

“If Someone Downvoted My Posts—That’d Be the End of the World”: Designing Safer Online Spaces for Trauma Survivors

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ABSTRACT

Trauma is a common experience affecting over 70 percent of adults globally, with many survivors seeking support from online communities. Yet few studies explore the online experiences of muted groups who lack the words to name or describe their trauma. We pull from 29 in-depth interviews with muted trauma survivors who belong to online communities where trauma narratives are commonplace. Using a spinning top metaphor, we model the sociotechnical nature of the disclosure decision-making process, uncovering new affordances, such as indirect feedback and transportability in online platforms. Findings challenge prior notions of community engagement and algorithmic filter bubbles, highlighting the potential for algorithmic filters to counteract societal filters for muted groups. We conclude with design recommendations to make online spaces safer for trauma survivors.

CCS CONCEPTS

• **Human-centered computing** → **Human computer interaction (HCI)**.

KEYWORDS

Disclosure, nondisclosure, trauma, trauma-informed computing, trauma-care tools, lurking, true crime, web sleuthing, disclosure production, disclosure decision-making, mental health, social support

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1 INTRODUCTION

Trauma, an emotional response to a disturbing or distressing event [103], is a common experience; over 70 percent of adults in 24 countries have experienced at least one traumatic event in their lifetime [21]. According to Chen et al. [31], the prevalence of trauma suggests that billions of technology users are trauma survivors.

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Despite its pervasiveness, scholars are still uncovering trauma’s nature on human-computer interaction (HCI) [31], including the role of platform design in influencing a survivor’s disclosure efficacy (i.e., confidence in their ability to disclose private information [79]).

Disclosing a traumatic event is recognized as an initial step in healing from trauma [50] and has been associated with positive health outcomes (e.g., lower levels of distress, stronger self-concept [26, 62, 93]). Yet trauma often goes undisclosed [85], which can severely affect an individual’s mental health and well-being [16, 118].¹ Prior work has outlined factors that can influence disclosure production [12], however, scholarship lacks a process model that illuminates the complex and often unobservable sociotechnical behaviors of trauma survivors. Modeling this process can help practitioners understand how trauma manifests in online interactions and influences recovery for survivors in the sample.

The disclosure literature often focuses on individuals who have a basic understanding of their trauma or health condition [12, 55], excluding *muted groups* (i.e., individuals who lack the words to name or describe their trauma [17]). A lack of language can limit access to health resources and make receiving a diagnosis even more challenging for trauma survivors [18]. Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), for example, can take decades before it is diagnosed despite symptoms being present (e.g., depression, anxiety [32]). To investigate this gap, we draw upon a subset of in-depth interviews ($n = 29$) with participants that describe themselves as muted and part of online communities where trauma narratives are commonplace. These communities include trauma-specific support groups and alternative spaces for support, such as true crime podcast communities [24, 108] and missing person forums [96, 132].

Using a spinning top as a metaphor, we model the sociotechnical nature of the disclosure decision-making process and their suggested effects on disclosure efficacy. Results reveal new affordances—indirect feedback and transportability—of online platforms. We uncover how platforms attempt to close sociotechnical gaps for trauma survivors, arguing that distributing trauma-care tools (e.g., *RedditCares*) to online communities can welcome harassment and diminish the perceived value of these resources. Findings also show that anonymity helps some participants access social support, echoing prior work [8, 10]. However, we find that the fear of direct feedback can overrule anonymity, resulting in users opting to lurk for protection [43]. Despite lurking, participants still describe feeling engaged in their communities [100], contradicting prior notions of community engagement [76]. We also note the limits of anonymity designs in Facebook Groups, particularly for survivors

¹Disclosures are also essential for relational maintenance (i.e., keeping relationships functional), social capital (i.e., networks of relationships among people), and social support (i.e., receiving help or providing help to others) [9, 34, 43, 132].

of intimate partner violence. Although inadvertent, we collected data around the height of the media attention surrounding the Depp Vs. Heard case and the overturning of *Roe v Wade*. Thus, findings also shed light on survivors' perceptions of online conversations about bodily autonomy and intimate partner violence.

Results reveal survivors' reactions to algorithmic recommendations, which vary depending on their emotional capacity. Some perceive themselves to be in partnership with their algorithm, while others obfuscate their data to resist algorithmic intervention in their trauma recovery. Participants' experiences with algorithms also complicate our understanding of filter bubbles. We argue that algorithmic filter bubbles can counteract societal filter bubbles (i.e., an institutional bias that limits information in favor of dominant groups) for muted trauma survivors. Findings also show that true crime communities can act as alternative safe spaces, bearing the weight of identity-based stigma. We conclude with a discussion on the implications of our findings and share design recommendations to make online spaces safer for trauma survivors.

2 PRIOR WORK

This section uses muted group and disclosure literature to understand trauma survivors' reasons for (non)disclosure. Then, we pull from HCI studies to model how communication technologies can influence the decision to disclose—online or offline.

2.1 Trauma Survivors as Muted Groups

2.1.1 *The Power of Language.* Muted group theory (MGT) posits that marginalized individuals face challenges communicating their experiences because dominant groups construct mainstream language [17]. MGT theorists argue that language does not serve all members of society equally and that institutions publish language that reflects the experiences of the dominant culture [18]. Thus, the words marginalized individuals need to describe their experiences are either non-existent or missing from conventional language.

The term sexual harassment, for example, did not exist until activists at Cornell University coined the name in 1975 [63, 116]. Before then, individuals that experienced unwelcome sexual attention in the workplace lacked speech to describe their experiences. In 1986, sexual harassment entered mainstream language—the U.S. Supreme Court added it under the sexual discrimination portion of the Civil Rights Act [120]. MGT theorists argue that having the term sexual harassment helped (a) transform unwelcome sexual attention from an individual problem to a societal issue; and (b) give survivors the language to name and communicate their experiences [135]. In this example, language is both limiting (a lack of words to describe an experience) and liberating (a vehicle for social change). Muted group theory provides a lens for us to examine the language-seeking behavior of trauma survivors using information communication technologies (ICTs).

2.1.2 *Finding Ourselves in the Stories of Others.* Stories can be powerful tools for sensemaking (i.e., understanding an event or experience [134]) and persuasion (i.e., convincing others to adopt new behaviors or beliefs [95]), particularly when audiences feel “transported into a narrative world” [54, P.701]. Narrative transportation describes the process of losing oneself in a story or “leaving the real world behind [to] step into a world created by the authors”

[53, P.87]. Feeling connected to characters, whether fictional or real [54], can prompt “self-examination and change by reminding readers of experiences in their own lives that relate to those in the narrative” [53, P.91]. Stories can activate reminders (i.e., links between the story and one's personal experiences [123]), influencing a narrative's impact [53]. Ahrens [3], for example, found that exposure to others' stories at treatment facilities helped survivors navigate between their trauma and others [40, 41] and come to terms with difficult experiences [28, 135]. As muted group theorist Harding [59] argues, the accessibility of other people who have endured similar experiences is just as important as the accessibility of organized services (e.g., nonprofits, social services).

Muted groups can face difficulty accessing trauma narratives in their day-to-day lives. For this reason, we spotlight online spaces where trauma narratives are often commonplace (e.g., trauma support groups, true crime podcast groups, missing person forums). True crime, for example, has been found to offer survivors of IPV “a world where violence was discussed openly and honestly, systemic flaws were exposed, and their experiences were normalized” [24, P.20].² True crime can offer an alternative path for seeking justice [25, 113]—survivors were found to work alongside podcast hosts to produce counter-narratives, raise awareness, and challenge common misconceptions about intimate partner violence [24]. Such studies demonstrate that true crime offers various motivations and uses for trauma survivors, which can include accessing the language needed to unmute.

2.2 Deciding to Disclose or Conceal Trauma

After finding the words, individuals will need to manage the decision to disclose or conceal their trauma. According to Kramarae, what matters is “whether people can say what they want . . . when and where they want to say it” [75, P.58]. Deciding to disclose is about the empowerment of choice. Thus, we turn to scholarship on the disclosure decision-making process to understand how an individual decides to disclose online or offline.

2.2.1 *The (Non)disclosure Decision Process.* Drawing from the communication privacy management theory, the decision to conceal (i.e., nondisclosure [110]) is always weighed against the decision to disclose [56, 111]. In other words, one cannot disclose without considering concealment. According to Greene's [55] disclosure decision-making model (DD-MM), individuals can complete the following processes before deciding to disclose: (a) evaluate the stigma associated with their private information; (b) anticipate the response from receivers; and (c) assess their disclosure efficacy (i.e., confidence in their ability to disclose).³ This study focuses on the disclosure efficacy of trauma survivors.

2.2.2 *The Role of ICTs.* Greene's [55] DD-MM has strong heuristic value, however, the model is limited in its recognition of ICTs. Greene [55] posits that an individual will choose a disclosure environment (e.g., phone, email) after deciding to disclose.⁴ Yet Andalibi and Forte [12] among others [5, 10, 20] argue that the technological

²True crime is a genre of media that tells stories of real crime cases.

