say, “okay, if I look for [redacted], are other people posting? What kinds of things were they posting? Maybe I’ll find something comforting in their posts.” And then as I started to recover a little bit, it became, maybe I’ll use the hashtag so if someone else is looking, this will come up. And maybe it will help them feel comforted or less alone. (8)

This excerpt and preceding examples illustrate that individual users can (and, reportedly, do) associate myriad affordances with a single feature. In exploring their use of hashtags for

gradual disclosure, participant 8 identifies additional goals pursued through using hashtags and reaffirms the idea that affordances are closely tied to individual goals as well as the fact that a survivor's needs, motivations, and usage of social media may shift in accordance with shifts in their recovery process.

As these examples suggest, hashtags may be leveraged for visibility management in numerous ways in pursuit of motivations. In some contexts, however, participants noted that the visibility afforded by hashtags had less beneficial outcomes. For instance, even as hashtags afforded gradual or subtler disclosure to others, for some, hashtags made trauma too visible to the poster. Participant 8 explained:

Sometimes, I don't use hashtag [redacted] even if I am posting a poem or a quote or something that I definitely do associate with my recovery. Because it's almost like, sometimes I'm just tired of acknowledging that it's still making me feel that way. [...] It's like, ugh, this once again is relating to sexual assault and how it's affecting my life, and I don't want to acknowledge that in this post, even though it's my reality.

This reflection suggests a boundary between self-focused and other categories of disclosure motivations, where the question "For whom?" acquires additional relevance; hashtags may be vague or ambiguous to others, but in tagging posts, disclosers are aware of their hashtags' meaning, importance, and relation to content, and they may serve as an unwelcome association or reminder of assault.

In a similar sense, participant 16 noted that searching hashtags they used sometimes resulted in feeling overwhelmed by others' emotions and trauma, and didn't benefit them in the way they hoped others would benefit from searching assault-related hashtags. They explained:

Hashtagging is a labyrinth of chaos. And I don't know that I have figured it out yet. Now, I started using hashtags like [redacted]. Then, when I go backwards and search inside those hashtags and try to find people who maybe enjoy my content that I could form a relationship with or start engaging in their content, I was finding that I was not able to... I didn't feel clean. I didn't feel good. People who, unfortunately, right now are using the hashtags that I think you found me through are very angry. And God bless, we should all be angry. But it wasn't empowering. [...] Okay, I'm going to use a gross analogy. It's like when you're eating cheese curds and you understand that you're going to get sick but you're going to keep eating them anyway because you have to, because they're cheese curds. So it was kind of that feeling being inside that hashtag. It's like, I know I'm going to emotionally react to this. This isn't helping me. This isn't serving me. I'm going to keep doing this and I don't know how to stop. So I had to remove myself. And even though I use those hashtags to try and bring people to my story, to help them understand that, "there's nothing wrong with you if you can't sleep through the night, it just is what it is and these are ways that I can help," backwards searching and looking through the hashtags hasn't been a positive experience for me.

This example highlights the relational aspect of visibility, that there is both a "seer" and a "seen" (Brighenti, 2007). Whereas asymmetrical visibility is common on social media (e.g., content producers and "lurkers"), reciprocity is often implied or latently possible. In other words, in affording visibility of oneself to others through hashtags, the connective aspect of hashtags additionally makes others visible to oneself. As such, discussions of visibility management should also consider privacy boundary construction and regulation as strategic and as not

drawing necessarily on features that constrain visibility (e.g., hashtags are always searchable, but a visibility management strategy might be to not engage in searching).

**Privacy settings: Constraining visibility of self.** In contrast to publicness as a means of increasing visibility, participants also reported that private settings allowed them to control, more specifically by constraining, visibility. Whereas being public allowed others to find one's content, being private was reported to aid in controlling who was granted access to that content. Publicly disclosing sexual assault victimization on social media was an eligibility requirement for participation in this project; however, several participants reported also engaging in disclosure on private accounts or in private groups, such as Facebook groups.

This example furthers the association between visibility management and privacy features as well as the association between visibility and vulnerability. That is, participants reported finding private Facebook groups safe and productive, attributes that appear directly informed by reduced/controlled visibility. As participant 7 explained, "I created a private Facebook group just for [a therapy group] that you can't even search for. It doesn't exist unless I invite you." Such groups exemplify the extreme of restrictive privacy settings; a privacy boundary that is invisible until one is intentionally informed of its existence. In this case, the privacy boundary mirrors the type of privacy boundary that exists in an offline group therapy space, where shared information is considered privileged information, and non-members are generally prohibited from participating or even lurking.

In so doing, private groups afford not only privacy through constrained visibility, but also a form of safety. Participant 4, in the context of trafficking, discussed forming private groups for survivors and utilized an in-depth screening process to vet and approve new members. In explaining their logic, participant 4 noted:

The information that's going to be disclosed in there is very sensitive, for one. Number two, there are a lot of predators on social media. In order to prevent a predator from getting into a group like that, it can't be open to the public. [...] It protects all the people [in the group] from somebody who is a predator from somehow getting access to a survivor of sexual exploitation or assault.

In suggesting that social media structures and policies inadequately prevent predators from being active, participant 4 implies an additional dimension of visibility related to user identity, that of anonymity. That is, anonymity constrains the ability of users to assess another user's identity, intentions, and threat posed to others. In discussing social media, there is a temptation to separate online realms from the offline world, when no such separation exists in reality: Social media users are real people, some of whom intend to inflict real harm on others. Precautions such as screening and privacy settings (or lack thereof) have material consequences. I return to this idea in Chapter 6.

**Blocking: Constraining visibility of self and to self.** Whereas adjusting privacy settings afforded some control over visibility, the block feature present in some form on many social media platforms affords the ability to control visibility (i.e., restrict) on a user-by-user basis. On Twitter and Tumblr, "block" means that a blocked user will not see any of the content posted by the blocking user. On Facebook and Instagram, this feature exists as well, though with additional functionality and specificity. Facebook relationships are reciprocated, and users may engage "mute" and privacy features to permit this connection to remain in tact while also controlling the information flow between two users. That is, one may mute a user, meaning none of the muted user's content will be seen by the muting user, or one may block a user from seeing certain types of content or a particular post. Similarly, on Instagram, one may mute a user as above; block a

user, preventing them from seeing the blocking user's content and profile (and thus preventing them from refollowing); or "remove" a follower, severing the directed connection between them (but without notifying the removed user, according to the platform). Overall, blocking constrains visibility in two ways: by reducing the visibility of one's content to others and by reducing the visibility of others to oneself.

Reducing the visibility of one's content to others relies on more nuanced use of the blocking feature, such as blocking a post(s) to a particular user. Participants reported such functions were particularly helpful in maintaining "normalcy" while simultaneously controlling the privacy boundary around disclosure. Participant 22, for instance, reported blocking family members connected on Facebook from seeing disclosive posts. Similarly, participant 27 noted being rather open on social media about sexual assault but still blocking their mother from seeing disclosive posts. Doing so allowed greater control of the privacy boundary surrounding disclosive content without signaling boundary exclusion through a more extreme action, such as "un-friending" or severing the connection.

Participants said they utilized more severe block functions for more egregious users and commenters, including perpetrators and harassing strangers, and blocked as a means of reducing the visibility of others to oneself. As participant 6 explained in regards to a known perpetrator, "I have him blocked on all social media so that he can't contact me, and his family can't contact me." In this case, blocking affords a powerful degree of separation between perpetrator and survivor. In regards to strangers, participant 7 referred to the block feature as "one of my favorite tools in the entire world." They explained:

I think that's the best way to engage with the people who are using social media to harass, and pile on negativity, and victim blame, which is something that I see all the

time. [...] I just think that if they're the kind of person who will take time out of their day to blame a victim, that they don't even know, who's already been through something horrible, that's probably not somebody who can teach me anything of value.

These examples, coupled with the observations mentioned above, indicate that blocking affords users multiple abilities and degrees of separation. Blocking or removing a follower outright severs a connection completely and appears most useful in the context of interactions with unknown users as well as with perpetrators of violence, whereas muting followers or blocking specific users from particular posts allows users to maintain a sense of continued connection (one's mother might notice if she were suddenly blocked or unfriended, for instance) while still restricting access at the level of all content or to a particular post.

**Anonymity: Constraining visibility of self to others.** In interviews, participants alluded to additional features that afforded additional control over visibility, privacy, and audience. As noted in Chapter 4, several participants noted that Instagram felt more anonymous than Facebook to them. Participant 15 linked this anonymity explicitly to the fact that user-provided content on Instagram includes fields for (and policy permits) pseudonymous usernames and a customizable biography, both published to one's profile. Although one bio field is labeled "name," policy does not require this disclosure, and users may supply alternative information, such as a profile description or epigraph, or leave the field empty. These fields are also editable, allowing users to adjust their self-presentation and relative level of anonymity. "It's only very recently, in the last few weeks, that I put my name on there, like in parentheses it says [my name]," participant 15 noted of their Instagram. "That was a huge step for me...but I did that because I thought I've got nothing to hide, but at the same time, I want to maintain a little privacy." Participant 15 also noted that adding their name aided in disambiguating their account from that of a support

organization. Adding their name increased their visibility and importantly identified them as an individual, which may have contributed to a sense of vulnerability.

Indeed, the ability to customize usernames is an influential determinant of anonymity, and visibility by extension. Participant 27, for instance, found the relative anonymity of America Online's Instant Messenger (AIM) chat forums helpful in disclosure. AIM was released in 1997 and discontinued in December 2017 (AOL, 2018). Anonymity in this context refers both to user-customized, pseudonymous usernames, as well as chat rooms based on interest rather than locations, and the relative invisibility of chat forums (chat forum engagement was not privy to or traceable by other users when the platform was active). Additionally, given the relatively anonymous nature of chat forums, there was a reduced likelihood of disclosure being associated with or following the participant offline. Participant 27 explained:

I started talking about it a little bit on AOL. [...] I felt safe to do that because it was really anonymous at the time. No one knew—most people I knew didn't get on AOL chat forums, and then my mom didn't look at it, so I was pretty open with my experience there.

This example suggests that anonymity can also be related to disclosure, in that feeling more anonymous reportedly facilitated participant 27's willingness and depth of disclosure; furthermore, the perceived lack of association/connection to offline friends and knowing that their mom did not use it afforded the ability to draw a privacy boundary around disclosure that explicitly excluded their mom.

In a previous section, participant 4 commented on the role of private groups as potentially safer for survivors than publicly accessible discussion spaces; this perspective appears informed by an understanding of the darker side of anonymity, which allows perpetrators to masquerade as

well-intentioned discussion group participants or allies. For other participants, the anonymity potentially afforded by social media platforms other than Facebook appears instrumental in their disclosure decision-making, as anonymity corresponds with a perceived reduction of risk resulting from disclosure. “I knew I was completely anonymous so I wasn’t worried,” participant 24 explained about disclosing on Reddit. “My biggest concern was just that somebody would give me bad advice and I’d take it.” This comment encapsulates the double-bind of social media anonymity: Anonymity affords a buffer, both from responses and judgment from known connections and from being “exposed” as one’s offline identity, while also obscuring the credibility and trustworthiness of other social media users. Participant 27, as discussed, similarly noted that the anonymity afforded in AOL chat forums provided a buffer between their disclosure and known connections, especially their mother.

These examples underscore that anonymity may be more readily perceived as an affordance, or more useful as an affordance, when there is a particular audience from which one wants to keep disclosure, such as known connections. Participant 25 echoed this in saying, “I think that having the anonymity of Reddit helped a bit, but I sometimes get worried, [like] what if someone figures out what my username is, or different things like that.” This worry is informed by Reddit’s interface, which allows unique, pseudonymous usernames and does not require email verification to create an account, making the platform more available for use as well as more available for use with multiple accounts. Regardless, these examples underscore the need, in considering anonymity in connection with visibility management, to additionally consider factors such as anonymity as constraining visibility “for whom” and “from whom.”

