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Spiral of Silence and the use of Social Media by Sexual Violence Survivors

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SPIRAL OF SILENCE AND THE USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA BY SEXUAL VIOLENCE SURVIVORS

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SPIRAL OF SILENCE AND THE USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA BY SEXUAL VIOLENCE SURVIVORS

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Acknowledgments

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ABSTRACT

Sexual violence has been a global health concern for over decades, but activism on social media such as #MeToo has increased public discourse and awareness about this issue. In its early advent, the #MeToo movement raised ample awareness, stimulated free discourse, and placed this issue as an important concern to address. While countries have implemented austere laws to prevent such hate crimes against women, societal norms and codes have deemed this type of violence as stigma or taboo resulting in the underreporting of the majority of sexual violence-related crimes. The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey conducted in 2015 reported that one in five women experience attempted or completed rape during her lifetime. In other words, 43.6% of women in the United States experience some form of sexual misconduct during their life including more than a third of women who reported unwanted sexual contact or, groping for example, in their lifetime (Smith, S.G., Zhang, X., Basile, K.C., Merrick, M.T., Wang, J., Kresnow, M., & Chen, J., 2018).). This study examines individuals' willingness to talk about sexual violence on social media. Using the spiral of silence theoretical framework, a survey was distributed online to understand who is willing to talk about social violence and under what conditions. Analysis of (n=108) responses found that gender and experience with sexual violence were key predictors of individuals' willingness to share their experiences or opinions on social media. More than half of the respondents (n=63) or 58% reported having experienced some form of sexual violence, but only a small number (n=9) or 14% had shared their personal experiences on social media. Participants identifying as cisgender females (n=32) or 41.6% reported their willingness to share their opinions on social media. Willingness to share

opinions on social media about sexual violence was positively associated with the perception of public perception. Male participants (n=9) or 38% who perceived their opinion to be shared by their followers were more likely to express their views about sexual violence. The results indicate that women are more likely to be vocal about the issue of sexual violence and less likely to experience the spiral of silence effect.

Keywords: the spiral of silence, sexual violence, social media use, support, victims

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Spiral of Silence and the Use of Social Media by Sexual Violence Survivors

Introduction

Sexual Violence across the Globe

Sexual crimes have drastically increased over the past few decades. In 2019, India revealed a devastating total of 405,861 registered cases of crimes against women, displaying an escalation of 7.3% over 2018 with 378,236 cases (National Crime Records Bureau, 2019). This translated to nearly four women being raped every hour, and an average of 88 women sexually abused daily (Times of India, 2020). In other words, every fifteen minutes a rape was reported in India (Caruso, 2020).

More generally speaking, crimes of sexual violence are prevalent health and social problems faced predominantly by women across the globe. Consequently, physical health becomes a concern for most victims as they could suffer from gynecological problems, unwanted pregnancies, chronic pelvic pain, unsafe abortion, and sexual dysfunction (Bott, Morrison & Ellsberg, 2005). Furthermore, survivors experience mental health issues that often stem from norms, societal structures, and environmental stressors. While some countries have successfully implemented austere laws that have reduced the overall count of hate crimes against women, a large majority of sexual-violence-related crimes remain underreported. This is largely due, in part, to victims fearing the cultural stigmatism and taboos associated with actually disclosing that they have been attacked, which, in effect, leads to them not reporting anything at all (Dwarkin & Weaver, 2021).

The United States reported a similarly alarming rate of crimes against women. The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS) conducted in 2015 reported that one in five women experience attempted or completed rape during her lifetime. In other words,

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43.6% of women in the United States experienced some form of sexual misconduct during their life including more than a third of women who reported unwanted sexual contact or groping in their lifetime. The survey also revealed that approximately 1 in 6 women experienced sexual coercion, for example, by someone who repeatedly asked for sex or sexual pressure by someone under authority (NISVS, 2015). Another survey conducted by the Bureau of Justice Statistics on Criminal Victimization, the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) reports that in 2019, approximately 33.9% of reported cases were rape and sexual assault amounting to a total of 212,230 surviving victims. Over the last two decades, several initiatives have been made to address sexual crimes against women however many of them have been unsuccessful. (Bott, Morrison & Elsberg, 2005).

The #MeToo is a milestone for sexual violence survivors to use social media as a place for expression. A recent article discussed social media platforms, especially Twitter and Reddit, as forums for survivors to express themselves on experiences/opinions of sexual violence with the coming of the #MeToo movement (Alaggia & Wang, 2020). The study emphasized the significance and impact of the #MeToo movement in pivoting the change from silencing to expressing oneself in online public discussions regarding sexual harassment. The authors found that social media offered a voice to sexual violence survivors. This study illuminated the direct relation between taboo/stigmatized subjects and willingness to express in online public forums. Hence, there is a need to examine how social media performs can act as facilitators or perpetrators in the expression of opinion regarding sexual violence.

Dubois and Szwarc (2018) examined the use of social media for public communication and how that reflected the intensity of self-censorship in the community in which it exists. Their research revealed that the two are directly related, meaning that if social media was being used

democratically, encouraging expression of diverse opinions, the likelihood of censorship was less and vice versa. The goal of my study was to understand how the advancement in technology could assist or hinder discrepancies in underreporting of gender-based violence. Using the framework of the spiral of silence phenomenon, this study examined how sexual violence survivors used social media platforms to express or self-censor their opinions on the topic. This analysis addressed the tendency of victims who have suffered forms of sexual harassment and misconduct to remain silent, specifically on social media.

The lack of relief and societal support for sexual violence survivors is another prominent reason that has also led to the underreporting of these terrible crimes. As this subject is considered taboo in many societies, we can understand the reasons for the self-censoring of rape and sex-related assaults. Hence, using the spiral of silence theory as a lens, this research study tried to understand individual willingness to express or remain silent against sexual violence on social media. The theory poses that when there was a dominant opinion present, the chances of expressing an opposing opinion were less likely.

