

# Survivors of sexual abuse find support in online 'anonymity'

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A level of relative anonymity provided by temporary accounts on Reddit provide survivors of sexual abuse with a layer of identity protection that enables them to disclose the abuse and seek help.

A study led by Drexel University researchers suggests that survivors of sexual abuse who seek guidance and support in online forums may be

doing so because they find comfort in the relative anonymity the forums provide, which allows them to speak candidly about their experience and be direct in asking for help.

It is widely known that more than half of all [survivors](#) of sexual abuse do not report it to authorities or seek help. While various theories exist as to how the perception of stigma attached to being a victim plays into the decision not to disclose the abuse, many experts suggest that talking publicly about what happened can be an important part of the [healing process](#).

In the study, which [was published](#) in the *Proceedings of the 33rd Annual Association for Computing Machinery's Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*, a multi-institutional team led by Drexel doctoral candidate Nazanin Andalibi and advised by Andrea Forte, PhD, an assistant professor in the College of Computing & Informatics, sought to understand how sexual abuse survivors interact in an online space where they are able to mask their identity. What they found is that people are willing to ask for help—both emotional support and information—sometimes for the very first time. Additionally, men are more likely to disclose that they've been victims of sexual abuse if they can post about it in ways that are disconnected from their online identities or their real names.

"Talking about one's experiences, feelings, and thoughts, and asking for support, are fundamental needs that often remain unmet for abuse survivors," Andalibi said. "In our analysis we found that people sometimes referred to unmet disclosure-related needs when posting online. In other words, sometimes people have never shared these experiences with anyone before online or off and they feel they need to."

The team, which also included Oliver Haimson, a doctoral candidate at the University of California - Irvine, and Munmun De Choudhry, an

assistant professor at the Georgia Institute of Technology, looked at publicly available posts on the social networking/news website Reddit in three abuse-related forums, called subreddits. The messages were posted over the course of 10 months in 2014. Messages were posted by a mix of participants, called redditors, some using pseudonyms and others who created one-time-use accounts dubbed "throwaways" to gain an added degree of anonymity.

They analyzed a random group of 200 posts, pulled from a sample of more than 2,000, with roughly equal representation from pseudonymous posts and throwaway posts, to ascertain what survivors of sexual abuse are disclosing on Reddit, how they seek support, and how these disclosures vary depending on whether or not they're coming from a throwaway account.

One of the central findings in the study is that in these data, men who survived abuse were more likely than women to use throwaway accounts to tell their stories and seek support. This indicates that there is significance to providing users an additional layer of identity obfuscation in the form of a throwaway account.

The authors suggest that "a variety of masculinity ideologies, norms and gender roles play a part in discouraging men's help-seeking behavior. So this finding highlights the importance of anonymous platforms and identity segmentation tools, such as throwaway accounts on Reddit, to encourage support-seeking in populations that otherwise find it hard to self-disclose and ask for help."

Another significant finding is that the study suggests the additional layer of separation from identity, offered by a throwaway account, provides a level of security at which victims are willing to disclose their abuse for the very first time in their life. And, as you'd expect, many of these victims are asking for help and support—which the authors see as an

area where the online forum can improve.

"Analysis of first-time disclosures suggests that survivors whose needs have not been met in other social online or offline contexts seek tangible pragmatic support as they disclose abuse-related stories on Reddit for the very first time," the authors wrote. "This suggests the potential of designing new kinds of provisions that subreddit moderators could use to identify potential support-seeking and sensitive disclosures by throwaway accounts, so they can direct timely help and support."

Forte notes that many of the users they studied are likely weighing a difficult decision between choosing a higher level of perceived anonymity provided by a throwaway account—while risking not being believed or offered the desired kind of support—against using an identifiable account—to gain more credibility—but taking the chance that it will divulge their true identity. This factors into what they're comfortable saying and what kind of help they will ask for—but the important thing, Forte says, is that they've found a place where they feel comfortable enough to disclose this sensitive information, and the hope is that it leads to further support.

"A significant finding here is that Reddit is used as a platform for first-time disclosures of sexual assault and rape, and that these first time disclosures are significantly linked to support seeking," the authors said. "This is important because of the highly stigmatized context of [sexual abuse](#) and rape. Many abuse and rape events remain unreported to authorities or undisclosed to friends, family, and mental health professionals. These online forums have created alternative spaces where disclosures that might have otherwise remained silent have a voice, and people can seek support."

Provided by Drexel University

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