³Similarly, Ahrens [3] found that the fear of negative reactions is one of the main reasons survivors conceal their trauma.

⁴Note, Greene's DD-MM was initially designed for offline disclosures.

environment (e.g., platforms, affordances, features) can be influential earlier in the disclosure decision-making process. During the MeToo movement, for example, some users decided to self-disclose after seeing others' public disclosures on Twitter (i.e., reciprocal disclosures [20, 37]). Andalibi and Forte's [12] framework provides an extensive overview of the factors that influence disclosure decisions, however, the disclosure scholarship is still limited in two important ways.

First, disclosure models and frameworks have yet to include muteness (i.e., a lack of language or words) as an influential factor of disclosure decisions. Studies on disclosure decision-making often focus on individuals with a basic knowledge of their private information. Greene's [55] DD-MM, for example, uses data from individuals who received an HIV diagnosis. Moreover, Andalibi and Forte's [12] disclosure framework leverages data from individuals that experienced a miscarriage. Greene's DD-MM and Andalibi and Forte's framework are both foundational for this study's understanding of disclosure decisions. However, participants in both studies start with a basic understanding or have a name to disclose their conditions. More research is needed to ensure that the disclosure literature reflects the experiences of trauma survivors that undergo muting and the role of ICTs in the (un)muting process.

Second, scholarship has yet to model the sociotechnical nature of disclosure decisions. As Niederman [99] explains, process models examine the flow between human actions toward a technology to generate particular outcomes. Visualizing the processes between trauma survivors and technology can provide structure and guidelines to better understand survivors' disclosure decisions.

2.3 The Role of ICTs in (Un)muting

Muted group theorists often point to the promise of ICTs in empowering marginalized individuals [59, 122]. Harding [59], for example, argues that resources are more accessible to sexual assault survivors online. Spears et al. [122] found that ICTs help muted groups resist dominant discourses, share grievances, and express dissent. While helpful, these studies focus less on how ICTs *can contribute* to muting. For this reason, we turn to the social computing literature to consider the interplay between human behavior, platform design, and technological affordances.

2.3.1 Affordances. Affordances represent "the relationship between individuals and their perceptions of environments" [104, P.361] and can complement theory by explaining the influence of technologies on human behavior [48, 80]. Perceived affordances commonly found on social media platforms include association with content, direct feedback, and anonymity. According to DeVito et al. [38], platforms afford users direct feedback through comments and replies. The authors argue that feedback directness can lead to both positive and negative effects. Scholars have found that feedback on posts can influence not just the author of the post but the users viewing the post. For instance, Lee and Jang [78] discovered viewers are more influenced by the comments on a post than the post itself.

Social media platforms with algorithmic recommendations (i.e., algorithms aimed at suggesting relevant content for users [57]) can afford users association which is defined as "established connections between users, between users and content, or between an actor and a presentation" [80, P.30]. For instance, Barta and Andalibi

[19] found that TikTok's algorithmic recommendations can afford association between content based on a user's previous interactions. Platforms can also filter out contradicting information when making content recommendations, placing users in filter bubbles (i.e., bubbles of curated information), which can lead to polarized opinions or distorted realities [105].

Chen et al.'s [31] trauma-informed computing framework can be considered outcomes of technological affordances. This study focuses on three of the framework's elements: safety, trust, and social support. Chen et al. [31] defines *safety* as psychological protection when interacting with digital platforms (e.g., doxing, identity theft) and protection against harmful software and websites (e.g., viruses [121]). Being able to *trust* others, whether online or offline, is an integral part of the recovery process [103].⁵ Similarly, *social support* (i.e., receiving informational, emotional, or tangible support from others) is vital for those recovering from trauma [103]. While social media can help facilitate social support [1, 23], its effects on mental health and well-being can vary depending on community moderation [128], or the platform's ability to prevent abuse [31].

2.3.2 Digital Silence. Lurkers (i.e., users that read but seldom, if ever, contribute to an online group [101]) are often misunderstood and described as freeloaders [14, 74]. Nonnecke and Preece [100] argue that being dismissive of lurkers can distort our understanding of online life and "lead to mistakes in the way sites and policies for online participation are organized and designed" [45, P.166]. Scholars have found that lurkers can be risk-averse, preferring to better understand a community and its members before contributing [87]. Prior studies also demonstrate that lurkers express a greater intention to post when they perceive their contributions as beneficial to the group [22, 83]. However, few studies, except for the following [13, 30, 43], have found a connection between lurking and populations at risk for trauma. For instance, lurking has been found to help LGBTQ individuals avoid harassment [43] and find health information related to pregnancy loss [13]. Lurking was found to act as a self-care tool for individuals with depression [30]. As Burgess et al. [30, P.16] state, lurking as a self-care tool "is worth investigating further." These studies suggest that lurking can be a strategic behavior for trauma survivors online.

2.3.3 Alternative Safe Spaces. We define *alternative safe spaces* as online groups whose main purpose is unrelated to social support; still, members can be found providing or retrieving support.⁶ Amari and Schoenebeck [6], for example, found that DIY forums can serve as informal venues for fathers to access support while constructing masculine identities.⁷ Moreover, Dym and Fiesler [44] learned that online fanfiction communities can serve as safe spaces (i.e., transformative fandoms) for LGBTQ users to engage in identity work while accessing support. In online communities for true crime media, Pavelko and Gall-Myrick [108] found that multiplatform exposure improved the well-being of individuals diagnosed with a

⁵Trust and safety can be intertwined. For example, trusting the members of an online community can help a user feel safe disclosing private health information [31].

⁶We use the word "group" loosely. Alt. safe spaces also include algorithmically curated communities.

⁷Do-it-yourself (DIY) is the activity of fixing or making something (e.g., woodworking, home repair) without professional training or assistance [89].

mental illness.⁸ Similarly, Myles et al. [96] found that web sleuthing forums can also be alternative spaces for social support. The authors observed a web sleuthing subreddit change its tagline from ‘catching criminals’ to ‘helping people in the process’ which they argue “associates the subreddit’s aim with social support rather than self-justice” [96, P.323].

Such studies demonstrate that online spaces (often centered around interests) can indirectly provide social support. Yet to the observation of the authors, researchers mainly study explicit support groups such as subreddits named after a particular trauma (e.g., *r/sexualassault* or *r/domesticviolence*). We argue that this can exclude survivors that experience muting and have trouble naming their trauma. Finding a specific support group often requires individuals to search using related keywords. Using keywords suggests that these users possess a basic understanding of how to describe their trauma. This gap highlights the importance of being inclusive of muted groups and examining alternative spaces for social support, such as true crime communities. Therefore, we ask the following research questions:

RQ1: How does the platform design or perceived affordances influence the disclosure efficacy of trauma survivors?

RQ2: What are the online experiences of trauma survivors who are part of spaces where trauma narratives are commonplace?

3 STUDY DESIGN

Due to the complex nature of trauma, we chose a qualitative research design which “is appropriate when the purpose of the research is to unravel complicated relationships” [117, P.51]. We used a semi-structured interview method to gain a deeper understanding of the disclosure decision-making process for trauma survivors and the interplay between disclosure efficacy, platform design, and perceived affordances. All interviews were collected with Institutional Review Board approval as part of a larger research project.

3.1 Data Collection

We recruited participants from 70 online groups focused on trauma (e.g., domestic violence survivors, male rape, true crime media (e.g., podcasts, documentaries), and missing persons (e.g., active investigations, cold cases) on Reddit and Facebook).⁹ Then, we asked admins and moderators for permission to post the recruitment message, which included a link to a brief Qualtrics screening questionnaire. Additionally, we posted recruitment messages on TikTok, Instagram, and Twitter and directly messaged users in true crime spaces on Facebook, Reddit, and Instagram.

The screening questionnaire asked potential participants for their informed consent and to categorize their use of social media, trauma experience, and demographics. We received 1,614 questionnaire responses and filtered out individuals that did not meet the following criteria: (a) identify as a trauma survivor; (b) part of true crime spaces online; (c) reside in the United States; and (d) at least 18 years of age. Using a purposive sampling technique, we asked 174 respondents to register for an interview based on demographics,

social media use, and experiences. Participants received a \$20 gift card to Amazon as a thank you for their participation.

We draw from a subset of 29 interviews from a larger research project about the experiences of trauma survivors online. Interviewee details are presented in Tables 1 and 2. All interviews were conducted on Zoom, and lasted, on average, 58 minutes (range 26-116 minutes), amounting to 55 total hours. Aligned with Chen et al.’s [31] trauma-informed framework, we developed interview questions that asked participants about their experiences using ICTs, however, we did not stop participants from sharing details about their trauma. Preventing participants from sharing details can feel like we are silencing them which can be retraumatizing. To encourage autonomy, we left the decision to share details up to the participant and as a result, the introductions for participants in the findings section vary in trauma-related details. At the start of the interview, we reminded participants that (a) this is a safe space to discuss their trauma, however, sharing details is not required to participate; (b) none of the interview questions will delve into specifics about their trauma; and (c) we can skip any question that they do not want to answer. Additionally, we had resources available (e.g., support hotlines) if needed. Ultimately, we interviewed 57 participants and focus on a subset of 29 for this study.