Existing scholarship has used the theory to exhibit the potential of social media activism in helping voice marginalized experiences (Kemp, 2020). Especially with the use of hashtags and compelling visuals, social media platforms such as Instagram have the political potential to act as forums for free socio-cultural discourse (Caldeira, 2021). This study examined the relationship between the willingness to intervene and express an opinion against acts of sexual violence on social media. Poulakidakos, Veneti, & Fangonikolopoulos (2018) analyzed personalized communication offered by social media and its potential to reduce censorship or silencing opinions in public. Their findings conveyed that the spiral of silence can be diminished in the online context.

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To de-stigmatize the controversial and sensitive topic of sexual violence, this study focused on one's willingness to express or self-censor on the topic of sexual violence on social media. With an emphasis on variables including gender, age, occupation/profession, social media use, social media purpose, and comfort level with social media, the study examined the spiral of silence phenomenon experienced by surveying 108 social media users. This research study explored if the SoS was diminished or continued to exist online when discussing sexual violence. Further, it analyzed the capacity of digital safe spaces for victims or survivors to offer relief to those who have experienced some form of sexual violence.

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Literature Review

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Spiral of Silence Theory

The spiral of silence was proposed by a German political scientist, Elizabeth Noelle Neumann in 1974. The phenomenon referred to people's tendency to remain silent when they feel that their opinions were in opposition to the majority view on a subject of moral concern. The theory implied two primary reasons for humans to behave this way including fear of isolation and fear of reprisal (Neumann, 1974). Fear of isolation referred to the fear of being secluded from the group once opposite views were established and fear of extreme isolation leading to loss of house, status, or job. The spiral was created when someone in the perceived majority opinion voiced confidently in support of the opinion, making the minority feel more distanced and uncomfortable to voice their opinion and hence begin to experience fear of isolation and reprisal. It also suggested that the closer an individual feels their opinion coincides with the majority opinion the more likely they were to voice their opinion in public discourse. This theory

explained how public opinion could influence one's perception and reaction to discussing public affairs.

Neumann described public opinion as "the opinion which can be voiced in public without fear of sanctions and upon which action in public can be based" (Neumann, 1974, page 44). The political scientist hypothesized that individuals observe and learn how to express opinions on public matters and this, in turn, influenced them in reacting to the matter. She also argued that individuals' willingness to share their opinion depended on the opinion expressed dominantly in public. This reinforced the presence of a dominating or overruling opinion that was openly voiced regarding a matter of public concern. She also hypothesized that if this phenomenon was to exist over time the process of the expression of personal opinion could evolve as well (Neumann, 1974).

To test her hypothesis, Neumann conducted multiple surveys and interviews. Some questions focus on the respondents' opinions on certain matters of controversy, the respondents' opinion on the majority opinion, and their willingness to express themselves in public discourse. Examples of the chosen subject matters included abortion law, capital punishment, communist party ban, married couples living together, and more matters of public interest. The variables she established were age groups, sex, occupation, monthly income, and residential status. The participants were asked to have discussions on topics of socialism, communist parties, and unmarried live ins with travelers on a train journey. The results revealed that minority opinions were more likely to speak out and hence become the majority opinion causing the initial majority to become the minority. This is on the basis that there was uncertainty within the groups on who held the majority opinion. Neumann claimed that the ones showing more willingness to express eventually formed the majority opinion.

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This theory has been adopted by scholars across disciplines to expose the discrepancies in public opinion. Bowen and Blackmon's (2003) article delved deeply into the spiral of silence phenomenon introduced by Elizabeth Noelle Neumann in 1947. Particularly, this study examined the effect of individual differences in groups or larger organizations and how this could create disruption or cohesion within the group/organization. Sexual orientation was adopted as the topic of discussion to emphasize the impact of differences of individual opinions in big groups. The authors found that individuals who have revealed their sexual orientation were more likely to engage in group discussions on the same. My quantitative study built on this theory by exploring the willingness of people who have experienced sexual violence to share their opinion on social media.

In another study conducted in the Middle East, the authors examined the spiral of silence phenomenon experienced within an online community of Arab women on Twitter (Dashti and Johar, 2015). The results revealed that while Twitter mediates online communication, the women felt equally confident to express their opinions face to face among women only. The study also confirmed that the spiral of silence phenomenon is reinforced among women in the presence of men and strangers. This study demonstrated the potential for social media to mitigate the effects of the spiral of silence phenomenon, as women could feel confident in sharing their opinion on social media.

Additionally, it was important to examine the evolution of digital technology and its influence on the spiral of silence theory. A study conducted by Hakobyan (2020) argued that while the internet has offered new and communicative methods of discussion and expression online it has also led to fear of being judged or criticized, thus reinforcing the SoS phenomenon. To better understand the effects of technology on SoS, another paper delved into avoidance

strategies that can be adopted in order to remain silent and further reinforce the spiral of silence phenomenon in a hostile or uninviting situation (Hayes, 2007). Some strategies found were the pretense to not have an opinion, pleading ignorance, physical/digital escape, or simply refusing to talk. Here, the importance was given to maintaining silence rather than voicing expressions making it important to also examine if a similar phenomenon is experienced in the context of sexual violence.

Gearhart and Zhang (2015) examined the impact of SoS theory on social networking sites (SNS) and found that fear of isolation continued to exist in the online context. Further, it also revealed that a shift from face-to-face relations to computer-mediated communication had also shifted the role of SoS on SNSs. Using this article as a reference, my research study examined the presence of the SoS phenomenon in both face-to-face and computed mediated communication. Another article written by Gearhart and Zhang (2018) applied the SoS phenomenon across various controversial topics including gay marriage, abortion, and immigration. As the theory relied on the discussion of a controversial topic, the scholars studied the intensity of fear of isolation experienced in each of the topics listed above. They found that when a socially controversial issue is growing in interest, more people tend to voice their opinion even if it is against the opinion climate. For instance, we can understand that if conversations on sexual violence are growing online, more individuals will voice their honest opinions regardless of the majority opinion hence diminishing the spiral of silence online.

Wu's and Atkin's (2018) study investigated the impacts of online anonymity on the SoS theory in online discussions, particularly on the subject of abortion. The article revealed that computer-mediated communication promoted expression of opinion through anonymity, online discussions on public forums help shape one's perception and reaction to subjects of public

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interest which in turn influences one's willingness to express online in fear of isolation from the
community. The authors provided a framework to further investigate the effect of computer-
mediated communication on the SoS theory with a focus on sexual violence.