**Distance: Asynchronicity and persistence as constraining visibility to self.** In addition to distance from one’s identity, as afforded by anonymity, social media can afford distance from

one's disclosure and from others' reactions to that disclosure, which in turn aid in managing visibility of reactions to oneself. More specifically, participants expressed a sense that one could walk away from social media in a way that would not be possible in an offline setting characterized by physical co-presence, due to the persistence of social media content (e.g., one can find, capture, or return to posted content) and asynchronicity (e.g., sender and receiver do not need to be attending to a conversation at the same time for it to continue) of communication on social media. In initially disclosing to known connections, participant 7 explained:

I just said, well, this is kind of like the shotgun method, and I can write it once, and kind of be, not done with it, but just kind of get it out there. And then, I can kind of see how the world reacts to it, and also I don't have to be directly there. [...] It was a bit of a barrier where it's like, I could throw it out there, but there was only so much that people could throw back in, because I could kind of control that.

Participant 7 references the reach and broadcastability as well as asynchronicity of social media communication. In combination, these affordances allow users to exert control over when and under what circumstances a conversation about disclosive content takes place. Consequently, users can effectively constrain the visibility of reactions to disclosure until it is advantageous to view them, by relying on these affordances and walking away from the platform. As with engaging or not with hashtag communities, adherence to personal boundaries (e.g., "I won't look at this until I'm ready") appears to play an important role in constraining the visibility of responses.

Some platforms, such as Tumblr, however, support distance between user and content more directly. Participant 22, for instance, utilized the queue functionality of the blog to continue

to produce content related to sexual assault while maintaining emotional distance from the topic.

They explained:

I liked that I could schedule posts or build up a queue and it would post automatically.

[...] I have my queue set up to post twice a day. But this is not a topic I can put my focus in every day, and I don't really think anyone should. It's very hard. So, when I set up a long queue, it gives me the freedom of, if I'm having a good day or a good afternoon, I don't have to worry about delving into this topic by signing onto Tumblr.

This example speaks to the reality that coping with or recovering from sexual assault can feel all consuming; the ability to schedule posts in advance thus afforded participant 22 emotional and mental distance from the topic as well as control over this distance (e.g., queues could be paused), while still allowing them to produce content in pursuit of their goals (reminding similar others that they are not alone, making the impact and recovery process following sexual assault more 'real' to those who have not experienced it). Similar to participant 8's comments regarding hashtags as a constant reminder of trauma, participant 22's insight underscores the importance of potential distance between discloser and disclosure, and of managing the visibility of trauma to oneself.

**Limitations of visibility management strategies.** Despite the array of visibility management strategies drawn on by sexual assault survivors presented here, there are limitations on social media users' abilities to meaningfully manage the visibility of sexual assault disclosures (and associated responses) both of and to themselves. As Bossetta (2018) argues in connection to political campaigns on social media, factors such as network structure (e.g., un/directed connections), functionality, and algorithmic filtering affect how users navigate social

media platforms in pursuit of motivations. I focus here on the influence of algorithms and policies affecting hashtags on visibility management strategies.

Content presented on each social media platform is determined and organized based on algorithms, complex calculations that shape how content is presented; at a minimum, such commands impact content audience, reach, and the order in which it is presented on platform content feeds. Participant 16, having taken business courses focused on social media, expressed an understanding of some of the ways such algorithms affected content:

With Facebook's new algorithm changes that happened [recently], I haven't had much engagement on Facebook. And I don't know how much of that is because people have unfollowed my content or because of Facebook just not favoring business pages anymore.

These platform structures were not accessible or transparent to users and additionally affected content visibility via features such as hashtags. Acknowledging this opacity aids in underscoring that user control over content is relatively cursory, and the structures and policies upon which users rely may change unpredictably.

Hashtags provide another example of features shaped by platform and policy decisions. Instagram, for instance, enforces community standards in part through banning hashtags thought to relate to unsavory and illegal activities (Gerrard, 2018). Such bans are somewhat dynamic and often unnoticeable until stumbled upon by users. As participant 15 explained, "I think people report that hashtag, because all of a sudden sometimes it's unavailable or all of a sudden there'll be nothing." Banned hashtags are discernable through searching, in that banned tags will return no search results.

At the time of this project, #Rape was banned and unsearchable on Instagram; this is perhaps justified given the plethora of material tagged #Rape on Twitter that would violate Instagram community standards, though the searchability of proximate topical tags such as #RapeVan perhaps undermines the logic informing tag ban policies. Similarly, functions on certain platforms appeared to supercede the affordances of hashtags, although hashtags were also supported by the platform. For example, on Facebook where hashtagging “doesn’t really do as much,” according to participant 12, hashtags appeared less helpful in boosting the visibility or searchability of content. As a result, the features and functionality of features, such as hashtags, may additionally influence platform choice, depending on the motivations pursued through disclosure.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter delves deeper into the question of how social media platform choice, features, and motivation interact and shape visibility management strategies used by sexual assault survivors. Visibility management strategies draw on social media features and affordances to increase or decrease the relative visibility of disclosive content. In stigmatized disclosure contexts, visibility resultant from revelation of information is associated with vulnerability, as disclosure is inherently risky (Dindia, 1998). Consequently, the ability to increase or decrease content visibility deliberately and selectively carries real implications, in terms of where and to whom survivors disclose as well as their own safety.

Strategic management of visibility appears additionally informed by motivation; as might be expected, motivations supported by access to a wide audience are associated with strategies that primarily increase visibility of content or user, while self-focused motivations and privacy boundary restriction are associated with strategies that primarily decrease visibility of content or

user. Restrictive strategies are also used to constrain visibility both of the user/content (e.g., blocking family from seeing disclosive posts) and to the user (e.g., blocking perpetrator from contacting survivor on social media).

Platform structures and policies further shape the degree of control over visibility granted to users. Depending on platform, for instance, hashtags both afford and constrain visibility of content; on most platforms hashtags afford visibility through searchability, whereas Tumblr's formatting standards and reblogging functionality constrain visibility by permitting disclosure through hashtags that cannot be easily shared/reblogged. Importantly, visibility management strategies that primarily constrain visibility, even temporarily, appear impactful when utilized for survivor safety or healing. That is, blocking constrained visibility of trolls, harassment, and users who negatively responded to disclosure; distance afforded in part through asynchronicity and permanence of social media allowed users to step away physically and emotionally from both their own disclosive content (e.g., Tumblr queues) and responses to disclosure when needed. In contrast, visibility management strategies that constrain the visibility of the user, such as anonymity, presented trade-offs that counter beneficial outcomes. For instance, perpetrators and trolls may leverage anonymity in attempts to harm survivors or infiltrate safe spaces for survivors. Such outcomes and trade-offs reinforce the importance of strategy, as indicative of goal-orientation, as a dimension of visibility.

The array of strategies I present here begin to suggest the ways in which motivation and platform choice inform disclosure and management of disclosure visibility, as well as management of vulnerabilities associated with disclosure. In the next chapter, I expand on implications for privacy boundary construction and maintenance.

## Chapter 6: Conclusion

The decision to disclose sexual assault on social media rests on a complex negotiation among motivation, risk, audience, anticipated reactions, social media platform, and affordances. The findings presented make several contributions to the literature. Findings related to RQ1, presented in Chapter 4, support and expand on a set of motivational factors informing sexual assault victimization disclosure on social media. More specifically, participant responses suggest that individuals can and do pursue multiple motivations simultaneously (Ahrens et al., 2007), often a combination of self-focused and other-focused categories. Participant responses, for instance, highlight the salience of providing social support (other-focused), in addition to seeking social support (self-focused), as a motivation for disclosure.

The responses participants reported receiving to disclosure were said to both influence motivation to continue disclosing as well as the perception of whether disclosure motivations and goals had been realized. For instance, the array of positive responses that participants reported validates disclosure as a means of reaching out to and supporting other sexual assault survivors, as well as educating others. That is, participants reported receiving positive feedback, such as validation and thanks, as well as requests for support in response to disclosure. As such, many participants reported satisfaction with disclosure or that they were making progress toward a goal; some participants reported feeling as though they had not yet accomplished their goal, which motivated them to continue disclosing and talking about sexual assault.

Although seeking social support was not an especially prominent reported motivation, several participants did express that they turned to social media in order to access resources such as information and social support. In combination, support seeking and support provision as motivations for disclosing on social media respond to RQ2 by suggesting a possible link between

online and offline worlds. That is, participants who said they were unsatisfied with the resources available to them offline also said that they turned to social media in order to seek—and in some cases, create and share—the resources they needed. In these examples, social media potentially expand the range of resources available to survivors, which, in the absence of offline resources, makes social media a valued component of broader social support and recovery systems.

The novelty of social media as a disclosure site goes beyond access to information and resources. As discussed in Chapter 2, social media differs from face-to-face contexts of disclosure in several ways, including its “masspersonal” quality, which blends aspects of interpersonal and mass communication (O’Sullivan & Carr, 2018). Social media features also make available unique perceived abilities, or affordances, which users strategically employ in pursuit of a goal. In regards to RQ3, participants reported leveraging myriad social media features and affordances, such as visibility, to further their disclosure motivations; for instance, those wishing to disclose to their entire network at once drew on the broadcastability afforded by the platform to make their disclosure visible to this audience. Participants said they also drew on affordances to constrain the visibility of disclosure when this was advantageous in pursuing a motivation, or when doing so aided in privacy boundary maintenance and turbulence resolution.

When combined with insights from social network analysis, presented in Chapter 3, participants’ comments regarding visibility management and responses to disclosure respond to RQ4 by mapping a disclosure network that is not fully perceptible from quantitative social network analysis alone. That is, survivors reported leveraging multiple communication channels, such as public posts and private messages, and visibility management strategies, such as using hashtags, to pursue motivations (e.g., supporting other survivors) and maintain privacy boundaries. Social network analysis results show analyzed Twitter hashtag networks as fairly

disconnected, with the majority of disclosive tweets as isolates. These snapshots fail to capture exchanges that occur not in direct response to disclosive content, but via private messages, other platforms and channels (e.g., texting), and offline. The complexity of these disclosure networks showcases the ways social media features and affordances manipulate visibility and make privacy boundaries customizable and individuated.

In the remainder of this chapter, I reflect further on findings from this project as well as on implications for theory and practice. In particular, findings regarding visibility management strategies carry implications for anti-violence practitioners who use social media to engage with survivors, provide resources, and challenge social stigma surrounding sexual assault. I also address opportunities for additional research and limitations of this project.

### **Visibility Management Strategies**

Throughout these chapters, I have suggested that visibility influences disclosure decision-making at several points. At a foundational level, visibility is deeply entwined with disclosure and parallels revelation processes (as revelation occurs, revealed information gains visibility). That visibility is also associated with vulnerability further underscores the relationship between disclosure and risk as well as the necessity for risk management (Petronio, 2002). In online contexts, risk management is performed in part through visibility management strategies, which aid in controlling the visibility of disclosive content to particular audiences (Vitak & Kim, 2014), as well as in controlling the visibility of negative reactions from social media users to the disclosing user (Pearce et al., 2018).

Understood in combination with motivation, visibility management strategies aid in, if not shifting the balance of power associated with visibility to the discloser, then providing the discloser with some degree of control over disclosive content, however cursory (Thompson,

2005). That is, in pursuit of audience-focused or network-level motivations (Andalibi & Forte, 2018a), visibility is often amplified, and risks associated with visibility may be outweighed by the perceived benefits of reaching one's audience and/or supporting others, educating others, and raising awareness of sexual assault. In pursuit of self-focused motivations, visibility supported through the permanence and accessibility of many social media platforms provides a means of reflecting upon and keeping track of one's recovery process. Participants primarily pursuing self-focused motivations reported constraining visibility of self through anonymity practices and platform choices, thus tempering risks associated with identity revelation.

In managing visibility of negative responses, participants reported strategically decreasing and increasing the relative visibility of such responses (Mendes et al., 2018). Blocking users who responded negatively provides one means of constraining visibility to the discloser, for instance, while posting threats and extreme comments (as participant 4 reported doing) increases the visibility of negative responses to the discloser's broader audience. Both strategies shift power away from those who perpetuate judgment, victim blaming, and stigma of sexual assault by severing communicative channels and by refusing to be silent about assault. As such, findings in this area echo the paradox of social media as at once making "the distribution of online vitriol easy, persistent, and vicious" while also being "extremely positive in generating community, connection, and support for feminist views, and solidarity in calling out rape culture" (Mendes et al., 2018, p. 244).