3.2 Participant Demographics

We allowed for the investigation of a diverse range of trauma experiences, as seen in Tables 1 and 2. 78.9% of the participants identified as female, 17.5% as male, and 3.5% as non-binary. Our race demographics include 2% Asian and Other Race, 5% Native American and Other Race, 14% Black and Other Race, 21% Latino or Hispanic alone, and 53% White alone. Participants represented 22 states across the U.S. Educational backgrounds varied, with 1 participant reporting a high school diploma, one technical or vocational training, 11 reporting some college credit, 7 reporting an Associate’s degree, 25 reporting a Bachelor’s degree, 8 reporting a Master’s degree, and 3 reporting a Doctorate/Professional degree as the highest level of completed education. 4% of the participants reported their ages as 55-64, 9% as 18-24, 16% as 45-54, 35% as 35-44, and 37% of participants reported their ages as 25-34.

3.3 Data Analysis

Interviews were transcribed using Otter AI, resulting in 1,384 single-spaced pages. The transcription process included replacing all identifying information with pseudonyms or place markers. As part of the analysis, the first author revised the transcriptions of the first 12 interviews; and four research assistants edited the remaining transcriptions. All transcripts were then imported into NVivo for data analysis. We then turned to emergent theory, which focuses on answering “why people behave or think as they do” [67, P.269] and emphasizes description, understanding, and explanation. Unlike similar approaches (e.g., grounded theory), emergent theory allows pre-existing theories to emerge during the data collection and analysis process.

We conducted several iterations of constant comparison [124] until broad segments emerged in the data. We narrowed the segments through open coding and used axial coding to examine relationships between the open codes [33]. We used a diverse set of heuristics

⁸Multiplatform exposure describes listening to podcasts and being part of their online communities. True crime communities can include fandoms of true crime media (e.g., podcasts, books, documentaries) and web sleuthing forums (i.e., spaces for users to search and share information about crimes or missing persons).

⁹Refers to sexual violence against men and boys as defined by the subreddit *r/MaleRape*.

(see Jaccard & Jacoby [67] for more detail) to explore different ways to interpret and conceptualize the data. Aligned with emergent theory, we continually consulted literature during the coding process, which allowed for relevant theories to emerge from the data (e.g., disclosure, muted group), helping us to connect segments to existing concepts and identify new theoretical contributions [67].

3.4 Researcher Positionality

Identities are complex and contain multiple layers [60]. Thus, the authors met weekly to discuss their positions as members and non-members of certain identities. The first author is a white cis-woman that identifies as a trauma survivor and is a first-generation U.S. citizen and college graduate. The second author is a cis-man who was raised and educated in the Middle East and has researched the use of technology by members of marginalized groups in both the Global South and the Global North.

4 FINDINGS

The research questions ask about the online experiences of trauma survivors to understand the influence of platform design and perceived affordances on disclosure efficacy. Using a spinning top metaphor, we then visualize the sociotechnical nature of the disclosure decision-making process for trauma survivors in the sample. Our evidence suggests three effects: (a) an activation effect (activating arousal or an emotional response to others' online content); (b) a toppling effect (weakening one's confidence in their ability to disclose); and (c) a steadying effect (strengthening one's confidence in their ability to disclose).

4.1 Activation Effect

A spinning top will remain dormant until activated. Similarly, encountering a public disclosure can initiate an activation effect if the narrative mirrors one's personal experience. For illustrative purposes, let us consider the following example of an activation effect. If Sam discloses her sexual assault in an online group, and Brienne, a muted trauma survivor, identifies with Sam's post, it can activate arousal or an emotional response. Thus, *an activation effect* describes the affective experience of recognizing one's trauma in the narratives of others.¹⁰

4.1.1 Algorithmic Recommendations. Mila first heard the term narcissistic abuse in a TikTok video. Narcissistic abusers use manipulative tactics (e.g., gaslighting, love bombing, crazymaking) to control others.¹¹ These mental games can make 'finding the words' a challenge for trauma survivors [68]. At the time, Mila was taken aback by the videos. For Mila, explaining why she wanted to divorce her husband was difficult. He never used physical violence, yet her mental health was suffering from the marriage. In this excerpt, Mila shares her experience encountering trauma narratives online.

"Once I left my marriage and was going through the divorce, I started to see videos on my ForYouPage

that were of people who have been through narcissistic abuse. I would catch myself literally having to pause the video and give myself a minute to calm back down... because it was finally explaining something I didn't realize, like the crazymaking that they do, making you question your own memory... I was like, this is me. It was almost like the words were coming out of my own mouth, but it was somebody else."

Mila describes pausing the video and making herself "calm back down," which points to the first effect: activation. As Mila describes, the algorithmically generated videos triggered an emotional response for Mila. This can be evidence of Mila activating cognitive restructuring, a mechanism that involves placing her experiences in a framework of abuse and recognizing herself as a survivor. TikTok's algorithm transported Mila to new narratives and helped her find the words to describe her trauma, which can be considered a positive outcome. However, not all participants find algorithmic recommendations.¹² Some describe feeling unprepared to experience emotional activation. In response, these participants use obfuscation to prevent the algorithm from recommending content that hits "too close to home."¹³

Pat, a sexual assault survivor, describes algorithms as "these perfect little mirrors," indicating that her algorithm recommends content reflecting her experiences. Encountering content that reflects one's experiences suggests an activation effect. Activating emotions can be burdensome for survivors dealing with emotional dysregulation (i.e., difficulty accepting an emotional response [42]). Emotional dysregulation often stems from childhood [131]. Pat describes growing up in a "household where you don't have feelings," suggesting that expressing emotions was unwelcome at home. Also, as a child, Pat felt unprotected from the assault she experienced. Pat said, "A lot of people saw what was happening, and they didn't do anything. They didn't want to step on anyone's toes; they didn't want to involve themselves." This quote reflects Pat's experience of feeling unseen as a child, which might explain why she feels uncomfortable being seen by algorithms as an adult. Pat explained,

"I try and mess with the algorithm... I don't like it when it starts to get really on par. And that's when I know that it's working specifically towards me, I choose not to like those videos, like I was not interested."

Pat choosing "not to like those videos" is an example of obfuscating her data to avoid seeing content that activates spinning effects. Using obfuscation as a resistance strategy [29] enables some trauma survivors in the sample to circumvent the algorithm from recommending trauma narratives. In addition, Pat choosing to mislead the algorithm suggests she is exercising control over her recovery process, which can have positive long-term effects on a survivor's mental health and emotional well-being [3].

4.1.2 Anonymity. Children can also experience narcissistic abuse. Dorothy has been 'no contact' with her mom for several years. She

¹⁰Affective refers to moods or feelings.

¹¹Gaslighting refers to manipulating someone into questioning their powers of reasoning [127]. Love bombing is when someone gives excessive attention and affection to make the recipient feel dependent [81]. Crazymaking refers to destabilizing a person by twisting their words and jumping to different topics [47].

¹²Therapeutic as in contributing to a sense of well-being [91].

¹³Obfuscation refers to making something obscure or unclear [90].

Table 1: We split the table to accommodate space and formatting. See Table 2 for a continued list of participants. (NB/TG: Non-binary/Third-gender; F: Female; M: Male; TM: Trans-Man)

Pseudonym	Trauma types	Gender
Aurelia	Survivor of or witness to domestic violence, Emotional abuse or psychological maltreatment, Sexual abuse, Traumatic grief or separation, Parental or partner addiction or substance abuse	F
Betina	Emotional abuse or psychological maltreatment, Sexual abuse, Traumatic grief or separation, Parental or partner addiction or substance abuse	F
Bill	Emotional abuse or psychological maltreatment, Sexual abuse, Traumatic grief or separation, Other	M
Cameron	Survivor of or witness to domestic violence, Emotional abuse or psychological maltreatment, Sexual abuse, Traumatic grief or separation, Serious accident, illness, or medical procedure, Other	NB/TG
Courtney	Survivor of or witness to domestic violence, Emotional abuse or psychological maltreatment, Sexual abuse, Physical abuse or assault, Exposure to community violence, Traumatic grief or separation, Exposure to gun violence, Serious accident, illness, or medical procedure, Parental or partner addiction or substance abuse	F
Diane	Survivor of or witness to domestic violence	F
Dorothy	Survivor of or witness to domestic violence, Emotional abuse or psychological maltreatment, Sexual abuse, Physical abuse or assault, Parental or partner addiction or substance abuse	F
Eloise	Survivor of or witness to domestic violence, Emotional abuse or psychological maltreatment, Physical abuse or assault, Exposure to gun violence, Parental or partner addiction or substance abuse	F
Grace	Emotional abuse or psychological maltreatment, Serious accident, illness, or medical procedure, Parental or partner addiction or substance abuse	F
Harmony	Traumatic grief or separation, Serious accident, illness, or medical procedure	F
Isabelle	Survivor of or witness to domestic violence, Emotional abuse or psychological maltreatment, Serious accident, illness, or medical procedure, Parental or partner addiction or substance abuse	F
Katrina	Survivor of or witness to domestic violence, Emotional abuse or psychological maltreatment, Sexual abuse, Physical abuse or assault	F
Kylie	Survivor of or witness to domestic violence, Emotional abuse or psychological maltreatment, Sexual abuse	F
Lars	Emotional abuse or psychological maltreatment, Sexual abuse, Physical abuse or assault, Traumatic grief or separation	M

describes herself as the longest of her siblings under her mom's control.¹⁴ Narcissistic parental abuse is when parents use psychological violence (e.g., isolation from others, verbal aggression, excessive surveillance; [52]) on their children, which can be detrimental to their development [35]. Dorothy lacked the language to name her experience until, at seventeen, she came across a subreddit for children of narcissistic parents. Here, Dorothy describes her experience reading disclosures in the subreddit.