A thorough study conducted in May 2020 presents a socio-cultural analysis of the
#MeToo movement in India and the United States (Kemp, 2020). The author performed a
thorough examination of social media platforms specifically Twitter and Facebook and their role
in social media activism with a focus on the #MeToo movement. In particular, the article delved
into the spiral of silence experienced by women and minorities in the context of rape on social
media. Here we observe the effective use of social media platforms and how they allowed the
creation of digital spaces for victims of sexual violence to share experiences, with the intent of
destigmatizing the topic of sexual violence as the public discourse on online platforms.

Sexual violence and social media

While many scholars have used the spiral of silence theory to study how public opinion
shapes or influences one's reaction and perception on moral issues such as police brutality,
abortion, marijuana legality, gender discrimination, this study used the spiral of silence theory as
a lens to inspect how sexual violence survivors use social media as a platform to voice their
opinion or self-censor. Digital media has been found to serve as a perpetrator of online misogyny
across social media platforms as well as a facilitator of domestic violence (Dragiewicz, 2018). In
other words, computer-mediated communication often perceived to be a medium that allows
individuals to communicate at will can be restrictive when it comes to willingness to express an
opinion on a sensitive topic such as sexual violence. For instance, O'Neil (2018) explored the
need for online communities on social media platforms such as Reddit, Twitter, and Facebook to
facilitate discourse among survivors regarding sexual violence. The study revealed that victims

and survivors of sexual harassment made use of digital technologies for storytelling, to seek advice, and to establish a supportive community with relatable members. The failure of the government to provide justice for the majority of the time further strengthened the need for a safe, judgment-free platform for sexual violence survivors to share personal stories and support one another. Here arose the need to investigate how the perceived minority opinion could be expressed using digital technology to diminish the feeling of isolation and injustice.

Similarly, Lokot (2018) explored Facebook responses to a particular post by a Ukrainian activist concerning sexual violence. While the subject was dominantly viewed as a taboo in this society, the findings revealed that an increase in the number of genuine, true, and personal Facebook posts regarding experiences with sexual misconduct are helping normalize and encourage women to express themselves on Facebook. This article further illuminated the willingness of women to voice themselves in a public discussion on a controversial topic, specifically sexual violence. It also reinforced that the topic of sexual violence can be normalized. Furthermore, Mendes and Ringrose (2019) introduced the term "digitized narratives" referring to discourse regarding sexual violence against women on a particular Tumblr page - Who needs Feminism and hashtag #BeenRapedNeverReported. The authors proposed that social media platforms such as Twitter and Tumblr could not only help reshape social norms but also encourage de-silencing and voicing of experiences and opinions. As more people join social media platforms and instances of sexual violence show no signs of diminishing, it's important to examine who is willing to speak up about this issue.

Armstrong and Mahone (2017) conducted a study that revealed a direct relationship between those willing to intervene and those willing to express opinions against sexual violence and their study revealed that those who are likely to intervene are also likely to fight against

sexual misconduct. Their study also revealed that more women than men are willing to fight against sexual violence further reinforcing that sexual violence mainly concerns women. The current study builds on the previous work by exploring whether there are gender-based differences in willingness to express experiences and opinions on sexual violence as well.

As digital spaces are not always supportive of those wanting to share their experiences with sexual violence. Zaleski, Gunderson, Baes, Estupinian, and Vergara (2016) conducted a study on social media to reveal that rape culture existed within the online community via discussions, comments, and threads. Upon deeper analysis, they found that victim-blaming and questioning were dominant across social media forums leading to further inquisitions and commentary. They also found that sexual violence survivors used social media to voice their opinion through personal narratives hence breaking down the rape culture.

Linder, Myers, Riggle, Lacy (2016) studied the use of social media by activists and highlighted its positive impact on community building and raising awareness regarding sexual misconduct on campus. In addition, the study offered recommendations to administrators and student activists that could improve campus life conditions. Some of them included paying close attention to the schools' social media accounts and involving student activists in these forums, staying aware of campus life and events, and improving response programs for minorities and marginalized groups. This research study exemplified the potential for social media as a tool to prevent, manage and offer support to communities in need. In this instance, adopting these strategies can help reduce the Spiral of Silence experienced online.

A detailed article by Boux and Daum (2015) examined the role of smartphones and social media in sharing experiences of sexual violence. They analyzed the role of media in acting as facilitators or challengers of rape culture. The authors described rape culture as the validation,

justification, and obfuscation of sexual violence and rape. This involved changing how society viewed sexual offenses to rationalize and normalize the subject. Furthermore, the article delved into the rape myth and reasons for questioning victims. The results conveyed that a primary reason for that was because women delay in reporting cases and due to the lack of evidence and proof most cases were suspended or closed. In addition, it also argued that social media can help address the problem of sexual violence through real and honest stories. This conveyed the importance of recognizing social media's potential role in offering relief and justice to victims, in the context of sexual violence.

While countries have made austere laws to prevent hate crimes against women, gender-based violence continues to exist in low and high-income countries. Primarily due to the failure of laws, institutions as well as societal norms that tend to discriminate against women and girls (Bott, Morrison & Ellsberg, 2005). For instance, video documentation of women in Delhi, India, revealed that five years after the dreadful gang rape of Nirbhaya in 2012, women in India still felt unsafe and afraid to leave their homes (Films Media Group, 2018). "You cannot even think about taking public transport after 9 o'clock" states a girl in the video. The emotional video conveyed the immense and immediate need to put an end to this crime towards women. Further, it illuminated the lack of change post Nirbhaya's case and highlighted the necessity for digital safe spaces for women and sexual violence survivors.

Salter (2013) conducted a study to examine the impact of online technologies on public discourse on sexual violence. For the purpose of his study, he delved into three case studies in which females have used various online platforms to make allegations of sexual violence and abuse. In the instance of publicly naming the accused it was argued that such action represented exploitation of the accused' privacy and an abuse of their right to a fair trial. These allegations in

the online sphere can be received and understood very differently and are in turn circulated in other media forms. However, the study also noted that the principles upon which online "counter-publics" operated were similar to those of the hegemonic public sphere. In addition, it also communicated that not all have equal access to the support of online networks and activists. Here it was essential to understand if subjects of controversy, such as sexual violence, could be communicated via an online discourse on social media.

