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"There is a Fine Line Between One's Personal Life and Professional One": Handling Employee Sexual Harassment on Facebook from the Victim's Perspective

Jennifer A. Scarduzio, Shawna Malvini Redden, Jennifer Fletcher, & Karis Wilson

Sexual harassment is an interdisciplinary topic in organizational research that has received increased attention with the rise of the #MeToo movement. The online environment has complicated the experiences of employees who are sexually harassed by a coworker. One particular medium where online sexual harassment occurs is on social networking sites (SNS), such as Facebook. This research report examined how victims of sexual harassment believe organizations should handle online sexual harassment. We qualitatively coded 153 responses to the question, "What else do you think employers could do to handle sexual harassment on Facebook?" Our findings demonstrated a clear tension between whether harassment on Facebook is a private concern of the employee or a public concern of the employer/organization. Some victims advocating keeping work friends off of Facebook, while others suggesting having open door policies, conversations, and/or trainings. The difference in these approaches

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illuminates how the victims grappled with the public/private tension, and whether the organization should be made aware of their situations or if victims should handle it themselves. Implications of this research suggest that the blurred boundaries between employee face-to-face and online sexual harassment should continue to be explored, including why victims report harassment and to whom they report it.

Keywords: Facebook; sexual harassment; online sexual harassment

Since the early '90s, the study of sexual harassment has burgeoned in interdisciplinary organizational research (McDonald, 2012). With the rise of the #MeToo movement, increased attention has focused on the study of sexual harassment, especially as the online environment complicates the experiences of employees who are sexually harassed by coworkers. Recent scholarship has explored how sexual harassment is experienced and perpetrated online, primarily by adolescents (Van Royen, Poels, & Vandebosch, 2016) and college students (Biber, Doverspike, Baznik, Cober, & Ritter, 2002; Ritter, 2014).

Online sexual harassment engenders consequences not only for employees but also for organizations (Mainiero & Jones, 2013). Online sexual harassment, also called cybersexual harassment (see Ritter, 2014), is defined similarly to traditional sexual harassment except that it occurs through computer-mediated communication (Biber et al., 2002). Barak (2005) describes three unique types—gender harassment, unwanted sexual attention, and sexual coercion. Gender harassment involves unwelcome verbal comments and/or pictures that are specifically related to gender, unwanted sexual attention includes uninvited sexual communication behaviors, and sexual coercion describes threats to harm and/or cyberstalking the victim (Barak, 2005).

One particular medium where online sexual harassment occurs is on social networking sites (SNS), such as Facebook. SNS allow information to be visible or invisible on walls or feeds and/or in private messages, and to persist in online environments for a long period of time (Treem & Leonardi, 2013). Indeed, the specific features of SNS may facilitate the online sexual harassment of employees such as ease of access and perceived privacy from other coworkers. However, when online sexual harassment occurs, employees may or may not report the harassment to the organization for various reasons (Herovic, Scarduzio, & Lueken, 2018). Furthermore, companies may or may not have policies regarding how to handle online sexual harassment of employees (Mainiero & Jones, 2013). While some research discusses example policies organizations use to handle online sexual harassment (Mainiero & Jones, 2013), there is a lack of research that actually includes the voices of victims in terms of preferred employer responses. To that end, this study examined how victims believe organizations should handle online sexual harassment on Facebook by answering the following question:

RQ: What are victims' perceptions of how employers should handle sexual harassment that occurs on Facebook?

Methods

Participants were recruited in three ways: (a) from a large public university in the southeastern United States through a department research data collection pool, receiving course credit for participation (students choosing not to participate were offered an alternative assignment); (b) from a recruitment call on the first author's Facebook page; and (c) from a CRTNET announcement. Participants recruited from Facebook and CRTNET did not receive incentives for participation. Together, 214 participants who consented to the study and finished the entire survey admitted to experiencing sexual harassment on Facebook from a current/former coworker. The focus of this specific study was the participants' qualitative responses to the question, "What else do you think employers could do to handle sexual harassment on Facebook?"

Of the total 214 respondents, 153 answered the question, providing a 72.5% response rate. In terms of demographics, 113 participants identified as female and 40 as male, with 126 identifying as Caucasian, 16 as African American, 2 as Latino/a, 2 as Asian/Pacific Islander, and 6 as "other." Finally, a majority of participants self-identified as heterosexual (149), two self-identified as bisexual, and two self-identified as other.