"I found a forum that taught me... an unbelievable amount about what I was going through... who I was becoming and why I was being treated this way. And being able to be anonymous, especially growing up with a narcissistic abusive mom that tried to take away my identity... so she could control it, being anonymous was key. And truthfully, that community saved my life."

Encountering trauma narratives online activated Dorothy's spinning top and led her down a rabbit hole of information on narcissistic parental abuse. As Dorothy mentioned, "being anonymous was key." At the time, Dorothy perceived Reddit as affording her freedom from her mother's surveillance due to the pseudonymous

nature of the platform. Dorothy understood that if she used an identified platform, she would risk her mother finding out and the abuse worsening. Ten years later, Dorothy describes herself as a "healed adult" that helps others understand their experiences in the same subreddit.

4.2 Toppling Effect

The force behind the initial push will determine if a top spins or falls; a top can become unstable if the first push is too strong. Likewise, aspects of the technological environment can influence someone's confidence in their ability to disclose—online or offline. To continue our example from Section 4.1, if Brianne perceives the feedback on Sam's post as negative, Brianne's confidence in her ability to disclose can teeter and create a *toppling effect*, pushing her further toward nondisclosure. In this section, we share how trauma survivors perceive technological affordances and features as toppling their confidence in disclosing.

4.2.1 The Consequences of Distributed Trauma-care Tools. As mentioned in 4.1, Dorothy has spent over a decade receiving and providing social support on Reddit. In the below quote, Dorothy introduces us to RedditCares, a feature that allows Redditors to flag users that appear to be experiencing mental distress. According to Dorothy, RedditCares is "definitely abused. People try to eff up your day." To

¹⁴No Contact refers to making a boundary and cutting off all communication (i.e., estrangement [119]).

Table 2: Continued list of interviewees

Pseudonym	Trauma types	Gender
Linda	Emotional abuse or psychological maltreatment, Parental or partner addiction or substance abuse, Other	F
Luisa	Survivor of or witness to domestic violence, Emotional abuse or psychological maltreatment, Sexual abuse, Physical abuse or assault, Exposure to community violence, Traumatic grief or separation, Serious accident, illness, or medical procedure, Parental or partner addiction or substance abuse	F
Mila	Emotional abuse or psychological maltreatment, Sexual abuse, Physical abuse or assault, Exposure to community violence, Traumatic grief or separation	F
Olive	Sexual abuse, Exposure to community violence, Exposure to gun violence, Serious accident, illness, or medical procedure, Parental or partner addiction or substance abuse	NB/TG
Pippa	Survivor of or witness to domestic violence, Emotional abuse or psychological maltreatment, Physical abuse or assault, Exposure to community violence, Traumatic grief or separation, Exposure to gun violence, Serious accident, illness, or medical procedure, Natural or man-made disasters, War, terrorism, or political violence, Parental or partner addiction or substance abuse	F
Sharon	Emotional abuse or psychological maltreatment, Sexual abuse	F
Stavros	Physical abuse or assault, Serious accident, illness, or medical procedure	M
Stella	Survivor of or witness to domestic violence, Sexual abuse, Physical abuse or assault, Exposure to gun violence, Serious accident, illness, or medical procedure, Parental or partner addiction or substance abuse	NB/TG
Stephanie	Survivor of or witness to domestic violence, Emotional abuse or psychological maltreatment, Physical abuse or assault, Traumatic grief or separation, Serious accident, illness, or medical procedure	F
Taylor	Emotional abuse or psychological maltreatment, Exposure to community violence, War, terrorism, or political violence	TM
Zach	Survivor of or witness to domestic violence, Emotional abuse or psychological maltreatment, Sexual abuse, Physical abuse or assault, Exposure to community violence, Exposure to gun violence, Serious accident, illness, or medical procedure, Parental or partner addiction or substance abuse	M
Eleanor	Emotional abuse or psychological maltreatment, Traumatic grief or separation, Other	F
Nora	Emotional abuse or psychological maltreatment, Physical abuse or assault, Exposure to gun violence, Serious accident, illness, or medical procedure	F
Caterina	Emotional abuse or psychological maltreatment, Sexual abuse, Physical abuse or assault, Other	F
Pat	Survivor of or witness to domestic violence, Emotional abuse or psychological maltreatment, Sexual abuse, Physical abuse or assault, Exposure to community violence, Traumatic grief or separation, Exposure to gun violence, Serious accident, illness, or medical procedure, Parental or partner addiction or substance abuse	F

prompt a RedditCares message, a user has to flag a post as a suicide risk. This will trigger RedditCares to send a message containing mental health resources (e.g., suicide prevention hotline) to the post’s creator.¹⁵ In this passage, Dorothy shares her doubts about RedditCares as an effective mental health tool.

“If people are doing it to you a bunch, because you’re a controversial Redditter, you can just disable RedditCares. Then you never get another message from them. But why make it a feature that you can disable? Why not punish the people abusing it? So, I don’t know that even a feature like that can be helpful.”

As Dorothy describes, receiving "a bunch" of RedditCares messages is evidence of organized flagging [109].¹⁶ For example, a "controversial Redditter" can be inundated with hundreds of RedditCares messages if users organize others to mass-flag that individual

as a suicide risk. In Dorothy’s example, Redditors use RedditCares as a social tactic to prank, harass, or retaliate against other users, which decreases the perceived value of the feature. Dorothy also calls attention to the ambiguity of platform-level moderation decisions when she asks, "why not punish the people abusing it?" As with other participants in the sample, Dorothy is doubtful that community moderation tools such as RedditCares are "helpful" for trauma survivors. Handing trauma-care tools to communities can open RedditCares to various uses beyond its original purpose. For participants in the sample, observing the abuse of trauma-care tools creates a toppling effect, making users lose faith in the platform’s ability to implement tools that protect trauma survivors.

4.2.2 The Debilitating Fear of Feedback. Taylor, a trans man that is femme-presenting and identifies as queer, manages extreme social anxiety (i.e., an intense fear of being judged by others [4]). He grew up in a small town in Kentucky and first heard the word transgender in college. As Taylor says, “It took me a while to find

¹⁵Reddit allows users to opt out of receiving RedditCares messages [115].

¹⁶Organized flagging is a mechanism that reports offensive content to a platform [69].

Spinning Effects Model for Muted Groups

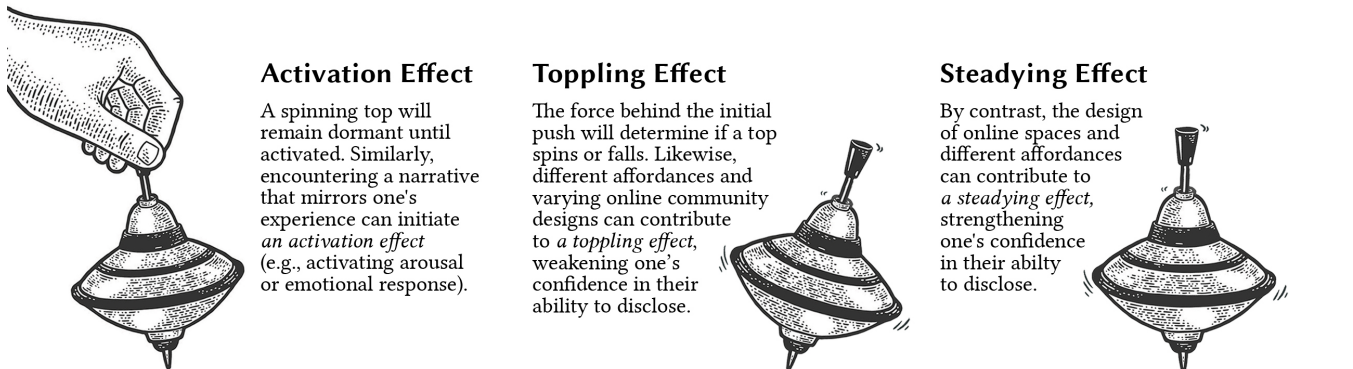


Figure 1: Randazzo & Ammari's Spinning Effects Model for Muted Groups

who I was because I did not have a word for it." After coming out, Taylor experienced discrimination from individuals in LGBTQ+ communities [133], exacerbating his social anxiety [106].