The growing online community has proven to offer a substantial amount of relief and support for sexual violence survivors. A recent study investigated the role of closed groups on social media platforms, particularly Facebook, in facilitating and offering support to members on controversial and sensitive subjects including sexual harassment, child abuse, rape, abortion, domestic abuse, and matters concerning child-rearing (Younas, Naseem, & Mustafa, 2020). The scholars analyzed and highlighted the positive impact of such groups in seeking support and providing relief to women in Pakistan. This study emphasized the importance of computer-mediated communication including features of anonymity to diminish the feeling of isolation and silence experienced within sexual violence survivors. Given the multiple cultural taboos that exist in society, my project offered to build on this study to explore the anonymity feature on social media used by survivors of sexual violence.

In China, the #MeToo movement emerged in 2018 and a study conducted in 2020 investigated how digital technologies shifted the ways in which feminist activism took place online (Zeng, 2020). A mixed-method approach was adopted to understand 36,000 articles related to the social movement and a final 48 cases were identified for further exploration. Findings revealed multiple counter censorship strategies including cache and camouflage. Cache referred to the "anti-censorship practice of restoring and hiding previously deleted content in

platforms that are less likely to be targeted by Chinese censors" (Zeng, 2020, page 19) whereas camouflage implied using tactics to avoid content censorship through content modification. These techniques not only encourage the expression of opinions on controversial subjects but also promote freedom of expression.

In its essence, the purpose of this study was to recognize the potential for social media to stimulate socio-cultural changes. A compelling study conducted in 2020 further illuminated the prospective for social media, specifically Instagram, to become a platform for women to voice political opinions (Caldeira, 2020). For the study, the author conducted 13 in-depth focus group interviews of women aged between 18-35 and the findings discussed it was important to understand the participants' perception of political potential as an aesthetically oriented platform and most candidates realized the potential for engaging in visibility politics and representing a wider diversity of women who are often absent from popular and mass media. Furthermore, the article also illuminated the possibility of receiving backlash or trolling as a result of an expression. However, when used strategically, it could be possible to have a communicative discourse on Instagram to address challenges faced by women, and in this context, the survivors of sexual violence.

While previous studies have offered an evident scholarship on the relationship between social media and socially controversial topics such as sexual violence, this research study focused on understanding the possible use of social media as a support system for survivors of sexual violence. Further, it discussed the role of the spiral of silence phenomenon to analyze whether it is increased or reduced in the online context.

Research Questions

Building on research by Kemp (2020), who discussed the potential for social media activism in bringing about societal and political change, this study focused on the following questions:

RQ1: How do sexual violence survivors use social media?

RQ2: Is there a gender-based difference in social media users' willingness to share their opinion on sexual violence when followers support their viewpoint?

RQ3: Is there a gender-based difference in social media users' willingness to share experiences with sexual violence if followers support their viewpoint?

RQ4: Is there a relationship between time spent on social media and willingness to voice an opinion on sexual violence?

Hypotheses

Building on the work by Lokot (2018), who found that an increase in the number of genuine, authentic, and personal online posts regarding experiences with sexual misconduct can encourage women to share experiences to create awareness and reduce stigma, the following hypotheses were proposed:

H1: Social media use will be positively related to sharing opinions on sexual violence

H2: Perception of support from followers will be positively related to willingness to share experiences of sexual violence on social media

H3: Support for social media networks will be directly related to sharing about experiences with sexual violence online

H4: Anonymous use of social media will be positively related to sharing about experiences with sexual violence

H5: Perception of social media is directly related to facilitating public or private discourse on the topic of sexual violence.

Methodology

This study was approved by the Rochester Institute of Technology's Institutional Review Board in June 2021, and data collection commenced May through December. Participants were recruited via Qualtrics for participation in an online survey about social media use and willingness to express opinions and experiences of sexual violence online. After offering the trigger warning and mental health helplines, participants completed the survey, which lasted approximately 7-15 minutes. The survey was voluntary and confidential. Respondents were free to leave the survey in case they felt uncomfortable.

The purpose of this study was to explore and understand the use of social media by survivors of sexual violence. Further, this research study examined perceptions of social media such as anonymous posting and follower types to test the above hypothesis and relationships.

Sample

For this study, an online quantitative questionnaire was designed using Qualtrics in the English language and distributed to 200-400 participants via social media, email, word of mouth, and other modes of face-to-face and computer-mediated communication. No monetary compensation was offered to the participants. Between May 2021 to December 2021 and a total of 157 responses were collected, from which 49 were incomplete, leaving a total of 108

responses. The sample was recruited through email blasts and snowball sampling which is a typical research method in which participants themselves spread the word about the survey (Kirchher & Charles, 2018). This approach was applicable as members of the sample were difficult to find considering sexual violence is a sensitive topic. Snowball sampling allowed anonymous recruitment of participants and encouraged them to share with their network to increase participation. Additionally, participants were recruited through posts on social media platforms such as Instagram and WhatsApp which were shared and reshared among groups

Questionnaire

The 29-question survey asked for general demographics including age, gender, and education. Additionally, to understand any relationship between willingness to express and social media use respondents were asked to identify primary use of social media, hours spent on social media, and participant opinion and experience with sexual violence. The next set of questions delved into the topic of sexual violence on social media. It examined participant involvement in the #MeToo movement online, reasons social media makes one feel safe, and participant understanding of the meanings of sexual violence, opinions, and experiences of sexual violence.

To test the spiral of silence effect, 46 statements were asked to understand the influence of expression/reporting stories related to sexual violence on social media, anonymity on social media, positive opinion climate, and implications of social media as a safe space for survivors. on a scale of 1 to 5, being strongly disagreed to strongly agreed. This scale system was introduced by Rensis Likert (Babbie, 2020).

Measures

These scales were developed using the existing scholarship. Additionally, the Likert Scale statements were built on work done by scholar, Kemp (2020).