Data analysis

Data analysis occurred in stages. First, all open-ended responses to the question were organized in a Word document and de-identified. Second, the first and second authors engaged in data immersion separately—where they read and re-read the responses. Third, the first author conducted line-by-line open coding (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011) where she provided a first-level code (Tracy, 2013) for each participant response such as "consequences," "reporting," and "need training." Subsequently, the second author also completed line-by-line coding. Then both authors met to compare coding and discuss which codes could be collapsed, changed, or added. The process of coding separately and meeting to discuss and refine coding interpretations is called consensus coding, which is a method for ensuring trustworthiness in qualitative research (Harry, Sturges, & Klingner, 2005). At this point, the authors realized there was a tension between public and private that was prevalent throughout the participant responses. After that tension was identified, the first and second author went back through and completed secondary cycle coding (Tracy, 2013) with the public/private tension in mind. The coding resulted in interesting connections between the tension of public/private and how victims' believe organizations should handle sexual harassment on Facebook.

Results

The participants in this study responded to the question: "What else do you think employers could do to handle sexual harassment on Facebook?" Through qualitative analysis of the responses, we determined that the victims provided numerous opinions about how they thought employers should handle coworker sexual harassment on Facebook and that many of these responses were connected to a tension between private and public concerns.

Some suggestions related to public responses for organizations such as: training and education, monitoring of employees, encouraging employees to limit work Facebook friends, and levying consequences for perpetrators, such as firing. For example, participants stated employers should "have training every month about sexual harassment," "they could monitor the Facebook accounts themselves," "they should not allow coworkers to add each other on social media sites," and "threaten the job of the employee doing the harassment."

While these suggestions are important, some may not be realistic and evidence a tension between public/private domains. Most companies will not be able to monitor the private Facebook accounts of all of their employees—especially what is stated in direct messages. While posts, walls, and pictures are frequently publicly visible, research shows that sexual harassment on Facebook typically occurs in direct and private messages (Scarduzio, Sheff, & Smith, 2018). Harassment that occurs in private messages may be difficult, if not impossible, for employers to monitor—unless victims share the messages. Moreover, public and visible education and training are useful but only if employees are willing to come forward. Finally, most organizations manage their own Facebook sites and use them to communicate not only with the public but also to coordinate activities with employees. Thus, limiting employees from being friends with each other or trying to monitor accounts is probably not possible and in some states, even legal. As a case in point, some states' interpretations of the federal Electronic Communications Privacy Act protects employees from having to disclose social media usernames, passwords, or content (Deschenaux, 2015).

Participants also discussed that the domain of Facebook was a private matter—not a concern of their employer. For example, participants indicated: "There is not really much the companies can do to limit this interaction if the action is not happening at work," "what people post on Facebook is their own problem," and "I don't expect them [employers] to try to help me with my own Facebook or personal life problems." Another victim echoed, "Facebook is a part of your personal life and the only reason it could be related to work is if the harassment was occurring during work hours." As social media blurs boundaries between face-to-face and online communication, it also distorts the distinctions between what is private and what is public, as well as what is the purview of employers. Thus, employees felt a significant tension between what they should share publicly with their employers versus what they should keep private or to themselves. Some of them seemed to feel unsure about what to communicate, how much to communicate, and if they did want to communicate who they should talk to about their experiences. These examples highlight how the private/public tension complicates helping victims come forward when they have been harassed on Facebook by a coworker.

Numerous victims of online harassment called for public events such as training and conversations about sexual harassment on Facebook, with many also suggesting that their organizations create policies specifically about sexual harassment on Facebook. One person said, "Employers … could even go as far as including

a compliance agreement in the new employee packet" while another explained, "[Employers] could introduce a policy that makes the consequences for online sexual harassment the same as physical sexual harassment." The notion of creating an employee policy about sexual harassment online generally and Facebook specifically is not a new idea as some organizations, such as Time Warner and Apple, instituted such policies years ago (Mainiero & Jones, 2013). However, research has also determined that simply because a policy exists, there is no guarantee employees will actually use or follow it (Kirby & Krone, 2002). Indeed, publicly stated policies and trainings that increase awareness of the prevalence of harassment do not always result in more employees talking about their experiences. More research needs to explore how to help employees manage this type of public/private tension.