Taylor is most comfortable lurking online or "sitting on the outside watching." He explains, "I'm not active because I have an anxiety disorder, and if someone downvoted my posts—that'd be the end of the world for me." In this quote, Taylor is afraid of receiving negative feedback through downvoting, an incentive mechanism on Reddit that affords feedback directness (i.e., ability to respond to content [38]). This contradicts earlier studies that have found that users with stigmatized identities perceive pseudonymous platforms as less judgmental [5, 12]. Our findings indicate that the fear of social consequences (e.g., shame, humiliation, judgment) from direct feedback can prevent survivors from communicating online regardless of platform affordances.

Taylor enjoys "being part of the gossip and reading other people's comments" despite lurking.¹⁷ In Taylor's quote, "being part of the gossip" suggests that lurking enables belonging without the risk of social humiliation. Taylor explains, "I like being partially outside the community and still listening to what everyone in the community says." Being "partially outside" allows Taylor to engage from a safe distance, indicating that he uses lurking as a defense mechanism. Olive, a survivor of gun violence, is also concerned about direct feedback. When Olive was a teenager, their friend committed suicide in front of them. They said, "The boy I was sitting next to shot himself in the head. And I witnessed it...It was with a very small caliber gun so I originally thought he was playing. I thought it was a [toy] cap gun." The incident happened on a Saturday. Olive was back in school the following Monday. Instead of being compassionate, Olive's classmates bullied them over the

incident. Olive said their schoolmates were "assholes, they found out...and decided to play with me because I reacted to it."

Olive recalls these childhood memories when anticipating direct feedback online. To protect themselves, Olive typically resorts to lurking except in a Facebook Group for plus-size fans of true crime. Olive said, "I never post pictures or videos of myself...but thanks to the plus-sized group from the true-crime podcast, I had gotten enough self-confidence to actually post a TikTok video publicly, not privately." In this quote, the social support Olive received created a steadying effect, stabilizing their confidence in their ability to disclose. Olive's spinning top did not remain balanced for long. Here, Olive describes receiving negative feedback on their TikTok video. Olive said,

"Some jackass made an ugly comment about my weight. And it broke my heart. My knee-jerk reaction was to remove it from social media. Then I found out that even though I blocked him, his comment was still on my video. I just couldn't see it anymore. I was ashamed because that meant his comment was still on my video for everybody else to see and laugh at it in my brain. You know? In my brain, everybody else was still laughing with this guy at me."

In this quote, Olive mentions, "everybody else was still laughing," which is reminiscent of her experiences being bullied in high school. Blocking features often enable users to exercise control, however, the design of TikTok's blocking feature is flawed. As the current design stands, TikTok requires users to delete hostile comments on their TikTok videos *before* they block abusive users. If not, the comments remain visible to everyone except for the user on the receiving end of the abuse [129], which created a toppling effect for participants such as Olive.

¹⁷Gossip can be a vehicle for social connection and belonging [71].

Stella, a survivor of verbal abuse, describes how feedback to their non-binary identity triggers memories of past trauma. Stella said,

“In my life, I’ve been subjected to a lot of verbal abuse. And it just breaks something in me. I’m non-binary and people on Discord would be like, ‘You’re a fucking girl and girls are shit. Non-binary is not real.’ And I would let myself get sucked into the fight. So, I just keep it where I only go on Discord on my computer and I’ve favorited a few communities because I can’t go anywhere else.”

Stella’s experience with verbal abuse shapes their social media ecosystem [102] and informs their role as an administrator and moderator of multiple online spaces. For example, Stella is the administrator of a splinter group of a true crime podcast.¹⁸ In this group, Stella requires each person to warn other members of potential triggers at the top of Facebook posts. Stella and the moderators review posts to ensure each includes trigger warnings. They said, “I wish there was a way that trigger warnings or content warnings could be written into the group. So, a user could filter them, just like you would filter new, top, or most recent.” Stella envisions this filter helping moderators avoid retraumatization when reviewing unpublished posts. They said,

“One of my moderators is a survivor of childhood neglect, childhood abuse, like every kind of sexual abuse you can imagine. And she has been through the wringer. I don’t want her to have to see those posts. So, I wish I could take those on. And she could take on like the partner abuse posts for me.”

Stella suggests that platforms offer workshops that can help community managers become more aware of emotional triggers. Stella is also a moderator on Nextdoor and said, “To be a moderator on Nextdoor, I had to do trainings. They make it required.”¹⁹ Stella benefited from these training and recommends that platforms offer something similar to help improve the design of online communities for trauma survivors.

4.2.3 The Dangers of ‘Anonymous Post’ in Facebook Groups. Diane did not recognize she was a survivor of IPV until after the relationship ended. Diane explains, “Dysfunctional families lead to dysfunctional adults,” meaning that individuals who witness intimate partner violence in childhood can accept violence as part of everyday life in adulthood [15]. Today, Diane is processing her trauma with the help of her therapist and true crime groups on Reddit and Facebook. She describes true crime groups as “so much better than therapy sometimes,” which we expand on in Section 4.3. Diane’s participation in these spaces, along with other survivors of IPV in the sample, varies depending on perceived platform affordances.

Administrators of Facebook Groups can enable a feature called ‘Anonymous Post,’ which allows members to publish content under the name Group Member. As the name of the feature suggests, it is designed to afford users anonymity, helping them feel more comfortable disclosing private information [5]. Yet our findings reveal that ‘Anonymous Post’ can create a toppling effect, pushing

users further from disclosure. Here, Diane shares why posting as Group Member can be dangerous for survivors of IPV. She explains,

“The admin still knows it’s you... It’s gonna sound a little paranoid, but, I don’t know who knows my ex. I don’t want the fifth world of him ever finding out. Because then I’m gonna have to relive it, and I’m gonna have to go through it with him. So, I just don’t post much [publicly] on the internet. Occasionally a meme, but it’s just easier that way.”²⁰

Diane’s experience suggests that Facebook’s ‘Anonymous Post’ feature is a mechanism for confidentiality (i.e., knowing someone’s identity but keeping their information private [88]) and *not* anonymity which we expand on in the discussion.

4.2.4 The Risks of Content Persistence. Trauma survivors in the sample expressed fear over losing control of their online content. Participants explained that the permanence of their content over time (i.e., content persistence [38]) created a toppling effect and pushed them toward nondisclosure. Pippa, a survivor of medical trauma, fears that her content will be used to invalidate her experiences which can be retraumatizing for survivors.

Pippa tried to get tubal ligation (i.e., also known as getting one’s tubes tied) multiple times. In the United States, women and child-bearing persons can face challenges getting their tubes tied due to “systemic patriarchal ideals, norms, and sexism” [36, P.4]. On two separate occasions, Pippa’s doctors agreed to tubal ligation in combination with her cesarean section (i.e., c-section). However, her doctors changed their minds for non-medical reasons while Pippa was incapacitated. She said, “I’ve signed the [consent form] three times, and I still don’t have my tubes tied. I’m still mad about it.” Pippa feels muted due to a lack of bodily autonomy and tries “not to open up too much for people” as a result.²¹ Here, Pippa explains how this has impacted her behavior online. She said,

“Sometimes, I will go in and write a comment. And I will be like, wait a minute, just forget it; I’m not going to comment. It will be taken the wrong way, or my opinion is just too long. I’ll go write a whole [message] out, and then I’m like, no, I’m just not gonna go there... People think it’s just the internet, but it’s set in stone. Especially if it’s something somebody can screenshot, even if anything is deleted, it can still have been recorded. Once it’s out there, it’s out there. And other people have control of that. Now you’re seeing all these people who made comments decades ago, and it’s coming back to haunt them.”

In this quote, Pippa attempts to unmute but then hesitates and ultimately erases her words. She fears that her words will resurface on platforms that afford content persistence (i.e., availability of content over time [38]). Pippa, along with other trauma survivors in the sample, expects others to use their content against them in the future. Thus, content permanence has a toppling effect for Pippa and similar participants.

¹⁸A splinter group is a group of people that has separated from a larger group.

¹⁹Nextdoor is a social networking service for physical neighborhoods.

²⁰Fifth world is a term for a part of the internet that is perceived to be ungoverned [86].

²¹Bodily autonomy refers to the fundamental right to make choices about one’s own body.

Trauma survivors in the sample also feared that their online content would be used against them in a court of law. For context, we began interviewing a few weeks after the Depp vs. Heard trial ruled in Depp's favor on allegations of defamation. Much of this trial played out on social media [39]. Experts warned that the memeification of Amber Heard would have societal consequences and discourage survivors of IPV from reporting to authorities [82].²² In our sample, several participants referenced the Depp vs. Heard case. For instance, Isabelle, a survivor of IPV, explained,

“Women, in particular, are really intimidated and afraid to speak up because society has taught us—goodness gracious, the Amber Heard Johnny Depp thing. There's always the fear that you're not going to be believed, and the reality behind that fear is, a lot of the time, people aren't going to believe you.”