Sharing opinion on sexual violence

The willingness to post opinions of sexual violence on social media was measured using the Likert scale developed by Rensis Likert. Participants responded to 12 items on a 5-point scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), including "I hope it conveys support for the victims/survivors" and "I would worry about what kind of impression I make on my social media followers." This scale was developed from previous scholarship which explored the need for online communities on social media platforms such as Reddit, Twitter, and Facebook to facilitate discourse among survivors regarding sexual violence (O'Neil 2018). Their study indicated that victims and survivors of sexual harassment made use of digital technologies for storytelling, to seek advice, and to establish a supportive community with relatable members. (M =3.44; Cronbach's α = .410).

Perception of support from social media network

Further, to access the willingness to post about experiences with sexual violence on social media, participants responded to 13 items on a 5-point scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), including "I hope it inspires other survivors to share their stories" and "I am comfortable sharing my experience if I feel my followers have had similar experiences." This scale was also developed using O'Neil's (2018) findings. **(M = 3.34; Cronbach's α = .654)**.

Support for social media network

Participants were also asked to indicate their agreement statements about their willingness to respond to someone in their social media network sharing experiences with sexual

violence. Participants responded to 7 items on a 5-point scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), including "I would provide positive and supportive comments publicly" and "I would post comments asking them to make their posts private." This scale was developed using previous studies conducted by Gearhart and Zhang (2015) found that when a socially controversial issue is growing in interest, more people tend to voice their opinion even if it is against the opinion climate. (M =2.73; Cronbach's α = .141).

Anonymous use of social media

Additionally, participants willingness to share experiences or opinions about sexual violence on social media anonymously. Participants responded to 9 items on a 5-point scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), including "I would share my experience with sexual violence" and "I would flag sexual violence-related posts as inappropriate and try and get them taken down." Previous scholarship by Wu's and Atkin's (2018) investigated the impacts of online anonymity on the SoS theory in online discussions, particularly on the subject of abortion. The article revealed that computer-mediated communication promoted the expression of opinion through anonymity, online discussions on public forums help shape one's perception and reaction to subjects of public interest which in turn influences one's willingness to express online in fear of isolation from the community **(M =2.93; Cronbach's α = .716).**

Perception of social media

Lastly, the perception of social media in facilitating public or private discourse around sexual violence survivors of sexual violence was accessed using 5 items on a 5-point scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Statements included: "Social media users can leverage various platforms to share opinions and experiences on sexual violence" and "Social media facilitates online sexual violence." This scale was developed using Boux and Daum's (2015)

article which examined the role of smartphones and social media in sharing experiences of sexual violence. They analyzed the role of social media in acting as facilitators or challengers of rape culture online. (M =3. 60; Cronbach's α = .247).

Data Analysis

Survey responses were downloaded from Qualtrics for statistical analysis using IBM Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS, version 28). First, the dataset was checked for missing information and incomplete responses were eliminated resulting in a total of 108 responses. Then Cronbach's Alpha reliability test was done to check for reliability of the scales. The two reliable scales: Experience with sexual violence and anonymity were used to test the hypotheses using Kendal Tau's non-parametric correlations. Further, Pearson's correlations and Chi Square tests were conducted however no significance was found.

Results

Demographics:

Most of the participants were in the age range of 18-24 (n=48) or 44% and 25-34 (n=42) or 39%. Participant gender identification revealed that the majority of them (n=77) or 71% identified as cisgender females, and participants (n=24) or 22% identified as cisgender males. The remaining (n=7) or 7% identified as a non-binary, trans man, a trans woman, and gender fluid. Results demonstrated that most of the participants had earned bachelor's degrees (n=45) or 41%, (n=30) or 28% had earned graduate degrees, other participants (n=28) 26% had graduated from high school or equivalent, and the remaining participants (n5) 5% had an associate degree.

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Social media use was the priming variable for the purpose of this study. Results indicated that participants used multiple social media platforms such as Instagram (n=88) or 82%, YouTube (n=74) or 69%, WhatsApp (n=57) or 53%, Facebook/Messenger (n=49) or 45%, Snapchat (n=45) or 42%, Tik Tok (n=39) or 36%, Twitter (n=33) or 31%, and Reddit (n=23) or 21%.

In the next section, I report the results by research questions and hypotheses.

RQ1 asked how sexual violence survivors use social media.

Results indicated that more than half of the participants (n=63) or 59%, had previously experienced some form of sexual violence in their lives. Further RQ1, results were compared to understand how these survivors specifically used social media. To do this, a dummy variable was created for the participants who voted yes to having experienced sexual violence. The analysis found that participants (n=25) or 40% used social media to connect with family and friends and others (n=24) used it for entertainment and trends. Further, frequency analysis reported that from the 63 participants, only a small number (n=9) or 14%, had shared their experiences with sexual violence on social media. However, several participants (n=30), or 48% had shared their opinions of sexual violence on social media while the remaining majority (n=33), or 52%, had not. Additionally, a small number of participants (n=20), or 32% reported that they would not share their experiences even if their followers supported their viewpoint.

RQ2 asked if there was a gender-based difference in social media users' willingness to share their opinion on sexual violence when followers support their viewpoint.

Of the 77 participants who identified as cisgender females, (n=32) or 42% had previously shared their opinions on social media. Further, a larger number (n=50), or 65% voted yes to sharing opinions if their followers supported their viewpoint. In comparison to this, only 1 of 24 participants who identified as a cisgender male had previously shared their opinion on social media. Additionally, only some male participants (n=9) or 38% said they would share their opinions if their followers supported their viewpoint whereas the remaining (n=15), or 63% voted no.

RQ3 asked if there was a gender-based difference in social media users' willingness to share experiences with sexual violence if followers support their viewpoint.

The results indicated that (n=20) or 32% of 63 participants who had identified as having had experiences with sexual violence would share their experiences if their followers supported their viewpoint while the majority of the participants (n=43) or 69% voted no.

RQ4 asked if there was a relationship between time spent on social media and willingness to voice an opinion on sexual violence.

Results reported that a large number of participants (n=65) or 60% spent 2-4 hours on social media, daily. Of them, a few participants (n=19), or 29% noted that they had previously shared their opinions of sexual violence on social media. However, more than half of them (n=34), or 52% said they would share their opinions if their followers support their viewpoint.