Social media features and affordances such as hashtags and anonymity appear especially influential in affording control over visibility. Participants who reported pursuing primarily self-focused motivations said they drew on social media platforms and profiles separated from their established networks to create a privacy buffer around disclosive content while still allowing

their profiles to be found by similar others. Risks associated with vulnerability stemming from permissive privacy settings were further tempered by anonymity, in that there appeared higher stakes attached to being identified as one's "real" self than to being found at all. This strategic negotiation of visibility leverages social media affordances and spaces to prioritize the visibility of content while minimizing the visibility of self, and importantly facilitates a secondary motivation of supporting invisible similar others.

Twitter results presented in Chapter 3 indicate that a large proportion of disclosive tweets marked with sexual assault-related hashtags constituted isolates and/or received little engagement (with few notable exceptions) in the form of favorites and retweets. Despite this apparent lack of connection to other vertices in the network, some sexual assault survivors may perceive the searchability, rather than the connectability, afforded by hashtags as more influential, though in interviews participants reported drawing on both abilities. Leveraging searchability makes such hashtagged content more akin to beacons than bridges in the network, and underscores how visibility may be variously and strategically managed through a single feature. Again, however, such posts tended to receive low engagement, which could be acceptable or frustrating, depending on users' motivations (French & Bazarova, 2017).

Such tagged disclosures, however, may serve an important function in supporting and validating non-networked others. On platforms such as Twitter, Tumblr, and Instagram, hashtags are publicly searchable and do not require connection (or even membership, in the case of Twitter) to other social media users to browse. As such, social support and validation present in hashtagged sexual assault disclosures and related content may still be accessible to sexual assault survivors who are not themselves visible on social media as survivors. In this way, online spaces such as social media may importantly provide resources to a broader and invisible community of

survivors. Indeed, this underscores the importance of sexual assault survivor advocacy groups' social media visibility and engagement as a means of supporting and validating survivor experiences as well as challenging the stigmatization and silencing of sexual assault survivors (Moors & Webber, 2013).

In interviews, participants referenced receiving affective feedback (e.g., likes) on disclosive content, albeit perhaps less than received on non-disclosive content. Additionally, participants noted a contrast in comments and reciprocal disclosure received on disclosive posts compared to through private channels. That is, reciprocal disclosures of sexual assault victimization were often received through private messages or, in some cases, in person. These channels constrain visibility to a dyadic or near dyadic context and do so perhaps to maintain a level of privacy around reciprocated disclosures. That platforms support both teleological and dialogic communication is significant in the context of sexual assault disclosure, as the varying levels of visibility afforded through these channels may support connections not possible with only one type of communication. In other words, more teleological or masspersonal communication channels support survivors motivated by being visible to other survivors, which would be more difficult to accomplish at a similar scale with simply dialogic channels. Similarly, survivors wishing to connect with similar others may seek out particular connections and not wish to assume the vulnerability associated with being visible as a survivor on social media.

This relative control over visibility again carries implications for providers seeking to support sexual assault survivors. That is, beyond being visible as a resource or advocate for survivors, organizations/advocates may benefit from maintaining multiple communicative channels that allow survivors to somewhat control their visibility (and perhaps anonymity, by extension) in seeking resources. Enabling private messages on Twitter, for instance, as well as

maintaining phone or text hotlines and email accounts provides multiple communicative channels with varying degrees of visibility and identification. That said, enabling these channels may also increase the vulnerability of organizations/advocates, the risks of which should be carefully assessed on a case-by-case basis.

Control appears attached to visibility in multiple ways, however, and extends beyond the use of multiple channels. Conceptually, regaining total control over visible information is impossible (Thompson, 2005), though participants leveraged visibility management strategies to exert some control over the relative visibility of disclosive content. Social media structures and policies, however, reiterate that control over visibility is always partial at best, as platforms ultimately retain control over user's content visibility through algorithms (prioritizing certain content over others), account management decisions (suspension, deletion, "shadow-banning"), content moderation systems (flagging content, removing content), and platform features (banned hashtags). These decisions not only restrict users' control over content, but are also political, in that they potentially replicate social biases that reinforce and reinscribe existing social hierarchies through technology, which often result in the policing and silencing of marginalized voices (Kitchin, 2017; O'Neil, 2016).

As Mendes et al. (2018) note, "although it may be *technologically easy* for many groups to engage in digital feminist activism, there *remain emotional, mental or practical* barriers which create different experiences, and legitimate some feminist voices, perspectives and experiences over others" (p. 237, emphasis in original). In other words, just as social hierarchies and previous experiences with formal support providers inform willingness to report sexual assault to law enforcement (Ullman, 1999), similar experiences may inform willingness to be visible on social media. As numerous reports demonstrate (e.g., Vera-Gray, 2017), women receive more abuse

online than male-identified users, perhaps especially women visibly engaging in feminist causes; the effect is compounded for women of color (Dhrodia, 2018). These findings indicate that research is thus needed to further refine understanding of how intersectional identity facets specifically influence willingness to be visible as a sexual assault survivor, motivations for disclosure, and viability of social media as disclosure space.

### **Motivations**

In combination, motivations and visibility management strategies act on privacy rules and boundary articulation. Hashtags, for instance, may be used as “disclosure warnings” in articulating a privacy rule attached to particular content (e.g., “don’t reblog,” “personal”) or aid in articulating an expansive privacy boundary by boosting the visibility and searchability of disclosure (Petronio, 2002). That strategies may be leveraged to both afford and constrain visibility in relation to motivation necessitates attention to a broader range of motivations than those that arise from situating disclosure as only a help-seeking behavior.

Indeed, a contribution of this project is a more nuanced set of motivation categories, building in part on Andalibi and Forte’s (2018a) disclosure decision factors for online disclosure of stigmatized identity (pregnancy loss). More specifically, participant insights challenge the positioning of stigma disclosure as selectively inviting support providers into a privacy boundary and instead expand stigma disclosure as motivated by a desire to serve as a support provider to similar others. Furthermore, participants often related multiple motivations for disclosure, such as self-related and audience-related motivations, which were sometimes held simultaneously. This not only addresses a limitation of previous work that considers primary motivations (Ahrens et al., 2007), but additionally suggests that self-focused motivations may be especially influential. As participants related, supporting others through disclosure was frequently

understood as beneficial, but predicated on a perceived beneficial outcome for oneself. Further research is needed, however, to explore if and the extent to which disclosure motivations are hierarchical.

In Chapter 2, I positioned social support as a guiding concept informing disclosure motivations. In noting the prominence and importance assigned by participants to supporting similar, invisible others, I do not wish to minimize the experiences of participants who also reported seeking support from others. Indeed, this motivation was present, albeit often attached to less public forms of social media, such as private discussion groups on Facebook and sub-Reddits specifically addressing sexual assault. That said, findings from this project lend further support to the salience of this motivation and the conduciveness of social media to social support exchange. Additionally, analysis of advocacy-oriented tags on Twitter indicated that sexual assault resource and advocacy organizations also engage with tags, and may provide an important source of social support to survivors. Interview participants did not validate this relationship explicitly, however; a direction for future scholarship is exploring sexual assault survivors' perceptions of such organizations' content as socially supportive.

### **Communication Privacy Management Theory**

Both the range of motivations and visibility management strategies present in participants' reports contribute to the scholarly conversation regarding online disclosure. In applying CPM theory (Petronio, 2002) to sexual assault disclosure, this project furthers literature in this arena (Petronio et al., 1996) and connects this work to scholarship applying CPM to online disclosure contexts (Child et al., 2011; Child & Starcher, 2016). More specifically, insights regarding visibility management as strategically leveraged in preventing and responding to boundary turbulence contribute to CPM scholarship.

As others, such as McNealy and Mullis (2019), have noted, there is a relative lack of scholarship focusing on privacy rule management and boundary turbulence on social media. While boundary turbulence was not a primary focus of this project, participants reported carefully considering audience, anticipating negative reactions from others, and taking measures (e.g., disclosing on secondary platforms or accounts, blocking specific others) to prevent privacy rule violation and moments of boundary turbulence. Participant insights also speak to the relative weight and impact of such moments, and contribute to literature suggesting that from whom the reaction comes (e.g., un/known other) is an influential factor in this assessment (Ahrens et al., 2007). Additionally, participants' reports that disclosure recipients also engaged in boundary adjustment (e.g., severing a relationship, not interacting with disclosive content) following turbulence underscores CPM theory's assertion that privacy boundaries are co-constructed and managed by disclosure recipients (Petronio, 2002), rather than fully controlled by disclosers. Future research could further explore the social media features and affordances users draw on in navigating boundary turbulence from the perspectives of discloser and disclosure recipient.

### **Connecting Offline and Online Recovery Systems**

There is, in a sense, no division between online and offline worlds; they are components of the same continuous social system. This is true of interpersonal networks (Baym & boyd, 2012) as well as activist efforts (Olson, 2016). That online spaces support resources and abilities (e.g., masspersonal communication and reach) not replicable offline is remarkable, but this ability perhaps eclipses the ways that offline spaces and systems influence decisions to turn to online spaces. In considering how online disclosure and offline support systems interact mutually, a few themes emerge from this project: the role of temporality, as representative of

recovery and disclosure timelines, and seeking of offline support in the form of therapeutic intervention provide one thematic illustration.

Although some participants reported disclosing on social media in the days following assault, the majority of participants indicated waiting, telling trusted others offline first, or otherwise disclosing online some time after assault occurred. This trend calls attention to the relationship between temporality and disclosure as well as the connection between offline and online systems for coping and social support. In their analysis of #NotOkay, Bogen et al. (2018) posit that, given the frequency with which responsibility for assault was explicitly assigned to the perpetrator, participants may have processed sexual assault beyond self-blame. Insights from this project lend some support to this notion, as evident in participant explanations of the difference between sexual assault “victims” and “survivors,” as well as suggest the salience of therapy or counseling in informing willingness to disclose. That is, many participants indicated having seen or presently seeing a therapist or counselor; indeed, therapists were attributed as inspiring several disclosures, including writing a letter to one’s rapist and creating resources for other survivors. In some cases, online disclosure was linked with dissatisfactory experiences with therapists and support services, in that such experiences spurred participants to turn to social media for resources and healing.

This is not to suggest that survivors who do not engage with therapy have a more difficult or prolonged recovery experience than those who do—indeed, there is evidence to the contrary (Thompson, 2000)—but, rather, that survivors engaged in therapy may perceive social media as differently available as a disclosure space. More specifically, positive experiences with therapy may make online disclosure appear less risky, whereas negative experiences with therapy may make online disclosure appear a viable means of seeking and securing social support.

Alternatively, experiences with negative reactions more broadly may make online disclosure appear to be a riskier and less viable support channel.

Moreover, access to support services such as therapy is an intersectional issue, in that not every individual has access to therapy or feels their identity fully supported by therapy (Bridges, Selvidge, & Matthews, 2003). Indeed, as sexual assault survivor engagement with formal support providers, such as mental health services, is typically low following assault (Ullman, 1999), those who do seek therapy and then disclose online may represent a minority of survivors. Formal therapy is one of many paths toward healing and recovery. I mention this to further highlight the supportive impact sexual assault survivors who disclose on social media may have on invisible others. Several participants engaged in additional forms of processing and healing, such as artistic endeavors, and shared these forms with others in a tangible way. As such, I reiterate that further research is needed to more thoroughly and intersectionally explore the relationship between engagement with offline recovery processes, including and beyond therapy, and social media disclosure.

### **Limitations**

In previous chapters and Appendix B: Orientation and Methods, I outline the limitations associated with methodological and design choices and reflect on the consequences of some of them here. For instance, the small sample size of participants in this project prevents reliable generalization beyond this particular population of participants. That said, I have contextualized participant insights where relevant within additional co-contexts of violence that inform stigma and visibility, such as sexual exploitation and child abuse, in an effort to further specify motivations for and reactions to disclosure. These co-contexts provide insight into sexual assault as intersectional with additional stigmatized and marginalized experiences. Although again

limited in terms of generalizability, it is significant that participants across assault contexts shared similar motivations, such as raising awareness and educating others.