Diane, also a survivor of intimate partner violence, echoed Isabelle's sentiments and explained how her concerns about content persistence influence her behavior online. Diane said,

“What if I accidentally say something, and then it's on the internet forever? I never went to the police. And I don't want it to ever come back to me. But I see victims are now getting sued. Like Amber Heard, and I forgot his name but that case. It's just not something I want to think about happening to me.”

In this quote, Diane references her content being “on the internet forever,” which is evidence of content persistence. For trauma survivors in the sample, such as Diane, the ephemerality of their content suggests a toppling effect that harms their confidence in their ability to disclose.

Some participants did lose control over their content. Stavros, a survivor of sexual assault, was a public advocate for survivors until he was sued by his perpetrator. Stavros used to maintain a blog that detailed his recovery and speak at charitable events for anti-sexual violence organizations. Stavros said, “I named my perpetrator, and then he sued me. So, that didn't end well. At that point, I kind of went dark and have not sort of really discussed [my trauma] in detail online since then.” His perpetrator's legal team won the case by using Stavros's blog and other online content as evidence of defamation. In this sense, Stavros was silenced by his own words.

Content permanence is also a double-edged sword for parents fighting to reunite their families. For example, Stephanie, a social worker, has spent decades investigating child welfare cases before starting an organization that helps mothers and fathers who lost their parental rights. She said, “There are a lot of kids that haven't been abused but have been taken from their parents.” Stephanie's concerns are warranted. In 2022, a United Nations committee reported that a “disproportionate number of children of racial and ethnic minorities [were] removed from their families and placed in foster care” [136]. Stephanie's organization helps fight disparities and discrimination within the child welfare system [73, 112], however, social media can complicate these efforts.

Stephanie's clients often use social media to garner support and encourage others to attend their court hearings. Stephanie explains, “When you're dealing with a certain system, you have to have a

presence of a lot of numbers. Numbers matter when people protest because the more presence you have, the more pressure you're putting towards whatever cause.” In this quote, Stephanie explains that social presence in a courtroom helps the judge see that others in the community believe in her client, which can help reinstate their parental rights. Using social media is an effective tool to garner support [9]. However, Stephanie describes telling her client to “pull back from social media” after seeing a district attorney use a client's online disclosures against them. In one case, the court subpoenaed two members of a private Facebook Group to read the posts of Stephanie's client to the courtroom. Stephanie said,

“[They] read everything she had posted within that week in court. And the judge was like, ‘You're supposed to be trying to get your children back, and you're posting.’ It wasn't anything that was threatening to anybody; it was just how she was feeling. [My client wrote] ‘I hate the court system. I'm trying to get my kids back. I need everybody to come to the courthouse to try to help me.’”

Stephanie's client was venting to a private Facebook Group for moms. However, members of the group shared screenshots of her client's posts in other public spaces online as an earnest attempt to encourage people to attend the court hearing. Stephanie said, “[The posts] were shared amongst some other people that were friends.” Stephanie warns that the court's behavior also leaves other users who comment vulnerable to future retaliation. She said,

“Who's to say that another person commenting doesn't have a case themselves? And so now you're bringing that other person into your case... A lot of parents are scared to [post and comment] because of retaliation in a court system. Some of them are brave enough to say, ‘Hey, this is how I feel.’ Others are scared because maybe they have a court date next week, and the courts are monitoring their page, they're monitoring what happened, they're monitoring if they're in Facebook Groups.”

While some of Stephanie's clients have posted online, her other clients are “scared to” take that risk, limiting their access to social support online. In this example, the ephemerality of a user's content (e.g., comments, posts) creates a toppling effect, discouraging them from making a public disclosure. At the same time, not sharing online can prevent Stephanie's clients from garnering a strong social presence in court, which can be critical for reuniting their families.

4.3 Steadying Effect

In contrast to 4.2, this section explains how factors of sociotechnical environments can strengthen disclosure efficacy, creating a steadying effect. To finish our example, imagine that Brianne perceives the comments on Sam's public disclosure to be supportive. To Brianne, the feedback on Sam's post is indirect, however, Brianne internalizes the support as if it is being directed at her. This experience steadies Brianne's belief in her ability to disclose.

4.3.1 True Crime Communities as Alternative Safe Spaces. In Section 4.1, we introduced Mila, a survivor of intimate partner violence.

²²Memeification refers to the process of making someone or something into an Internet meme [137].

After finding the words, Mila describes TikTok as a “safe space almost for you, because you put yourself around people who are like-minded.” Mila shares, “If you actually do the algorithm, and you like the videos [of the communities] you want to be a part of... you don’t ever have to see other sides [of TikTok].” In these quotes, Mila describes herself as having a role in curating her ForYouPage. Mila trains her algorithm to see content from TikTok communities such as CrimeTok and TherapyTok to find “people who can understand how hard it is to get out” of an abusive relationship.²³ For Mila, TikTok’s grouping algorithm facilitates social support from “people who are like-minded”, encouraging Mila to disclose “the bare minimum” to her family. Mila said,

“It helped me explain what happened to my parents and my brother when I needed to get out. I needed to bare minimum explain it because they still don’t—they don’t need to know a lot of it. I don’t think a lot of people need to know everything. But it did help me in that sense, those communities”

Mila’s experience, along with other trauma survivors in the sample, complicate our understanding of filter bubbles. For Mila, training the algorithm allows her to see videos that challenge dominant discourses, which we will expand on further in the discussion.

Taylor, whom we introduced in Section 4.1, lurks in most places online except for a true crime Facebook Group. Taylor said, “I am mostly a reader, but in this group, I’m a commenter.” The group was created for a podcast that no longer makes episodes, however, Taylor and the other members are still active. He said, “It’s a very small group, probably 100 members at most, but we’re all super supportive of each other. And we all found each other through true crime.” Taylor explains that true crime communities “understand that it is not the victim’s fault.” For someone with social anxiety, such as Taylor, seeing others be non-judgmental and accepting of victims can create a steadying effect, helping improve his disclosure efficacy. In the following example, Taylor describes sharing his fear of being judged at the dentist with his true crime group. After Taylor posted, one of the members, a dental assistant, offered support by hopping on Facebook Video with him. Taylor said,

“She looked at my teeth for me just over the internet, off of her job, just to be like, ‘We see people that are much worse than you. Don’t think we’re gonna make fun of you or anything.’ That was always my worst fear. I was gonna go and be the worst person they’ve ever seen, you know? She went out of her way to do that... To me, that’s wonderful.”

True crime communities offer Taylor, and most trauma survivors in the sample, a level of support that is unmatched by other online communities. Cameron is also reluctant to engage in online groups. They said, “I am very careful if I respond to anything or if I comment on anything.” Cameron cannot leave their house because they are immune-compromised and rely on Facebook Groups for social connections beyond their immediate family. Here, Cameron describes what they publicly disclosed to a true crime Facebook Group when their brother was found dead. Cameron said,

“I hadn’t heard from [my brother] for two weeks, which was abnormal. I called all the hospitals. I called the police stations, and everywhere was like, ‘He’s not been arrested. He’s not in the hospital.’ I was like, okay, something’s definitely wrong. I had the police go up and do a welfare check and they found him. He’d been dead for at least two weeks.”

In response, Cameron said their true crime group “practically paid for at least half, if not more, of my brother’s cremation expenses when he died. I didn’t expect it at all.” For Cameron and most trauma survivors in the sample, true crime communities can act as alternative safe spaces. Some participants prefer retrieving social support from true crime forums in lieu of explicitly stated support groups.²⁴ Caterina, along with other survivors in the sample, prefer true crime groups because they allow her to access support without attaching the sexual assault to her identity. She explains,

“I don’t like that kind of attention. I don’t want people feeling bad for me or thinking that I’m trying to make this into a bigger deal. It is a big deal, but it’s not my identity. I didn’t even want to go to the women’s center like to say something bad happened to me. I’ve never told my parents.”

Similar to other participants, Caterina does not accept the assault as part of her identity. Being part of true crime communities, where trauma narratives are commonplace, allows most participants to approach trauma recovery from a safe distance. Kylie, for example, said that true crime “provides a format for self-exploration and kind of tiptoeing up to experiences in a different way than what happens in a therapy setting.” Kyle’s quote is similar to Diane’s sentiments in Section 4.2 about true crime being “so much better than therapy sometimes.” This finding reveals that alternative safe spaces, such as true crime communities, can support survivors without attaching trauma to their identities. In addition, participants describe true crime communities as venues for honest conversations. Kylie explains,

“It is one of the only places in the culture where women can talk honestly with each other about male violence. And you don’t have to do all of the ‘not all men’ thing and shave away the truth...So, I think there is an aspect of comfort to it because of that. There’s an honesty there that we don’t have elsewhere. And I think that makes it very powerful.”

These “powerful” conversations, as Kylie describes, can have a steadying effect on participants, improving their confidence in their ability to disclose.