H1 stated that social media use will be positively related to sharing opinions on sexual violence.

SPIRAL OF SILENCE AND THE USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA BY SEXUAL VIOLENCE SURVIVORS

Hypothesis 1 was derived from existing scholarship in a detailed article by Boux and Daum (2015) which examined the role of smartphones and social media in sharing experiences of sexual violence. They analyzed the role of media in acting as facilitators or challengers of rape culture. They also argued that social media can help address the problem of sexual violence through real and honest stories. This conveyed the importance of recognizing social media's potential role in offering relief and justice to victims, in the context of sexual violence. Since the scale was not reliable, no further tests and analyses could be conducted. This hypothesis was not tested.

H2 stated that perception of support from followers would be positively related to willingness to share experiences with sexual violence on social media

Hypothesis 2 considered that perception of support from followers was directly related to willingness to share experiences on social media. Previous studies conducted by Gearhart and Zhang (2015) found that when a socially controversial issue is growing in interest, more people tend to voice their opinion even if it is against the opinion climate. For instance, we can understand that if conversations on sexual violence are growing online, more individuals will voice their honest opinions regardless of the majority opinion hence diminishing the spiral of silence online.

There was a weak, negative correlation between the perception of support from the social media followers and the willingness to share experiences on social media, which was statistically significant. (τb = -.154, p = .05). In other words, if an individual felt that their followers were less likely to support their perspective, they were more likely to share their opinion.

H3 states that support for social media networks will be directly related to sharing about experiences with sexual violence online

Hypothesis 3 was also derived from the above scholarship to better understand if there was a direct relation between support for social media network and sharing experiences online. Since the scale was not reliable, no further tests and analyses could be conducted. This hypothesis was not tested.

H4 stated that anonymous use of social media will be positively related to sharing experiences of sexual violence on social media.

Wu's and Atkin's (2018) study investigated the impacts of online anonymity on the SoS theory in online discussions, particularly on the subject of abortion. The article revealed that computer-mediated communication promoted the expression of opinion through anonymity, online discussions on public forums help shape one's perception and reaction to subjects of public interest which in turn influences one's willingness to express online in fear of isolation from the community. In another study, the scholars analyzed and highlighted the positive impact of social media groups in seeking support and providing relief to women in Pakistan. (Younas, Naseem, & Mustafa, 2020). This study emphasized the importance of computer-mediated communication including features of anonymity to diminish the feeling of isolation and silence experienced by sexual violence survivors.

This hypothesis was supported. A Kendall's tau-b correlation was run to determine the relationship between anonymous use of social media and willingness to share experiences with sexual violence. There was a modest, positive correlation between the variables, which was

statistically significant ($\tau b = .226$, $p = .01$). Individuals who perceived their social media presence to be anonymous were more willing to share their experience with sexual violence.

H5 stated that the perception of social media was directly related to facilitating public or private discourse on the topic of sexual violence.

Lastly, hypothesis 5 was derived from a detailed article by Boux and Daum (2015) that examined the role of smartphones and social media in sharing experiences of sexual violence. They analyzed the role of media in acting as facilitators or challengers of rape culture. The authors described rape culture as the validation, justification, and obfuscation of sexual violence and rape. This involved changing how society viewed sexual offenses to rationalize and normalize the subject.

Since the scale was not reliable, no further tests and analyses could be conducted. This hypothesis was not tested.

Discussion

This study attempted to understand how survivors of sexual violence use social media to share opinions or experiences online. The overarching results of this study indicated that anonymous use of social media has the potential to amplify messages that concern issues faced by marginalized communities. Analysis of (n=108) responses found that gender and experience with sexual violence were key predictors of individuals' willingness to share their experiences or opinions on social media. Results for research question 1 indicated that more than half of the participants (n=63) or 59% had previously experienced some form of sexual violence in their lives.

Further, results were compared to understand how these survivors specifically used social media. Results reported that some participants (n=25) or 40% used social media to connect with family and friends and others (n=24) used it for entertainment and trends. The results support findings from previous scholarship. For instance, O'Neil (2018) examined the need for online communities on social media platforms such as Reddit, Twitter, and Facebook to facilitate discourse among survivors regarding sexual violence. His study revealed that victims and survivors of sexual harassment made use of digital technologies for storytelling, to seek advice, and to establish a supportive community with relatable members. Another study investigated the role of closed groups on social media platforms, particularly Facebook, in facilitating and offering support to members on controversial and sensitive subjects including sexual harassment, child abuse, rape, abortion, domestic abuse, and matters concerning child-rearing (Younas, Naseem, & Mustafa, 2020).

Results of research questions 2 and 3 indicated that there was a significant difference in gender and willingness to share opinions and experiences with sexual violence on social media. Willingness to share opinions on social media about sexual violence was positively associated with the perception of public support. Male participants (n=9) or 38% who perceived their opinion to be shared by their followers were more likely to express their views about sexual violence. The results indicate that women are more likely to be vocal about the issue of sexual violence and less likely to experience the spiral of silence effect. Previous scholarship found that more women than men are willing to fight against sexual violence further reinforcing that sexual violence mainly concerns women (Armstrong and Mahone, 2017).

Research question 4 indicated that a large number of participants (n=65) or 60% spent 2-4 hours on social media, daily. From this number, only a few participants (n=19), or 29% noted

that they had previously shared their opinions of sexual violence on social media. However, the majority of them (n=34), or 52% said they would share their opinions if their followers support their viewpoint. A small number of 6 participants spent over 6 hours on social media daily. Only one in six participants had previously shared their opinion on sexual violence, whereas five in six voted that they will share their opinions if their followers support their viewpoint. A recent study conducted by Akers (2018) investigated the time spent on social media and online self-disclosure. The author examined online self-disclosure and securing social support, however her findings indicate that amplified social media disclosure was unable to offer emotional support.