In reflecting on the effect of my positionality on this project, I acknowledge that my position as a white, cisgender, and middle class woman has undoubtedly influenced this analysis in ways I am still recognizing and have not recognized, despite attempts to be reflexive throughout the research process. In hashtag selection, for instance, I may have prioritized breadth over specificity in my attempts to demonstrate that disclosure occurs with topical hashtags not associated with viral campaigns or events. This may have eclipsed the conversations of intersectional survivor communities using more targeted hashtags to connect their experiences. Additionally, throughout this project I have reflected upon personal experiences that meet the definitional criteria for sexual assault (but that I do not code as assault) and the ways that these experiences inform my personal identity and beliefs about sexual assault. I continue to make sense of these experiences. I have attempted to receive and relay each participant's story with gratitude and without judgment, though I am aware that my beliefs do not align with those held by some participants, which is a source of tension. I continue to reflect on the ways these moments of tension inform my analysis.

### **Appendix A: Legend of Cautions**

This document draws on Tracy's (2010) conceptualization of a Legends of Caution as an ethical tool that "warns readers about the ways that the research analyses may misread, misappropriated, or misused" (p. 848). I expand this concept slightly to include items that rely on assumptions that may require further clarification.

#### **Victim Blaming and Self-Blame**

This project is predicated on an understanding of relationship abuse and sexual violence that situates sexual assault as solely the choice of the perpetrator. As such, victims of these forms of violence are never responsible for violence perpetrated against them, regardless of factors such as clothing choice, drug and alcohol use, prior consent to sexual activity, and relationship status. Indeed, these factors are often utilized in assigning responsibility for another's actions to victims of assault. In assuming victims of violence are not responsible for assault, this project rejects myths and arguments that assume otherwise.

It is common, following sexual assault, to question how one's actions could have contributed to violence. Indeed, this is generally an adaptive technique following an accident or traumatic event, as one searches for a way to avoid a similar situation in the future. In the context of sexual assault, however, self-blame often eclipses the responsibility of the perpetrator in choosing to enact violence, failing to secure consent, and ignoring expressions of non-consent to sexual activity. Self-blame may be compounded by victim blaming apparent in the media, social groups, and interpersonal reactions to disclosure, and may result in internalized stigma and silence.

### **A Note on Language**

The terms victim and survivor are often used interchangeably when discussing sexual assault, though it is this lack of precision that contributes to a debate within feminist studies and related areas as to the implications of such terms (Hockett & Saucier, 2015; Kelly, Burton, & Regan, 1996). One line of argument, to which I am sympathetic, points to the implication of agency (and denial thereof) and empowerment in labeling someone who has experienced violence, as well as the problem of denying the individual the ability to label their own experiences. For the purpose of this project, I use the term “victim” in relation to crime statistics, as these pertain to incidence only and cannot account for literal survivorship, and in direct quotations; relatedly, I use the term “sexual assault victimization” to more precisely describe the topic of disclosure and situate survivors as blameless victims of a crime (as opposed to “disclose sexual assault,” which is somewhat ambiguous). I use the term “survivor” to somewhat abstractly refer to members of the population of interest to this project. In reporting results, I use individual participants’ preferred labels whenever possible, in accordance with recommendations from the literature (Hockett & Saucier, 2015). I use the term “perpetrator” to refer broadly to individuals who commit sexual assault, including rape, or perpetuate sexual exploitation.

### **Recovery**

As used throughout this project, “recovery” from sexual assault is used to reference the process of “integrating [a] traumatic experience into one’s life in an adaptive manner, including the meaning of the trauma, one’s memory of the trauma, and the emotions associated with it” (Littleton et al., 2006, p. 774). In so doing, I aim to describe a variable, individually-defined process that includes both intrapersonal coping and adaptation as well as interpersonal coping and adaptation, in which coping is broadly understood as “cognitive and behavioral efforts made

to master, tolerate, or reduce external and internal demands and conflicts among them” (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980, p. 223). Coping is thus a component of recovery—as Valentiner et al. (1996) note, “psychological recovery following an assault is an example of successful coping” (p. 455–456)—although one which falls largely outside the scope of this project. That is, coping is often understood as rooted in psychological theory and thus emphasizes internal mechanisms and individual-focused strategies, whereas the components of recovery provide a clearer connection to and help make sense of disclosure motivations beyond seeking help or social support. For example, the “adaptive manner” aspect of recovery speaks to both individual adaptation and healing as well as to some participants’ stated desire to reap “something good” from a traumatic experience, which often accompanied a motivation to support other survivors in some way.

### **Rape and Sexual Assault**

As defined in Chapter 1, for the purposes of this project, I position “sexual assault” as an umbrella term that includes attempted or completed rape. I differentiate the two terms in Chapter 4 in connection with social network analysis hashtags to acknowledge that these terms are related but not necessarily interchangeable, as some organizations distinguish between sexual assault and rape (cf. Fernandez, 2011) and sexual assault includes behaviors other than rape. In including topical hashtags on both sexual assault and rape, I hope to include a broader range of experiences and to include individuals who understand their experience as either rape or sexual assault.

## **Appendix B: Orientation and Methods**

This section details the methodological orientation and procedures guiding this project. I begin by reviewing the epistemological orientation that informs this approach and follow this with a brief conceptual exploration of reflexivity as well as a reflection on my own positionality throughout data collection. I then review the role of social network analysis as both a source of data as well as a participant recruitment method, before describing feminist interview methods guiding qualitative, semi-structured participant interview protocol. I conclude by previewing coding processes and limitations of methods used in this project, topics which are further explored in analysis chapters.

### **Orientation**

I adopt the position, as articulated by Anderson (1996), that “the belief in a phenomenal world that has multiple domains implicates a belief in multiple epistemologies” (p. 30). As such, I assume that multiple epistemologies are not only valid but also necessary in theorizing and making sense of communication phenomena. Sexual assault victimization disclosure is one such area, and the orientation I describe in this section and employed throughout this project reflects this assumption.

As a broad orientation, a subjectivist stance on epistemology views the social world as “essentially relativistic” and capable of being understood “from the point of view of the individuals who are directly involved in the activities which are to be studied” (Burrell & Morgan, 1979, p. 5, as cited in Miller, 2002c, p. 26). The “subjective meanings of a communication message to an individual” (Rogers, 1997, p. 200) are thus centered in this orientation, implying that knowledge is situated and relativistic rather than generalizable, objective, or detached. This orientation carries implications for methods, as “understandings of

motives and contexts are favored over causal and law-like explanations” (Miller, 2002c, p. 26), implying that methods should similarly center on individualistic understandings, motives, and situatedness. In contrast to post-positivistic stances that value objectivity and detachedness between researcher and researched, an interpretivist stance considers the researcher-researched interaction as contributing to the co-creation of knowledge (Miller, 2002b).

This attention to researcher influence is also apparent in critical epistemological traditions, which center questions of social power. More specifically, these traditions imply that values maintained by the researcher cannot be divorced from research, and that the influence of such values requires critical examination. The role of reflexivity in this project and in critical research more broadly is explored in the following section. Critical epistemologies may also center emancipation, and by extension power structures and social hierarchies, as a particular interest, and position research as potentially contributing to radical social change (Miller, 2002a).

Indeed, this interest in practical applications of research is supported by an understanding of communication as a “practical discipline,” in which researchers should “explore how their scholarship can be translated into practice” (Barge, 2001, p. 5). As an epistemological tradition, pragmatism is understood as both a “method of inquiry” as well as an “attitude of orientation” (James, 2003, p. 167). Contemporary perspectives on pragmatism, such as Cronen’s (2001) discussion of practical theory, emphasize the structure of practical theory as a system. Cronen (2001) suggests an understanding of practical theory as one that “informs a grammar of practice that facilitates joining with the grammars of others to explore their unique patterns of situated action” (p. 26). Coupled with the notion that practical theory “is importantly informed by data created in the process of engagement with others,” knowing becomes cast as an iterative and collaborative process that is traced through involvement with actors (Cronen, 2001, p. 26). That

is, in practical theories, “it is not possible to know fully in advance how a change somewhere in a system might lead to new connections with elements not before implicated” (Cronen, 2001, p. 27). In the context of this project, CPM as a translational theory (Petronio, 2007)—in which results drawn from its application carry practical implications—further grounds insights from participants as situated within a particular moment of the social media ecology, an environment which is additionally dynamic.

As explained in Chapter 2, I position social support as a guiding concept undergirding motivations for social media disclosure of sexual assault victimization. In understanding social support, if and how individuals perceive acts from others as supportive is an influential determinant of social support efficacy (Goldsmith, 2004). That is, social support is effective when a recipient perceives and evaluates actions as supportive. This understanding aligns with an interpretive stance that underscores the subjective and localized nature of knowledge. Relatedly, the reality of violence such as sexual assault is that it is a gendered crime, as discussed in Chapter 1, in that victims are overwhelmingly women. As such, attention to the influence of social constructions and hierarchies of gender in this context is crucial. This commitment reflects the emphasis in feminist epistemologies on uncovering structures of power and ideology, particularly as they pertain to gender. Similarly, the feminist epistemological regard of knowledge as gained through lived experience and deeply individualistic appears compatible with the interpretivist orientation to knowledge as localized as subjective. Furthermore, treatment of lived experience as contributing to concrete knowledge may be especially important in research engaging survivors of sexual assault, given social stigma attached to sexual assault.

In relating my epistemological orientation, my use of the term “understanding” further reflects a subjective/interpretivist approach to epistemology, in that the aim of my research is to

understand, rather than explain, the motivations for engagement with social media for disclosure. This reflects an assumption on my part that the constellation of contexts particular to individual survivors are so varied in their composition and influence on motivations that drawing causal relationships between traumatic events and social media disclosures is not only untenable, but reductive. This assumption is further reflected in gravitation toward research questions that address motivations and personal circumstances surrounding decisions to disclose. Finally, I find myself agreeing with scholars such as Craig (2006, 2007), who position the field of communication as a practical discipline. In so doing, however, I am hesitant to fully embrace the commitment, outlined in pragmatism, of participating in the systems under investigation, opting instead for the feminist commitment to reflexivity (Lotz, 2000). That is, I am aware of a potential contrast in positionalities expressed by participants, in that sexual assault is a broad umbrella under which myriad experiences (and contexts) fall (see Chapter 1). As such, my understanding of such phenomena is deeply and irreconcilably different from an individual with a lived experience that differs from my own. The implications of this contrast require serious consideration and reflection throughout the research process.

### **Reflexivity**

Although this project does not engage feminist standpoint theory, it does draw upon feminist epistemology and feminist interviewing practices in situating my position and guiding interview protocol. I made such choices to more fully and critically consider the positionality of participants, as well as the effects of my choices (as well as my own positionality) on the stories they shared with me. In so doing, I also position myself as invested in reflexivity as an ethical practice in knowledge co-creation.

Within qualitative social research, reflexivity is described as “a continuous process of critical scrutiny and interpretation” (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004, p. 275), which requires the researcher to “recognize and take responsibility for one’s own situatedness within the research” (Berger, 2015, p. 220). Following Guillemin and Gillam’s (2004) call to position reflexivity as a tool in building ethical research practices requires a more nuanced understanding of the concept and its multiple qualities. I draw on Finlay’s (2012) typology of five lenses through which to consider reflexivity, including strategic, contextual-discursive, embodied, relational, and ethical. These categories are not mutually exclusive, and function to maintain critical attention on reflexivity throughout the research process. This typology is also informed by multiple theoretical traditions and interdisciplinary approaches to qualitative work, and thus speaks somewhat broadly of reflexivity. I consider reflexivity as attached to ethics in a following section; the exercise of reviewing the remaining categories is useful in the context of this project as this project builds from a foundation in social science paradigms to combine interpersonal communication, technology studies, and feminist praxis, all of which similarly carry their own ethical emphases and blind spots.

At a foundational level, strategic reflexivity suggests “methodological self-consciousness” and emphasizes “reflecting critically about research aims, methods, and how to set up and approach research” (Finlay, 2012, p. 321). This type of reflexivity is instrumental in conceiving, designing, and conducting research, and involves reflection on aspects such as personal presentation during interviews, monitoring participant responses, and considering how best to present findings. I further detail decisions that fall under this category later in this chapter in outlining research procedures.