Sexual harassment policies are ineffective unless employees actually feel comfortable reporting harassment or know that policies will be enforced if they do. Indeed, participants in this study indicated that there was a difference between being able to report and feeling comfortable reporting. This is evident through comments such as: "I think they [employers] could make it easier for people to come forward and make it a more private experience so they wouldn't have to feel embarrassed." Several other victims spoke about wanting an "open door policy" where they could feel comfortable talking with their employers about sexual harassment. However, this seemed less likely in situations where power differentials existed between victims and perpetrators. One victim expounded, "Power plays a huge role. If the person harassing is higher power the employee will more than likely not talk about it. This is, in my opinion, the biggest obstacle in solving this problem." In other words, besides the existence of a policy and a comfortable environment for reporting, victims are not likely breach the public/private tension and report if the perpetrator is someone in a higher power position than them in the organization.

As evidenced through these examples, harassment victims' perceptions about how to handle sexual harassment on Facebook are influenced by the tension between public/private. In closing, we explore this tension in more detail and offer brief suggestions for future research.

Implications and discussion

Participants in this study offered myriad opinions regarding how employers should handle sexual harassment that occurs on Facebook. Many recommendations, based upon their own experiences of harassment, demonstrated a clear tension between whether harassment on Facebook is a private concern of the employee or a public concern of the employer/organization. Additionally, the public/private tension is related to the relational dialectics tension of openness/closedness as we discuss in the following.

Some participants advocated keeping work friends off of Facebook altogether. However, most companies have their own Facebook sites and some even coordinate activities and events through Facebook. Thus, prohibiting employees from being

friends does not seem to be a viable way to reduce sexual harassment on Facebook nor does it correlate with how offline harassment is handled. Other victims suggested having more "open door" policies, conversations, and trainings, while others stated that simply ignoring or blocking the perpetrator would be the best choice. The difference in these approaches illuminates how the victims grappled with the public/ private tension, and whether the organization should be made aware of their situations or if victims should handle it themselves.

As discussed in the results, many victims felt that Facebook was not a part of work and that "work was for work." In other words, they felt that even though the perpetrator was a coworker they should handle the situation outside of work on their own. The problem with the public/private tension is that even if the harassment occurs privately, many victims still had to come face-to-face with their harassers when they went to work, bringing the harassment into the workplace. In addition, by keeping the experience private, the victim is reifying the silence surrounding the experience of sexual harassment. Managers and coworkers do not know what is happening and therefore they likely will not step in to assist the victims or even be cognizant that there is a need for a conversation/policy/intervention.

Research on relational dialectics suggests that individuals in relationships feel a tension between openness and closedness (Baxter, 1990). Similarly, we found that when individuals experience sexual harassment, they also feel a tension between being open and forthright about their experiences with their employers or remaining silent, or closed, about the experience. We discuss and name this new tension between coming forward and being public about sexual harassment experiences or being private and remaining quiet about sexual harassment experiences. The public/private tension is related specifically to the online community and workplace communication, and is also related to the openness/closedness tension discussed in dialectical theory. However, the openness/closedness tension typically is related to close interpersonal relationships, while the public/private tension we propose is related to going public or remaining private with the organization about one's sexual harassment experience. Future research needs to continue to investigate how the public/private tension relates to the experiences of sexual harassment victims, including how it depends on whether they are reporting and to whom they are reporting the harassment.

Based on this public/private tension, there are several directions for future scholarship. First, future research should consider who is likely to report and not report online coworker sexual harassment. Why do some consider online, out-of-work harassment the purview of employers and others do not? Second, research needs to explore what a policy regarding online sexual harassment would look like and how organizations can encourage employees to use it. Example policies about online sexual harassment exist but fewer are specifically about social media and, as mentioned, just because a policy exists does not mean employees will use it. Thus, future research needs to consider why victims claim certain policies and not others, as well as what organizations can do to make employees more comfortable reporting or talking about online harassment. Finally, future research should consider other

types of SNS such as Twitter and Snapchat, social media more popular among younger generations where harassment is also likely rampant.

In summary, this article explored victims' perceptions of how employers should handle coworker sexual harassment that occurs on Facebook. Future researchers should continue to explore the blurred boundaries between face-to-face and online sexual harassment and the tensions that arise between public and private concerns when this type of sexual harassment occurs in organizations.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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