Results indicated that hypothesis 2 was moderately supported, and the results indicated that findings were congruent with existing scholarship conducted by Gearhart and Zhang in 2015. The scholars studied the intensity of fear of isolation experienced in a controversial setting. They found that when a socially controversial issue is growing in interest, more people tend to voice their opinion even if it is against the opinion climate. For instance, we can understand that if conversations on sexual violence are growing online, more individuals will voice their honest opinions regardless of the majority opinion hence diminishing the spiral of silence online (Gearhart and Zhang 2015).

Hypothesis 4 posited that anonymous use of social media was positively related to sharing experiences or opinions of sexual violence online. This hypothesis was strongly supported, and the results indicated similarity with existing scholarship. Wu's and Atkin's (2018) study revealed that computer-mediated communication promoted the expression of opinion through anonymity, online discussions on public forums help shape one's perception and reaction to subjects of public interest which in turn influences one's willingness to express online in fear of isolation from the community.

SPIRAL OF SILENCE AND THE USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA BY SEXUAL VIOLENCE SURVIVORS

Through the lens of the spiral of silence theory, findings indicate that the topic of sexual violence on social media is still controversial however, participants are likely to share their viewpoints if their followers support them. This is similar to the findings of Gearhart and Zhang (2018) which discusses that when a socially controversial issue is growing in interest, more individuals tend to voice their opinion even if it is against the opinion climate.

Further, anonymous use of social media has the potential to shape perception which influences one's willingness to express online in fear of isolation from the community (Wu's and Atkin, 2018). Findings of this study were in agreement of previous scholarship and indicated participants would social media anonymously to express opinions and experiences with sexual violence.

Implications

Results of this study found that social media is unable to break societal barriers. Further, sexual violence continues to be a matter of controversy and is considered a taboo topic. Results also indicated that there is a significant gender-based difference in voicing opinions and experiences online. An important implication of this study was that anonymous use of social media could encourage individuals to share opinions and experience with sexual violence online. Furthermore, results indicate that individuals are more willing to share their opinions of sexual violence when they perceive their followers are less likely to support their perspectives. Results also indicated that there was a gender-based difference in voicing opinions and experiences online. More women are likely to share. Lastly, results indicated that the spiral of silence in effect online through computer mediated communication, however diminished among women.

Limitations

Although this study had planned to compare different aspects of online posting on sexual violence among varying demographics, a major limitation of this study was the sample size. A larger sample would have a given higher reliability score with significant relationships between social media use and sexual violence survivors.

Another limitation was the lack of male participants. Similarly, the majority of the participants fell within the same age range, limiting analysis of age-based differences. With more social media users advocating for women's safety and speaking out about experiences with sexual abuse, this research study hopes to contribute to existing scholarship about the potential for social media to become a platform for positive discourse on controversial topics.

Future Studies

Future studies should look into gathering a larger sample with male participants. They should also consider analyzing a variety of other demographics such as marital status and education, which would also provide insight into how different people use social media to share opinions on sexual violence. Further, asking if those who shared experiences online received backlash on not would offer scholarship on reasons for not sharing on social media. One may also consider a qualitative study, by recruiting and conducting focus groups with those who have experienced forms of sexual violence in their lifetime. Further, textual analysis of posts related to sexual violence could offer additional data on how survivors use social media.

Sexual violence is experienced by many people. So much so, it is almost a health concern in some parts of the globe. The goal of this study was to identify and recognize how survivors of sexual violence use social media. The findings support the Spiral of Silence theory in the sense

that it continues to exist online in the context of sexual violence except for the case of anonymity

in which the spiral is diminished.

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Appendix A

Participant Recruitment

Participants residing in India and the United States will be recruited using social media, RIT
student email list, word of mouth, and email.

Participant recruitment note:

Dear [insert name],

I am a master's student in the School of Communication at Rochester Institute of Technology,
and I am writing to invite you to participate in a research study.

There are no foreseeable risks for participating in the study and your responses will inform
scholarship on social media use. Also, no personal identifiable information will be collected, and
all responses will be anonymous.

If you agree to be in the study, you will need to complete the form linked below: [Qualtrics link]

Taking part in this study is voluntary. You may choose not to take part or leave the study at any
time. You will not receive payment for taking part in this study.

For questions about your rights as a research participant or to discuss problems, complaints or
concerns about a research study, contact the Rochester Institute of Technology, Institutional
Review Board at hsro@rit.edu.

Your honest participation is much appreciated.

For any queries, I can be reached at the contact information listed below.

Thank you for your time and participation.

Tanvi Thakur MSc Student School of Communication Rochester Institute of Technology

tt5333@rit.edu

Appendix B

Survey Questionnaire

Trigger Warning: The following survey includes sensitive language and content related to sexual violence that may be unsettling for some people. I encourage you to care for your well-being and reach out to the resources at the end of the survey if needed.

Your participation is voluntary and very much appreciated. By continuing with the survey, you grant consent.

1. What is your age?

  ❏ 18-24 years old

  ❏ 25-34 years old

  ❏ 35-44 years old

  ❏ 45-54yearsold

  ❏ 55 and older

2. What is your gender identification?

  ❏ Cisgender Male (His/him)

  ❏ Cisgender Female (She/her)

  ❏ Non-binary (They/them)

  ❏ Trans Man

  ❏ Trans Woman

  ❏ Other, please specify: _____

3. What is the highest degree you have earned?

❏ Less than high school/secondary school degree

❏ High school/Secondary school completion or equivalent (e.g., GED)

❏ Associate degree

❏ Bachelor's degree

❏ Graduate degree

4. In which country do you currently reside?

❏ India

❏ U.S.A

5. Which social media sites do you use regularly? Please check all that apply.

❏ Facebook/Messenger

❏ Instagram

❏ LinkedIn

❏ Pinterest

❏ Reddit

❏ Roposo

❏ Signal

❏ Snapchat

❏ Telegram

❏ Tik Tok

❏ Tumblr

❏ Twitter

❏ WhatsApp

❏ YouTube

❏ Other, please specify: _____

6. How many hours do you spend on social media daily?

❏ Less than 1 hour

❏ 2-4 hours

❏ 4-6 hours

❏ More than 6 hours

7. Which types of followers do you primarily have on social media?

❏ Close friends and family

❏ Colleagues and acquaintances

❏ Strangers and fans

8. What is the primary reason you use social media?

❏ To connect with family and friends

❏ To get inspiration

❏ For Entertainment and trends

❏ To seek support

❏ For storytelling (sharing your professional brand, products or services)

❏ To buy or sell products

❏ For self-branding (sharing stories about your personal life)

❏ Other, please specify: _____

9. Have you ever participated in the #MeToo movement online?

❏ Yes

❏ No

10. If yes, which social media platform did you primarily use?

❏ Facebook/Messenger

❏ Instagram

❏ LinkedIn

❏ Pinterest

❏ Reddit

❏ Roposo

❏ Signal

❏ Snapchat

❏ Telegram

❏ Tik Tok

❏ Tumblr

❏ Twitter

❏ WhatsApp

❏ YouTube

❏ Other, please specify: _____

11. What about the above-selected platform primarily made you comfortable to participate in the

#MeToo movement?