Embodied reflexivity in turn focuses on interview procedures and reflexively considering the nonverbal communication between interviewer and participant (Finlay, 2012). As I conducted phone interviews, nonverbal communication inasmuch as the term refers to physical cues (e.g., body positioning, posture) was minimized; however, paralinguistic cues, such as tone of voice, were relevant. In another sense, embodied reflexivity additionally refers to being attentive to the “body’s response” during research, and being cognizant of the ways in which one physically reacts to participant responses.

Both contextual-discursive and relational reflexivity consider aspects of how research is a co-creation between researcher and participant, as well as how this researcher-participant relationship further necessitates ethical reflexivity. Contextual-discursive reflexivity speaks to the ways in which experience, such as that shared in an interview, is shaped by the interview process itself as well as by editing and “repackaging” processes in presenting findings. In other words, this form of reflexivity hones in on the fact “that narrators—participant or interviewer—are strategic in their choices about positioning themselves, their characters, and the audience” (Finlay, 2002, p. 325). As such, contextual-discursive reflexivity touches on the positionality of the researcher, as well as the structure of interviews, as influences in research.

Relatedly, relational reflexivity focuses more explicitly on the relationship between researcher and participant, and suggests that research findings are co-created through the research relationship. As Finlay (2012) notes, this form of reflexivity is especially relevant in feminist projects, as this lens “allows us to put the intersubjective and relational dimensions between interviewer and interviewee under the microscope” (p. 329). It interrogates most directly the “emergent, situated, and negotiated nature of the interviewer-participant relationship” with particular attention to multiple subjectivities interacting in research (Finlay

2012, p. 329). In this project, for instance, interview participants are somewhat primed to activate their sexual assault victim/survivor/experiencer and social media “selves”; this priming understandably shaped how participants related their experiences in interviews, as well as how I phrased clarifying statements and questions, to offer two illustrations.

**Reflexivity and ethics.** Beyond bias and influence, reflexivity also pertains to the ethical design and conduct of qualitative social research; this tie to ethics is perhaps especially salient in the context of research on trauma or social stigma, given the potential for “ethically important moments” encountered in such research (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004; Hoover & Morrow, 2015). Furthermore, sexual assault survivors constitute a “vulnerable population” such that this project requires an ethical commitment beyond procedural ethics to consider the context and its relationship to vulnerability and privacy (Linabary & Corple, 2018). These defining aspects of reflexivity, that is, continuous, critical, and actionable (as implied by taking responsibility), offer points of connection between reflexivity in practice and research ethics. Understanding the entanglement of reflexivity and ethics requires reviewing the types of ethical considerations salient throughout the research process.

Tracy’s (2010) model for quality in qualitative research points to procedural ethics, situational ethics, relational ethics, and exiting ethics as especially pertinent to the overall “ethics” of a project. Procedural ethics refers to ethical considerations and practices “dictated as universally necessary by larger organizations, institutions or governing bodies,” such as Institutional Review Boards (Tracy, 2010, p. 847); these considerations generally include mandates regarding reduction of harm to participants, informed consent, privacy, and confidentiality. Guillemin and Gillam’s (2004) work similarly distinguishes between procedural ethics and “ethics in practice,” or “everyday ethical issues that arise in the doing of research” (p.

263). It is this latter category, refined by Tracy's (2010) enumerated ethics categories, that is of particular interest here, as they further inform the ethical considerations foundational to this project and also inform the process of designing a qualitative project that goes beyond institutional requirements in ethical considerations. Indeed, Guillemin and Gillam (2004) note that procedural ethics alone are insufficient in addressing all ethical junctures encountered in the research process, and positions reflexivity as a tool in addressing and planning for these moments. I briefly review the remaining ethical categories included in Tracy's (2010) model to suggest further how reflexivity functions in this project.

Within qualitative research, and perhaps within research pertaining to social media data more broadly, the context(s) from which data is collected carries ethical considerations, as details such as who is included, for what purpose, under what broader social circumstances, inevitably shape design decisions. Broadly, situational ethics describe the "ethical practices that emerge from a reasoned consideration of a context's specific circumstances" and underscore that "ethical decisions should be based on the particularities of a scene" (Tracy, 2010, p. 847). In the context of this project, for instance, situational ethics point to an increased need for discretion and privacy in data handling and contacting participants, as the current social context in which individuals disclose sexual assault victimization remains one that largely stigmatizes and blames survivors for another's choice to assault them (see Chapter 2). Contacting potential participants through private channels and exercising discretion in contacting individuals with private profiles is indicative of reflexively considering situational ethics.

Relational ethics speaks perhaps more directly to reflexivity by encouraging a "self-consciousness in which researchers are mindful of their character, actions, and consequences on others" (Tracy, 2010, p. 847). Ellis (2007) connects this type of ethics to ethics of care, which

“values mutual respect, dignity, and connectedness between researcher and researched” (Ellis, 2007, p. 4). Relational ethics thus informs research design and encourages researchers to reflect on the “why” of a project, as well as the “how.” That is, qualitative research that engages a vulnerable or marginalized community may have an ethical obligation to contribute to that community. At the very least, relational ethics makes clear that participants are people, and that minimizing harm is insufficient in ensuring participants are treated fairly, with dignity, and respectfully. In the context of qualitative work on social media, transparency regarding intent and practice (including data collection methods) may function to uphold participants’ dignity (Vitak, Shilton, & Ashktorab, 2016).

Finally, exiting ethics speak to considerations following data collection, and concern “how researchers leave the scene and share the results” (Tracy, 2010, p. 847). That is, in this model, exiting ethics speaks to measures a researcher can take to responsibly situate participant stories such that “unjust or unintended consequences” are avoided or reduced (Tracy, 2010, p. 847). This category requires careful consideration when the contexts of research are ‘stacked’ against the community or phenomenon of interest. In other words, in a social context where survivors are (wrongly) blamed for their assaults, research can unintentionally present survivors’ stories in a way that further stigmatizes, blames, or otherwise negatively presents them. To counter this potential, Tracy (2010) suggests including a “Legend of Cautions” that “warns readers about the ways that the research analyses may be misread, misappropriated, or misused” (p. 848). Given the abundance of rape myths and victim blaming attitudes that continue to shape the landscape of social attitudes toward sexual assault survivors (including within academia), I include an adapted Legend (see Appendix A) in an effort to dispel such misunderstandings and

explain how to contextualize survivors' self-blame as a natural reaction to trauma rather than as expressing complicity in assault.

Reflexivity plays an additional role in exiting ethics in work on sexual assault and sexual abuse victimization by promoting reflection on completed research, and drawing on participants' experiences to further inform best practices in future research. Hoover and Morrow (2015), for instance, invited previous participants in sexual assault disclosure research to reflect on the experience of participation, with the intent of utilizing these responses to improve future work. This is one example in a growing body of literature questioning the effects of participating in work on sexual violence (cf. Campbell et al., 2010). Such studies are attuned to the reality that negative responses to victimization disclosures, including in research, can be traumatic and negatively impact the recovery process (Ullman, 1996c), and thus seek to reflect on completed work to more ethically design future work that minimizes this retraumatization. These ethical categories are not necessarily comprehensive, but the utility of outlining them here is to provide a framework against which to understand how different types of reflexivity pertain to these ethical facets.

**Positionality and the role of shared experience.** Within the interpersonal context of reflexivity, the researcher's position influences the types of concerns or moments that should be critically considered (or are likely to arise). Berger (2015) outlines three common positionalities in qualitative research—when the researcher has personal familiarity, will have personal familiarity, and has no personal familiarity—to argue that positionality ultimately affects reflexivity and the co-creation of knowledge through research. These positions are informed by researchers' characteristics, ranging from demographic (e.g., gender, race, age, sexual orientation) to ideological (e.g., political beliefs, social biases, religious affiliation), which

ultimately shape research by virtue of their impact on access to the field, the “researcher-researched” relationship, and researchers’ lenses on the world (Berger, 2015).

Although personally experiencing sexual assault may allow one to more fully understand the experience in a general sense, shared experience as a dimension of similarity or understanding lacks important specificity in this context, given the range of experiences and reactions that fit under the umbrellas of sexual assault and sexual assault recovery. Further, in designing this project I sought to protect participants’ privacy and minimize harm by focusing on how they used social media in response to assault, rather than on the details of their assault experiences. As a result, I am unable to say with confidence if or how my experiences align with those of my participants. I am, however, able to say that my experiences do not align with the experiences of every participant—I do not understand the lived experience of identifying as a male survivor of sexual assault, for instance.

Indeed, more relevant to this project and my own position within it is my professional training and experience as an anti-violence educator and training in crisis counseling, as these experiences inform my approach to sexual assault as a research topic. This project marks the culmination of a decade of work on relationship abuse and sexual assault prevention and response. When I applied to graduate school, I did so as a program manager at the Center for Relationship Abuse Awareness, a non-profit organization focused on outreach and education of professionals and students on the topics of relationship abuse and sexual assault. In addition to in-person trainings, the organization supported (and continues to support) an online repository of educational materials and resources. Working in this space, and coming of age on the cusp of the so-called “digital native” generation, sparked an interest in how organizations utilized online spaces to support survivors.

Early sketches of this project focused on how service providers understood online social support and engaged with digital tools, as well as their concerns about doing so. Anti-violence advocates have long known that, as technology enables survivors, it also enables perpetrators of violence, who can utilize the same tools to intimidate, harass, stalk, and harm women (cf. Freed et al., 2018). In investigating online support available to survivors, I sought out the online spaces survivors occupied, such as online support group sites. A quick Internet search reveals no shortage of such spaces, operating seemingly independently from anti-violence advocacy organizations and shelters. Similarly, I saw survivors on social media platforms, such as Facebook and Tumblr, organizing their own groups and outlets, sometimes in reaction to receiving services from organizations that did not meet their expectations. I saw survivors turn profiles and blogs into digital diaries, and I witnessed the audiences that gathered around them, offering encouragement, validation, and occasionally tangible aid in the form of contributions to gofundme.com campaigns and clothing sales. Still, there appeared a tension between the viability of public social media spaces as safe spaces for disclosing and processing sexual assault victimization and the reality of online spaces as rife with both realized and potential harassment and harm. In Chapter 1, I expanded on this tension and present a broader question guiding this project:

**Given a culture that is so violent toward and damning of women's experiences of sexual assault, why are some sexual assault survivors disclosing their experiences on social media to audiences of mostly strangers?**

In Chapter 2, I present the research questions guiding this project. I restate these questions here:

## Research Questions

**RQ1:** What are the motivations and goals of sexual assault survivors who choose to disclose on social media, and how do they make sense of their social media disclosures and what those disclosures did for them?

**RQ2:** What technological characteristics or factors particular to different social media platforms, such as visibility, inform sexual assault survivors' decisions to disclose on social media?

**RQ3:** What role does the social media context for sexual assault disclosure play in sexual assault survivors' broader systems of coping and social support?

**RQ4:** What are the characteristics of the networks of users engaging with sexual assault disclosures on social media (including their social network size and density or connectedness)?

In responding to these questions, I draw on social network analysis and qualitative interviews with survivors of sexual assault who have identified as such in social media spaces. Multiple social media platforms, namely Twitter, Tumblr, and Instagram, form the basis of this social network analysis. This multi-platform approach allows for a deeper understanding of the affordances unique to particular platforms and common across multiple platforms, as well as the slippage between platforms.

## Social Network Analysis

Social network analysis permits a quantitative means of visualizing and understanding key attributes of a social network. Hashtags segment larger networks of social media users into a manageable sample of users posting about a particular topic. Hashtags are a discretionary feature, in that content may be posted without them. As such, resultant networks are a product of

user self-selection and are not generalizable or mappable to another population (Tufekci, 2014). Further, network scraping is limited by what the platform makes available, as seen below. Indeed, tools currently available (including platform APIs) position Twitter as especially well-suited for such network analyses, while connections on Instagram, Tumblr, and other platforms are not similarly analyzable using these tools. With these limitations in mind, the intentions behind a hashtag network analysis for this project are to (a) demonstrate that there are social media users and user networks engaging with these tags, (b) identify disclosure content within hashtag networks, and (c) use communities around particular hashtags to purposively sample potential interview participants.