Trauma survivors in the sample describe feeling vicarious support through feedback (e.g., comments, replies, votes) to other people’s posts. Eleanor said, “I often get validation on my own issues from the other comments. Even if the original person isn’t in a place to receive that help, it still helps me because I’m going through the healing process.” Eleanor describes feeling “validation” from reading the feedback on someone else’s post, suggesting that Eleanor received feedback indirectly. Similarly, Aurelia, a survivor of IPV,

²³CrimeTok is mainly crime stories and TherapyTok is mainly mental health conversations.

²⁴Groups whose main goal is support and explicitly state it in their name (e.g., Domestic Violence Support Group).

describes how experiencing feedback indirectly created a steady-effect that pushed her to unmute. Aurelia said, “I did feel the support in everyone else that was commenting next to me saying, ‘I’ve had this experience, I’ve had that experience.’ It was more like we’re all here together. We’ve all felt this together. And we’re a brick wall.” Both Eleanor and Aurelia describe internalizing “the other comments.” These participants, and others in the sample, felt validation and support despite the feedback not being directed at them.

4.3.2 Downward Social Comparison. Trauma survivors across the sample describe true crime as helping them “feel better about what happened,” which can be evidence of downward social comparison (i.e., comparison to others perceived as worse off [49]).²⁵ Downward social comparison can improve life satisfaction [138], however, it can also contribute to dangerous thinking in group settings [64]. Group members’ opinions can become more extreme during group discussions, which helps to differentiate themselves collectively from a comparison target [64]. Dorothy, whom we introduced in Section 4.1, describes Reddit users (whom she perceives to be IPV victims) comparing themselves to Shanann Watts.²⁶ Dorothy said,

“They might not know that they’re being abused or experiencing domestic violence, but they’ve ended up on the subreddit about a domestic violence case that ended in the wife’s death. And they almost seem prideful. They’re like, ‘Well, I didn’t die, I didn’t get killed. So, I’m not in a domestic violence situation.’ I think a lot of people are looking for encouragement that way or justification. Almost like, ‘Oh, my husband, he might hit me, but he doesn’t cheat on me. So he’s not gonna annihilate my family.’”

In this example, Shanann Watts serves as the comparison target. By comparing themselves to Shanann, users of this subreddit are differentiating their experiences and providing justification for the violence they experience at home. This subreddit can still be perceived as facilitating social support, however, the support appears to be encouraging unhealthy and dangerous thinking.

4.3.3 Anonymity Mitigates Gender Bias. In the sample, male trauma survivors of sexual abuse use pseudonymous platforms to mitigate gender bias. The U.S. Center for Disease Control describes male sexual victimization as a serious public health problem that is often underreported [27]. In the context of the U.S. military, scholars found that 10,800 men are sexually assaulted every year, but only 13% report themselves as victims of assault [51, 84]. For example, Lars, a male survivor of sexual assault, is conscious of his gender when engaging in discussions about trauma online. He said,

“If women are talking about whichever trauma they’ve had, and then I jump in as a man and say, that happens to men too, it can be perceived as what you’re saying isn’t important, or isn’t a women’s issue. So, sometimes you can get a negative response.”

²⁵Downward social comparison is not to be confused with upward social comparison (i.e., comparison to others that one perceives as better off [64]).

²⁶Shanann Watts and her daughters, Bella and Celeste, were victims of family annihilation (i.e., when a member of a family kills multiple other family members [61]).

Stavros, also a survivor of sexual assault, had a similar experience. He said, “When I would write about [the assault] or share it online, the one most common criticism I would get was, ‘you’re diminishing women who were also assaulted.’ And I sort of wouldn’t go there.” In both examples, Lars and Stavros are conscious of their positionalities. Both participants describe not going there or jumping into conversations to prevent negative feedback, which suggests membership in a muted group. Lars often turns to Reddit to unmute. He said, “With Reddit, unless people identify themselves, you don’t know if it’s a man or woman. I haven’t gotten anything negative as long as no one thought I was derailing someone by telling my story.” For Lars and other trauma survivors in the sample, being pseudonymous on Reddit allows them to camouflage their gender and circumvent social stigma. This example is evidence of anonymity steadying a survivor’s top, spinning them toward disclosure.

5 DISCUSSION

This paper investigates the sociotechnical nature of disclosure decisions for muted trauma survivors. While studies have explored the disclosure decision-making process, few have considered the role of mutedness as a factor [94], and even less in HCI have included offline contexts [11]. This is can be due to the challenges of collecting such data, the study’s design, or it can be a tendency to separate online and offline spaces, despite users often perceiving them as closely linked [72]. However, focusing solely on online environments can limit our understanding of the role of HCI in disclosure decision-making. This study also sheds light on the relationship between lurking behaviors and trauma survivors, an area that has been largely overlooked in prior work. By addressing these gaps, we contribute a more comprehensive understanding of the factors that shape the disclosure decision-making process for muted trauma survivors. Additionally, we highlight the need for more nuanced and inclusive approaches to studying HCI and its impact on vulnerable populations.

5.1 Design Implications

This section discusses the broader implications of the findings for platform research and design, including an overview of affordances and their spinning effects as presented in Table 3. We also challenge the understanding of filter bubbles, help argue the value of lurking, and call for more investigations into alternative safe spaces.

5.1.1 Anonymity. Our findings confirm earlier studies that anonymity is a crucial affordance for populations at-risk of trauma seeking to disclose [8]. However, we find that the design of the ‘Anonymous Post’ feature in Facebook Groups is not inclusive of survivors of intimate partner violence (IPV). Meta requires group admins and moderators to approve anonymous posts, which allows them to view the author’s name and profile picture [92]. This leaves moderators and admins responsible for managing the author’s confidential information. Protecting the private information of IPV survivors online is crucial to keeping them safe from perpetrators [5, 125] which is why Diane and other IPV survivors in the sample perceive the ‘Anonymous Post’ feature to be life-threatening. We argue that the labeling of Facebook’s ‘Anonymous Post’ can mislead users due

Table 3: Social media affordances and their spinning effects

Affordance	Section	Spinning Effects		
		Activation	Toppling	Steadying
Transportability	4.1.1, 4.1.1.1, 4.3.1	x		
Anonymity	4.1.2, 4.2.3, 4.3.3	x	x	x
Direct feedback	4.2.2		x	
Indirect feedback	4.3.1			x
Content persistence	4.2.4		x	

to the feature affording confidentiality (i.e., the state of keeping information private)—not anonymity.²⁷

Participants such as Taylor in 4.2 complicate our understanding of how users disclose on pseudonymous platforms. Prior research has found that users with stigmatized identities prefer disclosing on platforms that afford anonymity. This is due to the perception that de-identified platforms are less judgmental than identified platforms with known audiences (e.g., friends, family). In contrast, other scholars argue that pseudonymous platforms can lead to online disinhibition.²⁸ However, our findings reveal that trauma survivors can fear judgment on all platforms regardless of anonymity affordances. This is because identified and pseudonymous platforms can afford direct feedback (e.g., comments, replies) that is negative [38]. This feedback can damage survivors who manage social anxiety, leading them to engage in lurking behavior as a defense mechanism.

5.1.2 Indirect Feedback. This study shows that social media platforms enable users to internalize *indirect feedback*, defined as the degree to which they assimilate feedback (such as downvotes and replies) to others' posts. Indirect feedback differs from direct feedback [38] in the way communication flows among users. For instance, consider the case of Eleanor in Section 4.3, who is not the author of a post but reports internalizing comments as if they were directed at her. Surprisingly, existing research on affordances in social media has overlooked the question of how users assimilate feedback received by others. To address this gap, we introduce the concept of indirect feedback, which sheds light on this important yet understudied aspect of social media interactions.

5.1.3 Transportability. Findings reveal that participants perceive platforms to afford *transportability*, which we define as the extent to which platforms afford transportation to new communities or worlds of information. This affordance stems from the research on narrative transportation [53], which describes listeners or readers being immersed in stories. We adapt this idea to online platforms by conceptualizing the platform design as the mode of transportation. Examples of platforms with high-transportability include subreddits, Facebook Groups, and algorithmically curated communities on TikTok. For participants, the mode of transportation often involved algorithms that either suggested groups or recommended content. Platforms transported survivors in the sample to different online neighborhoods of interest, introducing them to narratives unavailable to them in other contexts.

²⁷Facebook warns users that their information will be visible to the admin before publishing an anonymous post.

²⁸Online disinhibition refers to the lack of restraint one can feel when communicating on pseudonymous platforms as opposed to identified platforms [126].

5.1.4 Lurking as a Self-care Tool. This study answers Burgess et al.'s [30] call to investigate lurking behavior as a mechanism for protection. We build upon prior work, such as Dym et al.'s [43] finding that LGBTQ users in fandoms lurk to avoid harassment and Burgess et al.'s [30] discovery that individuals with depression lurk as a form of depression management. In this study, trauma survivors use lurking as a defense mechanism to protect themselves from factors that can intensify muting (e.g., judgment, harassment). For participants, lurking is not a passive activity, as previously theorized. Instead, lurking is a conscious choice to self-protect. Interestingly, participants, such as Taylor in 4.2, still felt a sense of belonging despite having no direct social interaction with other redditors. Despite lurking, Taylor was still engaged and able to recite all of the recent happenings of his go-to subreddits to a level of detail that might be associated with more communicative members. These findings add evidence to the debate on lurking as a form of engagement [100] and challenges Kraut and Resnick's [76] notions of community engagement.