❏ A private account with only family and close friends

❏ A public account where anyone can follow and see content

❏ Offers closed groups

❏ Offers support groups

❏ User-friendly interface

❏ Other, please specify: _____

12. Which one of the following statements most reflects your understanding of sexual violence?

(Please check all that apply)

❏ Stalking in person

❏ Stalking online

❏ Sexual harassment verbally in person

❏ Sexual harassment verbally online

❏ Sexual harassment through physical advances (i.e. hugging, groping or massaging)

❏ Sexual assault through unwanted touching (i.e. kissing or fondling)

❏ Sexual assault through sexual acts (i.e. oral sex or physical penetration)

❏ Sexual assault through an attempted rape

❏ Sexual assault through rape

❑ A demand or request for sexual favors

❑ Showing pornography or private genitalia against will

❑ Penetration, no matter how slight, of the vagina or anus with anybody part or object or

oral penetration by a sex organ of another person or an object without consent

❑ All of the above

13. Have you experienced any of the above-mentioned forms of sexual violence?

❑ Yes

❑ No

14. If you selected yes for the above question, then in which country?

❑ India

❑ U.S.A

❑ Other:____

15. If you selected yes, have you ever shared your experience with sexual violence on social

media?

❑ Yes

❑ No

16. If you selected yes for the above question, then which platform did you use to share your

 experience?

❑ Facebook/Messenger

❑ Instagram

❑ LinkedIn

❏ Pinterest

❏ Reddit

❏ Roposo

❏ Signal

❏ Snapchat

❏ Telegram

❏ Tik Tok

❏ Tumblr

❏ Twitter

❏ WhatsApp

❏ YouTube

❏ Other, please specify: _____

17. I would share my experience if I feel my followers support my viewpoints

❏ Yes

❏ No

18. Have you ever shared your opinion of sexual violence on social media?

❏ Yes

❏ No

19. If you selected yes for the above question, then which platform did you use to share your

opinion?

❏ Facebook/Messenger

❏ Instagram

❏ LinkedIn

❏ Pinterest

❏ Reddit

❏ Roposo

❏ Signal

❏ Snapchat

❏ Telegram

❏ Tik Tok

❏ Tumblr

❏ Twitter

❏ WhatsApp

❏ YouTube

❏ Other, please specify: _____

20. I would share my opinion if I feel my followers support my viewpoint.

❏ Yes

❏ No

SPIRAL OF SILENCE AND THE USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA BY SEXUAL VIOLENCE SURVIVORS

While thinking about your opinion on sexual violence and expressing that on social media, please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements.

(1=Strongly disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Neutral, 4=Agree, 5=Strongly agree)

21. If I were to post my opinions of sexual violence on social media:

_____ I hope it creates awareness

_____ I hope it conveys support for the victims/survivors

_____ I would be concerned about my social media followers' opinions of me

_____ I don't care what my social media followers think of me

_____ I hope my social media followers will agree with my beliefs

_____ I would worry about being criticized and judged

_____ I would worry about what kind of impression I make on my social media followers

_____ I am willing to share my opinion if I feel my followers share my opinion

_____ I am willing to share my opinion if my followers disagree with my opinion

_____ I am willing to share my opinion if at least one follower shares my opinion

_____ I am comfortable sharing my opinion with known followers privately

_____ I am comfortable sharing my opinion with strangers or unknown followers publicly

22. If I were to post about my experience with sexual violence on social media:

_____ I hope it inspires other survivors to share their stories

_____ I hope I receive support

_____ I would be concerned about my social media followers' opinions of me

_____ I would worry about being criticized and judged

_____ I would worry about what kind of impression I make on my social media followers

_____ I don't care what my social media followers think of me

_____ I am comfortable sharing my experience if I feel my followers have had similar experiences

_____ I am comfortable sharing my opinion with strangers or unknown followers publicly

_____ I am willing to share my experience if I feel my followers will support me

_____ I am willing to share my experience if my followers do not support me

_____ I am willing to share my experience if at least one follower supports me

_____ I am comfortable sharing my experience with known followers privately

23. If someone in my social media circle posts about their experience with sexual violence

_____ I would provide positive and supportive comments publicly

_____ I would offer support and encouragement publicly

_____ I would reach out to them privately to offer my support

_____ I would read and acknowledge but not comment publicly

_____ I would criticize and judge them for sharing

_____ I would block them from my social media

_____ I would post comments asking them to make their posts private

24. If anonymity is offered on social media

_____ I would share my experience with sexual violence

_____ I would share my opinion on sexual violence

_____ I would comment positively on posts related to sexual violence

_____ I would show public supportive comments on posts related to sexual violence

_____ I would criticize and judge people for sharing posts related to sexual violence

_____ I would flag sexual violence related posts as inappropriate and try and get them taken down

25. The role of social media in facilitating public or private discourse around sexual violence survivors of sexual violence

____ Social media users can leverage various platforms to share opinions and experiences on sexual violence

____ Social media can be a safe space for sexual violence survivors

____ Social media can help amplify marginalized suppressed voices

____ Social media hinders sharing opinions on other forms of violence

____ Social media facilitates online sexual violence

Thank you for your honest participation. As promised, please use the helplines provided below if needed.

HELPLINES:

INDIA: National Commission for Women USA: RAINN, NSVRC, RIT SUPPORT