**Hashtag identification.** I identified twenty-three (23) hashtags as of interest for collection on Twitter. These tags are listed below. I identified tags by using Twitter's search functionality to assess the tags' association with sexual assault-related content. (A rationale for including tags related to both sexual assault and rape is provided in Appendix A: Legend of Cautions). These tags may be sorted into several categories, including those that (a) explicitly associate sexual assault with an individual identity, such as #SexualAssaultSurvivor and #RapeVictim, (b) describe the topic itself, such as #SexualAssault or #TWRape, or (c) imply advocacy or support, such as #BelieveSurvivors and slogans like #NoMeansNo. Tags such as #MaleRapeVictim and #MaleSexualAssault were included to specifically address male survivors of sexual assault.

These tags are not intended to be comprehensive of the conversations about sexual assault occurring on these platforms; rather, this collection addresses multiple aspects and niches of assault and supportive responses. As I discuss further in Chapter 4, a single hashtag may be used in connection to myriad forms of content (e.g., disclosure, news articles, political action),

and as such, it is possible that certain tag forms will have stronger associations with certain types of content. For instance, #Rape or #RapeVictim may appear more prominently attached as descriptors of news items, whereas #BelieveSurvivors may appear more connected to advocacy efforts, such as legislation, or protesting public figures’ or media’s treatment of survivors.

**Table 1: Hashtags for Twitter collection**

<b>Identity-oriented</b>	<b>Descriptive</b>	<b>Advocacy-oriented</b>
MaleRapeVictim	Rape	BelieveSurvivors
MaleSexualAssault	RapeStory	BreakTheSilence
RapeSurvivor	SexualAbuse	ItsNeveraVictimsFault
RapeVictim	SexualAssault	NoMeansNo
SexualAssaultSurvivor	TWRape*	NotOkay
SexualAssaultVictim	TWSexualAssault*	SupportSurvivors
TWRapeVictim*		SurvivorLoveLetter
TWSexualAssaultVictim*		WeHealTogether
		YouAreNotAlone

\*“TW” refers to “trigger warning,” and is commonly used to indicate that content associated with the tag discusses the issue following “tw.” Trigger and content warnings are meant to flag posts such that individuals sensitive to a particular topic are able to avoid exposure to such content or emotionally prepare themselves before viewing it.

**Hashtag collection.** Tags were scraped using NodeXL, an open-source Excel template that facilitates collection of Twitter content and associated metadata. Data collected from Twitter is limited in several ways, and thus the networks represented here are sketches, and likely incomplete. For instance, Twitter provides a free and public API, though only a portion of content is available or collectable through it (Smith et al., 2010). The ways such content is controlled are rather opaque, and thus it can be assumed that scraped content is incomplete, though how and in what ways it is incomplete remain unclear. Twitter data is further limited by date restrictions, such that only content from the previous 8-9 days at the time of scraping is available and will be collected (Smith et al., 2010). As a result, the networks and conversations implied by these collections can only be understood as snapshots of the broader platforms. The popularity of hashtags varied widely at the time of collection (July 2017), such that some queries

returned four vectors, while others approached 2,000 vectors. Queries of six hashtags on Twitter returned no results at the time of collection, and were reissued two weeks later in a second collection pass, though these queries also returned no results. These results are explored more fully in Chapter 3.

Scraped tags and associated metadata were collected into Excel spreadsheets and kept on a password-protected computer. Because usernames are not relevant to the networks (aside from uniquely identifying each user), usernames were not included in analysis. Instead, I reviewed each hashtag spreadsheet and collected usernames associated with disclosive content. These handles were stored separately, offline, and constituted a pool for first round interview requests (Howard, 2002). I define “disclosive content” (content disclosing sexual assault victimization) as a post marked with an assault-related hashtag and consisting in part (e.g., quoting) or entirely of user-generated content that either directly identified the poster as a victim/survivor of sexual assault (e.g., “After I was raped, I felt so alone”) or implied that the poster identified as a victim/survivor (e.g., “Believe survivors, we’re not lying.”). Disclosive content contrasts with, but is not mutually exclusive from, other types of content that similarly engage sexual assault-related hashtags. Links to news articles, for instance, were often marked with topical hashtags such as #SexualAssault, though did not constitute disclosive content, *per se*. Similarly, content promoting advocacy campaigns, organizations, or expressing an anti-violence/pro-survivor stance did not necessarily indicate whether the poster was a victim/survivor of assault. These non-disclosure categories can overlap, and in cases where the poster added disclosure or otherwise appeared to identify as a victim/survivor, posts were retained for consideration.

Although similar network analysis of hashtags was not supported by platforms other than Twitter, potential interview participants were similarly identified through disclosure and hashtag

use on Instagram and Tumblr. On both platforms, hashtags are also searchable, meaning it is possible to similarly identify disclosive posts tagged with one or more of the target hashtags. The same procedures for contacting potential participants, including privacy considerations, were used across platforms.

### **Interview Processes**

Eligibility for participation in interviews was determined using several criteria, including potential participants being at least 18 years of age, self-identifying as a sexual assault survivor or victim, posting about personal assault experiences on social media, and residing or attending school in the U.S. or Canada. Participants were intentionally limited to those living the U.S. and Canada to provide a reasonably consistent sociocultural context. Cultural context informs the ways in which society “at large” understands sexual assault and reacts to survivors of assault. Within the U.S. and Canada, there continues to be a culture of violence that blames victims of assault for the crimes perpetrated against them; as such, limiting participants to within this cultural context suggests a foundation of stigma, privacy concerns, and social media perceptions similar across platforms. Gender was not a determining criterion for eligibility.

Centering self-identification as a victim/survivor as an eligibility criterion served an important purpose in conveying my approach to the topic of sexual assault. Multiple studies suggest that negative social responses to sexual assault disclosure, including doubting a victim’s account or blaming the victim for their assault, can retraumatize survivors and negatively impact the recovery process (Ahrens, 2006; DePrince, Welton-Mitchell, & Srinivas, 2014; Hoover & Morrow, 2015; Littleton, 2011; Ullman, 1996). As this project is not focused on instances of sexual assault but rather sexual assault survivors’ use of social media as a disclosure space, it is sufficient (and indeed, important) to believe participants’ accounts and self-identification as a

survivor. Allowing potential participants to determine this for themselves, coupled with the explicit disclaimer that interview questions do not ask about assault experiences, reduces the potential for researchers' scrutiny of survivors' identities and implies that participants will be believed as survivors. Relatedly, I understand disclosure of sexual assault victimization to be any publication of content that the discloser feels associates their identity with sexual assault survivorship.

Given the sensitive nature of this topic, coupled with the inability to discern where someone is in their recovery process from their social media content, I took steps to respect the privacy of potential participants through every phase of this process. In practice, this included not contacting individuals unnecessarily and exercising discretion in accepting participants. These steps are detailed in the following protocol.

**Participant recruitment.** Following identification of potential participants from scraped hashtag data, as previously described, the procedure for contacting users and inviting them to participate in an interview involved several steps. First, I visited the profile on which the scraped disclosure appeared to determine each user's public facing-ness. At the time of collection, all users captured had public profiles; I visited profiles of interest to identify users who had since made their profile private and removed them from potential participant contact lists. I did so in an effort to respect users' privacy boundaries, as tweets from private profiles are 'protected' and are thus not searchable, regardless of hashtag use. If a user's profile was set to "private," they were not contacted. Additionally, users were not contacted if their profile disclosed an age or location that implied ineligibility; when this information was not ascertainable from user's profile and metadata associated with the scraped disclosure post, users were contacted.

All users were contacted privately through the messaging system embedded within each platform. On Twitter, “direct messages” (DMs) are accessible only if a user opts in to the system by editing their account settings. On Instagram, DMs are a default feature, in which any user may DM another user with a public profile. Users can opt out by making their profile private (in which case DMs must be ‘accepted’ by recipients to open this communicative channel between users), by turning off notifications, or by blocking individual users after a message has been received. Tumblr’s current platform supports two features that allow users to contact each other privately, the “Ask” and “Messaging” features. Ask supports a public-facing response feature, in which Ask posts position the submission as quoted text above a response from the “asked” user. Messaging is a default feature that can be toggled between allowing all users or only “Tumblrs you follow” to send a user messages; Messaging on Tumblr is akin to DMs on Twitter and Instagram. Whenever possible, Messaging was used to contact potential participants on Tumblr. Although these features are similar, they function slightly differently across platforms and allow users varying degrees of control over their visibility and availability to other users.

Following this preliminary assessment of eligibility and visibility, I sent messages to potential participants from my personal accounts that identified me as a researcher, briefly described the project and participation requirements, and included a link to the project website (the message text is included in Appendix D: Materials). I used my personal accounts to reinforce my own legitimacy as not only a user of each platform but also as a researcher and advocate, as much of the content I post and many of the accounts I follow, across platforms, speak to these interests (though not exclusively). If an individual contacted for an interview responded with interest, an interview was arranged through the DM system, unless a user specified a preferred means of contact (e.g., phone, email, or text).

I am aware that my position as a researcher created a power imbalance, and that contacted individuals may have felt pressured to agree to participate out of an obligation to other survivors, adherence with a ‘good survivor’ archetype, fear of disappointing advocates, or other reasons. In a few cases, contacted individuals appeared reluctant to participate or otherwise expressed a negative response to the request. In these instances, I sent a follow up message indicating my appreciation for their consideration, reiterating that deciding to participate was their choice, and that I valued their healing and recovery processes over participation. I also indicated that I would not contact them again, but that they were welcome to contact me with any questions.

During recruitment, I took additional steps to convey that participants would be believed and not be judged or blamed for any disclosure, experience, or decision related during the course of the project. This orientation is consistent with considerations resultant from qualitative investigation of participant preferences in interviews regarding sexual assault (Campbell et al., 2009). These considerations note that interviewers must understand that “rape happens to all kinds of women and that survivors show their emotions in different ways”; “interviewers need to understand that recovery is a long journey and they will be talking with women at very different stages of that process”; “interviewers need to be respectful of the differences between personal knowledge and learned knowledge, but both can help researchers appreciate survivors’ lived experiences”; and that “survivors wanted interviewers to use all of this knowledge to help women feel comfortable in the interview, so they could talk freely about the assault and have someone bear witness to that telling with patience and compassion” (Campbell et al., 2009, p. 604). I believe my anti-violence training aided me in implementing these considerations.

As these considerations make clear, acknowledgment and respect of the possible range of situated lived experiences are crucial in establishing a trusting relationship between researcher and participant, as is knowledge of violence against women and related issues. To this end, Campbell et al. (2009) suggest establishing a research website that provides information about the study as well as the researchers. As a result, I created a research website, with an URL indicating affiliation with a university (e.g., washington.edu), prior to contacting potential participants, providing information about the nature of the project as well as my institutional affiliation, feminist orientation, and relevant information regarding my experience as a trained anti-violence advocate and educator. More specifically, the website noted that I have completed and exceeded the 40-hour domestic and sexual violence advocate training required in the state of California, been professionally employed as an anti-violence advocate, and completed 32-hours of crisis counselor training. A link to this website was included in initial participation request messages.

In addition to criterion sampling, snowball sampling was also considered a viable recruitment method, and contacted individuals/recruited participants were encouraged to share my contact and study information with personal connections that might be eligible and interested in participating. With few exceptions, however, referrals did not appear to increase interest or participation. The reasons for this are unclear and may cover a range of possibilities, including comfort and uncertainty, finding the web form or reaching out to participate a formidable barrier, and desire to participate. Additionally, participants' likelihood of referring others to the project depends greatly on their construction of their disclosure network; in some instances, participants reported not following other survivor accounts and thus did not have these contacts, while in other instances, survivors sought to make their online spaces as anonymous as possible, or chose

to dissociate their online networks with their offline networks. All of these scenarios and configurations impact not only the likelihood but also ability to engage other survivors.