5.1.5 Filter Bubbles can Help Survivors Unmute. This study's findings challenge our understanding of filter bubbles. Filtering algorithms use digital trace data to personalize platform experiences [97]. As a result, users can be placed in bubbles of curated information (i.e., filter bubbles) which can have negative effects (e.g., distorted realities, polarized opinions [105]). However, our findings reveal that filtering algorithms can benefit trauma survivors, helping them to challenge societal filters that institutions implement. For example, trauma survivors in the sample went years without knowing they were survivors of sexual assault or intimate partner violence (IPV). According to muted group theory, this is due to their institutions (e.g., education, health, media) filtering out opposing information in favor of discourses representing the dominant group. In the context of IPV, men are the dominant group—95% of all domestic violence perpetrators are men [77]. In this context especially, men are positioned to have more influence over societal discourses on domestic violence. Thus, it is unsurprising that trauma survivors in the sample lacked the language to understand and describe the abuse. It is surprising how filtering algorithms benefited survivors, helping them challenge dominant discourses by introducing them to narratives unavailable in their societal bubbles. Recall Mila's description of her experience on TikTok in sections 4.1 and 4.3.²⁹ Mila's ForYouPage recommended videos that challenged common

²⁹TikTok uses filtering algorithms, among others, to personalize a user's ForYouPage [130].

misconceptions about domestic abuse, transporting Mila to narratives that reflect her experiences.³⁰ Our findings suggest that algorithmically generated filter bubbles can help muted groups pop societal filter bubbles. Future research can build upon this finding and investigate how algorithmic filters counteract societal filters, particularly for users at the intersections of identities [114].

5.1.6 Alternative Safe Spaces for Stigmatized Identities. Most survivors in the sample have not reported their traumatic experiences to strong ties (e.g., friends, family) or professionals (e.g., police, doctors) for fear of attaching the trauma to their identities. Survivors in the sample carried this concern to online spaces. For some survivors, entering a group called ‘Rape Survivors and Support’ is overwhelming because the group’s name symbolizes an experience they are trying to distance from their identities. Like Taylor in 4.2, survivors can feel the weight of stigmatized identities even in de-identified spaces. Pseudonymous or not, the title of an online support group still prevents some survivors in the sample from entering these spaces and accessing resources. However, findings reveal that true crime communities can bear the weight of identity-based stigmas, allowing survivors to “tip-toe” up to trauma narratives from a safe distance. These findings echo prior work that explores alternative online spaces for stigmatized identities (e.g., fandoms [43], DIY blogs [7]). We urge future research to include alternative spaces (relevant to the population of interest) in their studies about online social support. Being inclusive of these spaces can also help be inclusive of muted groups.

5.2 Design Recommendations

In this section, we make several design recommendations based on the implications raised in section 5.1. These recommendations can help bridge gaps between the needs of users and the designs of online communities, ultimately creating safer and more inclusive spaces for trauma survivors.

5.2.1 Anonymizing ‘Anonymous Post’. To solve the issue discussed in 5.1.1, practitioners at Facebook should assign a unique identifier to participants using ‘Anonymous Post’ feature. Doing this will allow moderators and admins to continue monitoring the use of ‘Anonymous Post’ to prevent abuse while protecting users’ identities. Based on our findings, we anticipate that this design change will encourage muted trauma survivors to engage and disclose in Facebook Groups with the feature enabled. In addition, de-identifying users by assigning them unique IDs aligns with Chen et al.’s [31] trauma-informed computing framework by protecting users’ safety.

5.2.2 Anti-personalization. Pat’s challenge, presented in 4.1, requires practitioners to give users more flexibility over their platform experience. Participants such as Pat desire features that promote anti-personalization. While Pat wants platforms to transport her to other communities, she wants those spaces to feel unfamiliar. Pat seeks to disassociate and fully immerse herself in stories or information different from her own experiences.³¹ Designing for disassociation can involve allowing personalization to be an option that

users can control. Practitioners can offer this feature on a scale that ranges from low-personalization to high-personalization, allowing the algorithm to adjust content to a user’s preference—building such tools echos the idea of affirmative consent as proposed by Im et al. [66]. The authors specifically suggest voluntary content feeds which are easily revertible (i.e., designed in an unburdensome manner). Recall Dorothy’s description of users being inundated with RedditCares messages in 4.2. Although users, such as Dorothy, do not take RedditCares seriously as a form of trauma-care, RedditCares does follow Im et al.’s [66] affirmative consent by allowing users to opt-out of RedditCares messages *and* reverse the decision in the future. As we argue throughout the study, trauma survivors have varying and specific needs, mainly when using content feed algorithms. While Mila found the algorithm central to her capacity to curate trauma-related content, Pat did not want to see specific content that triggered her trauma. Earlier work shows that users might want to evade triggering content associated with eating disorders [107]. While our respondents were more cognizant of the feed algorithm (as opposed to earlier work [46]), they needed more control over the specifics of its use. By providing trauma survivors with more control over the specifics of feed algorithms, anonymity, and persistence, the distance between their needs and the technological affordances of online communities can be reduced [2]. This, in turn, can help create safer spaces for trauma survivors.

5.2.3 Distributed Trauma-care Tools and Workshops. Trauma survivors in the sample question the effectiveness of distributed trauma-care tools such as RedditCares. According to our findings, RedditCares is not aligned with factors in Chen et al.’s [31] trauma-informed computing framework (e.g., support, safety, trust). To the knowledge of the authors, Reddit does not provide the public with information on the efficacy of RedditCares. Platforms that implement trauma-care tools in communities should (a) share evidence that the tool is working as intended; and (b) consider adding a human as part of its design (e.g., reviewing flagged posts) to prevent RedditCares from being used for harassment purposes.

As Stella shared in 4.2, some platforms, such as Nextdoor, require moderators to enroll in training programs focused on topics such as diversity and inclusion (i.e., inclusive moderation course [98]). Social media platforms can consider partnering with a nonprofit or other organization to offer virtual workshops and training programs for users interested in moderating or administrating a group. While appropriate for Nextdoor, we do not suggest that social media platforms mandate this training. Instead, we recommend that the training is optional for users. Group administrators can be empowered to require their moderators to take the training to build safer online communities.

5.2.4 Trigger Warnings. Our findings suggest that semi-automating trigger warnings and directing word filters can be beneficial for at-risk populations for trauma. For instance, Haimson et al. [58] found that trigger warnings build community, foster social support, and create a safe space for trans individuals. According to our findings, trigger warnings can be helpful for moderators sharing the responsibility of reviewing content in online communities. Jhaver et al.’s [70] FilterBuddy, a system that supports content creators, can filter out phrases that fit different categories (e.g., misogyny, homophobia). Trauma survivors, such as Olive and Stella in 4.2 would

³⁰One misconception being that intimate partner violence can only be physical [65].

³¹Note, we are not referring to dissociative identity disorder. We define disassociation as a disconnection or separation from someone’s past trauma.

benefit from FilterBuddy, helping them to avoid retraumatization from triggering content. FilterBuddy can auto-delete negative comments based on predesignated categories, which we suggest can empower survivors to be active agents in their recovery.

6 LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE WORK

All research should be considered in light of its limitations. First, our methods limit the generalizability of this study. However, our findings can be helpful in hypothesis development. We recommend that future research use experimental methods to test and better understand the suggested spinning effects. Second, although we recruited a diverse sample of participants, our study only touches upon intersectionality. Future research should focus on the intersections of muting, particularly for trauma survivors subject to other forms of institutional oppression. Third, we recruited participants from alternative safe spaces such as true crime and missing person forums. The support users receive in these spaces can be due to the nature of the content (e.g., trauma narratives). More studies are needed that look beyond communities where trauma narratives are commonplace, which can also help build a taxonomy of alternative safe spaces. Also, our study is limited to the United States; however, trauma is universal. We recommend adopting a cultural lens in examining how this phenomenon unfolds in other parts of the world. Finally, researchers might consider whether mutedness varies depending on a person's stage in the recovery process. We suggest that future work longitudinally survey trauma survivors to understand how their disclosure efficacy changes over time with each stage in the recovery process.

7 CONCLUSION

In this paper, we draw on 29 interviews to examine the experiences of muted trauma survivors. We provide new insights into the complex and often unobservable sociotechnical behaviors involved in the disclosure decision-making process, leading to a deeper understanding of the influence of platform design on trauma recovery. The spinning top metaphor suggests the interplay of psychological, social, and technological factors that impacts disclosure efficacy for trauma survivors in the sample. Our findings reveal new affordances, such as indirect feedback and transportability, and the limits of anonymity designs in online spaces. We contribute design recommendations that consider the unique challenges of muted groups and help make the internet a safer space for trauma survivors.

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