Sixty users were identified as engaging in hashtagged personal disclosure or identifying as a victim/survivor of sexual assault from scraped Twitter hashtag networks, and search results of hashtags using Instagram and Tumblr's native search tools. Of these, 29 were determined to be eligible based on information in their profiles (i.e., located in the U.S. or Canada, public account) and invited to participate. Although this initial call for participation was generative, it did not attract sufficient interest. A second round of potential participants was identified and contacted through a repeated search of hashtags; an additional 15 users were identified and contacted on Twitter and Instagram as a result. Interview participants were also encouraged to refer potential participants to the project, and calls for participation were posted on Instagram, Tumblr, Twitter, and Reddit (with permission from forum moderators) to increase the project's visibility. Ultimately, a final sample of 27 participants was reached; this sample was also informed by a sense that a point of saturation of themes had been reached (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

### **Interview Procedures**

As reviewed in Chapter 2, communication privacy management (CPM) theory is used to interpret individuals' understandings of information ownership, privacy boundaries, and when, how, and why those boundaries are drawn and crossed. Individuals' motivations and goals for disclosure are centered, requiring a method of inquiry that taps into the subjective experience and understanding of individuals. Semi-structured interviews allow for points of comparison, via questions asked of all participants, while also maintaining space for individuals to share and elaborate on their own stories in their own terms.

**Technologically-mediated interviews: Effects and limitations.** As the phenomenon of interest in this project exists in digital spaces, geographic dispersal of potential participants limited the viability of in-person interviews. Beyond geographic limitations, telephone or audio-only VoIP calls were utilized to address several concerns about participant privacy and comfort. In one sense, mediated interviews preserve the mediated nature of the phenomenon of interest. As Andalibi and Forte (2018a) suggest, the particularities of social media platforms, including affordances, may be a motivating factor in disclosure. Anonymity in particular may be especially influential for some survivors (Andalibi et al., 2016). As such, the “distance” afforded by a telephone call may be more commensurate with the ‘distance’ afforded by online spaces than face-to-face interactions. The ability to conduct interviews by phone afforded greater reach in participation, as geographic co-presence was not required. Furthermore, telephone interviews allowed participants to choose their location, which may have granted participants greater control over where, when, and with what level of privacy the interview occurred. Indeed, participants conveyed scheduling/holding interviews at a range of times and locations, including when they could be home alone, when a friend or roommate was nearby, and in a public café surrounded by strangers. This ability in turn may have affected what and how much participants disclosed during interviews (Petronio et al., 1996).

Telephone interviews introduce several limitations as well, including lack of nonverbal cues and difficulty establishing rapport and trust. Nonverbal cues provide valuable information in interviews on sensitive topics, as cues such as eyes welling up with tears or crossing one’s arms over one’s torso offer insight into a participant’s comfort and attitude toward the interview. Conversational cues, such as opening one’s mouth to indicate a desire to speak, are also more difficult to discern over the phone. This lack of visual information requires a researcher to attend

more fully to paralinguistic cues, such as pauses or shakiness in one's voice, in order to assess a participant's comfort and reaction (Abrahams, 2017). In the context of gender-based violence, non-verbal cues may be an important component in conveying empathy and practicing active listening with survivor participants (Abrahams, 2017).

Returning to Finlay's (2012) embodied reflexivity, I attempted to attend to these cues and adjusted my conversation style as a result. For instance, to reduce the likelihood of interrupting a participant, I left longer pauses between participant response and my reactions than I might in an in-person interview. Additionally, I am aware that my fairly feminine voice and name grant me a certain degree of gender privilege in this context, as being a woman makes me statistically more likely to have experienced sexual assault or be sympathetic to survivor experiences.

**Interview protocol.** Prior to starting interviews, an oral consent procedure was completed with each participant. The researcher reviewed the consent document, including participants' right to decline to answer a question(s), decline recording, pause or end the interview, and withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. This document also outlined how participants' data would be used and stored. Participants were allowed to ask questions about the study, and once all questions were addressed, I obtained verbal consent to voluntarily participate in the study. Participants were provided a copy of the consent document by email following the interview (a copy of this document is included in the Appendix D: Materials).

These measures contribute to the procedural ethics considerations informing this project, and constitute a contract of trust between participants and the researcher. Given the sensitive nature of this topic, I made efforts to be transparent about the intentions of the project and to go beyond minimum procedural ethical requirements whenever possible. Participants were informed that while they would not be asked to recount details of sexual assault experiences, questions

about subsequent disclosures could cause mild discomfort or stress; I emphasized that participants' comfort was a priority, and reiterated that participants could pause, decline a question, or end the interview at any time. Participants were also told that interview questions focused on sexual assault, that I acknowledged their experiences of trauma may include more than sexual assault, and that I wanted to hear what they felt was relevant to their experiences on social media; this was done to convey respect for the totality of participants' experiences and to acknowledge that sexual assault is often comorbid with other forms of violence, such as relationship abuse, child abuse, and sex trafficking, as well as the fact that it is often difficult to disentangle the context in which assault occurred from assault itself. In so doing, I attempted to give participants control over their disclosure story, while also acknowledging that I was additionally shaping the narrative (Finlay, 2012).

Prior to starting an audio recording (provided participant consent), participants were asked if they felt safe participating in the project. Although blunt, this question provided an opportunity for participants to voice concerns and to check in with themselves about participating. All participants included in the final sample answered in the affirmative. It is of course possible that some participants answered affirmatively in an effort to please the researcher (e.g., social desirability bias). That said, participants reported experiencing relatively little stress as a result of the interview, and none asked to end the interview or withdraw due to discomfort. One interview was paused when the participant became emotionally upset while recalling events around their initial decision to disclose. In this case, I paused the interview recording, chatted with the participant about how they were feeling and what they would like to do, and ultimately resumed the interview once the participant determined they were willing and able to continue. In general, however, feedback from interview participants supports my understanding that

participants generally did not feel retraumatized by the interview (Campbell et al., 2010). One participant, for instance, noted, “I write about this every day, talking to you wasn’t bad.”

Interview questions represent a blend of open-ended prompts (e.g., “Can you tell me about the first time you posted about sexual assault on social media?”) and exploratory or clarifying questions. Prompts asked participants to reflect on how they use social media, how they engage with different social media platforms, the first time they posted about sexual assault on social media, their motivations and goals for doing so, as well as the audience(s) they imagined engaging with their posts and the impact of audience reactions (both positive and negative) on disclosure decisions. Toward the end of each interview, participants were asked directly to reiterate their goals for disclosing and posting about sexual assault victimization. This was done partly to provide a point of comparison, against which the participant’s responses to other prompts could be held and potentially reduce misinterpretation, as well as to provide an additional opportunity for participants to feel control over their story and explanations. Interviews varied in duration from 16 minutes to 74 minutes, and typically ranged from 25 to 45 minutes. This difference in duration is due largely to the extent to which participants felt comfortable expanding on their experiences and ideas.

Throughout interviews, I sought to validate responses by paraphrasing and checking my understanding, as well as to provide feedback that underscored my appreciation for their explanations without attaching a valence to their answers. For instance, opting for “Thank you for clarifying” or “Thank you for sharing that,” rather than “Great.” Moments when participants engaged in self-blame or doubt presented a dilemma in terms of how much I should insert myself into the interview. That is, self-blame is incredibly common following assault, though it is my position (reflected by that of the anti-violence advocacy community) that sexual assault is a

choice made only by the perpetrator. Self-blame was often referenced in reflection, such as a participant saying, “At the time, I really blamed myself,” and did not necessarily reflect their current mindset or understanding of their assault.

Following interviews, I ended recordings and debriefed participants, during which time I acknowledged that the interview might have brought up emotional memories or anxiety, and asked participants how they were feeling. If participants reported feeling upset, I offered to continue talking with them. I also asked participants if there were self-care activities or trusted confidantes they could turn to, if needed, and offered resources such as the National Sexual Assault hotline. During this time, I also offered to answer any questions about the project and my motivations. As there was no deception in this study, and given my interest in transparency discussed earlier in this chapter, I answered all questions truthfully to the best of my ability.

Finally, all participants were offered an electronic Amazon.com gift card in the amount of \$15.00 USD as compensation for their time. Unless a participant declined compensation (as one did), gift cards were delivered via email to an address provided by the participant (consent document copies were sent to the same email).

**Coding and analysis.** Transcribed interview recordings were analyzed using Dedoose, a qualitative analysis software. I developed a coding scheme informed by template coding that reflected research questions (e.g., disclosure motivations) as well as expected themes (e.g., support seeking, self-expression, supporting others) (Blair, 2015). Initial codes were informed by scholarship on expected themes and refined to reflect emergent categories (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Resultant codes spoke to participants’ initial disclosures of sexual assault victimization on social media, disclosure motivations, imagined audiences to disclosure, reactions to disclosure, platforms used for disclosure, and mentions of specific social media features and abilities. The

last category was used to inform understanding of the affordances and strategic visibility management strategies that shaped participants' disclosures.

In coding transcripts line-by-line, complete thoughts provided the unit of analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). Coding thus focused on both understanding the array of motivations, audiences, and reactions held, imagined, and experienced by participants, as well as connections between platform choice and social media features and affordances that participants used in strategically managing the visibility of disclosive content. I present insights from participant interviews in Chapters 4 and 5.

### **Limitations**

An important potential limitation of this design is the effect of the elapsed time between a participant's initial online disclosure of sexual assault victimization and participation in this project. That is, in some cases, participants reported disclosing/discussing sexual assault on social media for several years, and were unable to recall with certainty if the initial disclosure they described in the interview was actually their first online disclosure. This uncertainty, however, does not invalidate the participants' recollection, and indeed, if described disclosures were not the first, they were still impactful. Petronio et al. (1996) address this limitation in the context of their work with child sexual abuse survivors, and indicate that "speakers can remember a great deal of ordinary conversations and recall of critical events results in an even stronger case for this kind of data collection technique" (p. 185). In other words, when disclosure is impactful, as sexual assault disclosure appears to be, it becomes cemented in a certain way that it is perhaps more available for recall, despite occurring months or years prior.

I also wish to underscore the limited generalizability of findings from this project. That is, the experiences related in interviews and insights from social network analysis are not

comprehensive of the experiences of all sexual assault survivors, nor of the sexual assault survivors who choose to disclose on social media. As previously noted, this project focuses on individuals who have self-selected to disclose not only on Twitter or other social media platforms, but who have also self-selected to use a hashtag(s) included in this project (Tufekci, 2014). Furthermore, findings from this project represent the sample of self-identified sexual assault survivors who consented to participate in interviews. As I address in Chapter 6, there remains a need for research investigating for whom social media are viable disclosure spaces, as this small sample is not necessarily indicative of the experiences of sexual assault survivors more broadly.

**Appendix C: Social Network Analysis Results**

Hashtag	Category	Vertices	Unique Edges	Duplicate Edges	Total Edges	Self-loops	Isolate Proportion	Graph Density	Modularity	Disclosure Coded Posts
MaleSexualAssault	Identity	4	9	0	9	0	0	0.75	0.2222	0
MaleRapeVictim	Identity	NR								
RapeSurvivor	Identity	25	20	6	26	13	0.5	0.02	0.573225	7
RapeVictim	Identity	33	25	4	29	16	0.552	0.0123106	0.645065	1
SexualAssaultSurvivor	Identity	11	11	3	14	12	0.857	0.0181818	0.459184	6
SexualAssaultVictim	Identity	2	1	2	3	2	0.667	0.5	0.25	0
TWRapeVictim	Identity	NR								
TWSexualAssaultVictim	Identity	NR								
Rape	Descriptive	770	807	181	988	274	0.277	0.0011619	0.753841	1
RapeStory	Descriptive	NR								-
SexualAbuse	Descriptive	NR								
SexualAssault	Descriptive	1317	1410	643	2053	661	0.322	0.0006969	0.641561	15
TWRape	Descriptive	2	2	0	2	1	0.5	0.5	0.1875	0
TWSexualAssault	Descriptive	NR								
BelieveSurvivors	Advocacy	42	44	8	52	13	0.25	0.0226480	0.669286	0
BreaktheSilence	Advocacy	446	474	279	753	197	0.261	0.0021363	0.605467	1
ItsNeveraVictimsFault	Advocacy	NR								
NoMeansNo	Advocacy	594	598	77	675	174	0.258	0.0013343	0.777362	2
NotOkay	Advocacy	462	382	61	443	182	0.411	0.0011597	0.712806	5
SupportSurvivors	Advocacy	112	102	41	143	42	0.294	0.0075611	0.622524	0
SurvivorLoveLetter	Advocacy	6	8	0	8	4	0.5	0.1333333	0.398438	2
YouAreNotAlone	Advocacy	1302	1386	294	1680	454	0.27	0.0006848	0.736195	1

## Appendix D: Materials

### Recruitment Messages

Sent via private message on Twitter, Tumblr, and Instagram

Hi [Name if listed on account],

My name is Kristen Barta and I am a graduate student at the University of Washington. I am conducting a research project on disclosing sexual assault experiences on social media, would you be interested in participating in a 30-60 min interview? You will only be asked about content you post and why, never details about assault experiences. I'm happy to answer any questions. Study info is here as well: <https://depts.washington.edu/sasm/wordpress/>

Thank you,  
Kristen  
sasm@uw.edu

### Study Website: About and FAQ Page Content

The sexual assault and social media (SASM) study is part of the dissertation research project of Kristen Barta at the University of Washington, Department of Communication. Talking about being sexually assaulted is incredibly difficult. This study explores the ways survivors of sexual assault utilize social media to disclose, process, receive support and support others affected by sexual assault.

*I am currently scheduling interviews. If you are at least 18 years of age, reside or attend school in the U.S. or Canada, consider yourself a victim or survivor of sexual assault, and have posted on social media about sexual assault, you are eligible to participate.*

#### Who is behind this study?

The SASM study is part of dissertation research led by Kristen Barta. The project is overseen by the University of Washington (UW) Department of Communication.

#### Has this study been reviewed by IRB?

Yes. The study design was reviewed and approved by the University of Washington's Human Subjects Division (HSD). Questions about this study or its status may be directed to UW HSD at 206-543-0098 or hsdinfo [at] u.washington.edu. The IRB ID is STUDY00000941.

#### What are your qualifications?

I am a trained domestic violence advocate and have been professionally employed by anti-violence organizations in California. This means I have completed the 40-hour advocate training required in the state of California. I have also completed a 32-hour crisis counselor training. If

you have additional questions about my qualifications or approach to this topic, please contact me at [sasm \[at\] uw.edu](mailto:sasm@uw.edu) or through the Contact form on this website.

**Who is eligible to participate?**

Anyone who 1) Currently lives or attends school in the United States or Canada; 2) Is at least 18 years of age; 3) Speaks conversational English; 4) Identifies as a victim or survivor of sexual assault; and 5) Has posted about sexual assault experience(s) on social media is eligible. You will not be excluded from participation based on gender identity. If you have questions about eligibility, please contact me through the Contact form on this website.

**What is involved in participating?**

Participation involves one interview with me, lasting approximately 30-60 minutes, conducted over Skype, Google hangouts, or the phone. Video is not necessary.

**What will you ask during the interview?**

I will ask you about your motivations to begin posting about sexual assault, your intentions and goals, reactions to your posts about sexual assault, and the social media platforms you use. I will not ask you to provide details about or otherwise disclose personal assault experiences. I am interested in understanding why you chose to discuss SA on social media; there are no wrong answers.

**Will this be recorded?**

I will ask to record the audio from our interview. This helps me create an accurate transcription of our conversation and better capture your responses in your terms. I will not record video. You may ask to pause or end the interview at any time, and you may choose to withdraw from the project at any time without penalty.

**What about confidentiality?**

Your name and identifying information (username, contact information) will not be shared with anyone outside the research team and will not be published as part of this project.

**Is there compensation?**

Yes. You will receive a \$15 USD electronic gift card to Amazon.com following your interview.

**I know someone who might be interested, can I send them to you?**

Yes. Please feel free to share my email and this website with anyone who may be interested in participating.

**I have other questions. How can I contact you?**

Please contact me at [sasm \[at\] uw.edu](mailto:sasm@uw.edu) or through the Contact form on this website.  
Thank you for your interest!

**Consent Document**UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON  
CONSENT FORM

Reclaiming publicness in the face of sexual assault: Social media, disclosure, and social support

Researchers:

Kristen Barta, graduate student, Department of Communication, University of Washington, 650-575-5313, Principal Investigator (PI)

Gina Neff, Associate Professor, Department of Sociology, Oxford University; Senior Research Fellow, Oxford Internet Institute

**Researchers' statement**

We are asking you to be in a research study. The purpose of this consent form is to give you the information you will need to help you decide whether to be in the study or not. Please read the form carefully. You may ask questions about the purpose of the research, what we would ask you to do, the possible risks and benefits, your rights as a volunteer, and anything else about the research or this form that is not clear. When we have answered all your questions, you can decide if you want to be in the study or not. This process is called "informed consent." We will give you a copy of this form for your records.

**PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

This research is intended to help us further understand the motivations and goals behind disclosing experiences of sexual assault on social media. Our goals are to explore 1) the reasons why (motivations) survivors choose to talk about sexual assault on social media, 2) survivors' goals for talking about sexual assault on social media, 3) the outcomes (good and bad) of talking about sexual assault on social media, and 4) how social media spaces fit into survivors' social support systems.

**STUDY PROCEDURES**

To meet these goals, we are conducting qualitative interviews with self-identified sexual assault survivors. We are focusing on survivors who have posted about personal assault experience(s), currently live or attend school within the United States or Canada, and are over 18 years of age. We intend to interview up to 40 survivors. Your participation in the study will be limited to one interview, lasting no longer than one hour (60 minutes). Interviews will be conducted by phone or online voice chat service such as Skype or Google Voice (audio only). You will be offered a \$15 Amazon.com gift card as compensation for your time.

During the interview, we will ask you questions such as "Can you tell me about the first time you posted about sexual assault?" and "What did you consider when deciding to post about sexual assault?" We will also ask you to describe how you use social media, what your goals were for posting about sexual assault, and any consequences arising from your assault-related posts.

We will ask to audio record your interview. You may refuse to answer any question(s) in the interview, and may choose to end the interview or withdraw your participation from the study at

any time. If you choose to end the interview or withdraw from the study, you will still be compensated with a \$15 Amazon.com gift card for your time.

### **RISKS, STRESS, OR DISCOMFORT**

As we will be asking questions that may be personal or sensitive in nature, you may experience mild discomfort or stress during the interview. If this occurs, you may decline to answer a question, or pause or end the interview. We will not ask you to disclose any details about personal sexual assault experiences, and you do not need to disclose this information; if this information is disclosed, we will not report this information.

Your personal information will not be recorded for this study, and your interview data will be kept anonymous (i.e., your name will not be associated with the interview recording nor any subsequent analysis). Your interview recording will be associated with a pseudonym (fake name) and all personally identifying information will be deleted from the transcriptions. Your interview recordings will not be shared with researchers not affiliated with this study.

### **ALTERNATIVES TO TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY**

There are no alternatives to taking part in this study.

### **BENEFITS OF THE STUDY**

Your participation in this study contributes to a greater understanding of what social media affords sexual assault survivors and, more broadly, how technology may be used to support sexual assault survivors. Findings from this study will be made available to interested participants.

### **SOURCE OF FUNDING**

There are no sources of funding to report at this time.

### **CONFIDENTIALITY OF RESEARCH INFORMATION**

All of the information you provide, including interview recordings and transcriptions, will be anonymous (meaning there will be no links to your identifying information). Interview recordings will be kept on a password-protected computer for one year past the transcription date. All interview transcriptions will be stripped of personally identifying information.

All of the information you provide will be confidential and will not be shared with parties beyond the research team. However, if we learn that you intend to harm yourself or others, we must report that to authorities.

Government or university staff sometimes review studies such as this one to make sure they are being done safely and legally. If a review of this study takes place, your records may be examined. The reviewers will protect your privacy. The study records will not be used to put you at legal risk of harm.

### **OTHER INFORMATION**

You may refuse to participate and you are free to withdraw from this study at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

You will be provided an Amazon.com gift card in the amount of 15 USD. This gift card will be emailed to you at or following the conclusion of your interview.

Interviews will be conducted at a time chosen by the participant. We do not anticipate you having to immediately or ultimately bear any unexpected costs for participation in this study.

### **RESEARCH-RELATED INJURY**

If you think you have a medical problem or illness related to this research, contact the Human Subjects Division at (206) 543-0098 right away. They will refer you for treatment.

### **Subject's statement**

This study has been explained to me. I volunteer to take part in this research. I have had a chance to ask questions. If I have questions later about the research, or if I have been harmed by participating in this study, I can contact one of the researchers listed on the first page of this consent form. If I have questions about my rights as a research subject, I can call the Human Subjects Division at (206) 543-0098. I will receive a copy of this consent form.

### **Interview Protocol**

#### **Before starting recording:**

Now that we've reviewed consent, do you have any questions for me?

I never want to assume where someone is in their recovery process, so I want to ask, do you feel safe participating in this project?

This study, as we've just reviewed, is focused on disclosures of sexual assault victimization, and the questions I'm going to ask reflect that. I'm aware however that your experiences may go beyond sexual assault, and I want to hear everything that you feel is relevant and are comfortable sharing, anything you want me to know about your experiences and social media.

As we go, let me know if you have any questions for me, if you'd like to decline to answer a question, or if you'd like me to stop the recording. Before we get started, do you have any questions I can answer?

Do I have your permission to record this interview?

#### **Interview prompts:**

(1) I'd like to start by asking, can you tell me about how you currently use social media, for personal or professional use?

- a. And when you say [Platform], how often are you using it?
- b. And, roughly, what are you doing on social media? (Posting, looking at other people's accounts, commenting or engaging in discussion)

- c. What do you like about [Platform]?
- (2) You mentioned [Platform]/a few platforms, do you use them the same way?
- a. What's different?
- (3) Thinking back, can you tell me about the first time you posted something personal about sexual assault?
- a. How did posting that feel? Was it a big deal to you?
  - b. What influenced you to post?
  - c. In that first post, who are you speaking to?
  - d. Who did you imagine seeing this post? What audience did you have in mind?
  - e. Were you worried about anyone in particular seeing this?
- (4) Building on that, can you tell me a bit more about what went into your decision to post on [Platform]?
- a. When you posted, were people close to you already aware of your assault experience?
  - b. At the time, did people close to you know you posted about this? Do people know now?
  - c. Have you posted about this on other platforms? If so, which?
- (5) What kinds of things do you post about sexual assault now?
- a. Who are you speaking to in those posts?
  - b. What audiences are you addressing?
- (6) Repeat (5) for other platforms if needed
- (7) I'm curious also about how people react to your posts about sexual assault. Can you tell me a little about the reactions you've received?
- a. Have you ever posted something because of the reactions you've received?
  - b. Have you ever deleted a post or thought, "actually I'm not going to post this" because of responses?
  - c. Have you experienced any undesired consequences from posting? (trolls, negative reactions)
  - d. Are there particular platforms where you've experienced these or more of these consequences?
- (8) Do you follow or are you friends with any other people/accounts that post about sexual assault?
- (9) We've been talking for a while and I just want to be very clear and capture this in your own words: When you post about sexual assault, what are your goals? What do you want from posting?
- (10) Is there anything else that I didn't ask about that you want me to know about your experiences?

**Post-interview Debrief**

- (1) Now that we've been talking for a while, I just want to check in about how you're feeling?
- (2) You obviously know yourself best, but some of what we've discussed can bring back memories or anxiety, are there things you can do to take care of yourself after we finish?
  - a. Suggestions: Listening to a favorite playlist, reading a book or watching a movie that makes you feel strong or safe, drawing, exercising, talking to a friend or family member, playing with a pet
- (3) I'm happy to keep talking with you, if you'd like. I can also give you a few resources if you think you might want to talk to someone later?
  - a. National Sexual Assault hotline: 1-800-656-4673. They will route you to a local RAINN affiliate and can give you confidential support, referrals and local resources. Confidential.
  - b. RAINN online: [online.rainn.org](http://online.rainn.org). Same hotline service but online and may be available after business hours –
  - c. Crisis Text Line: Text hi/help/start to 741-741. Confidential, available 24/7, not sexual assault specific. Texting based.
  - d. Trevor: 1-866-488-7386. For LGBTQ+ youth, focused somewhat on suicide, but Trevor Lifeline also aids with crisis intervention, 24/7
- (4) Do you have any questions for me?

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