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Everyone's 'uncomfortable' but only some people report: privacy management, threshold levels, and reporting decisions stemming from coworker online sexual harassment

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ABSTRACT

Online sexual harassment is important for scholars to consider because employees who are harassed by coworkers online can experience distinct consequences that may differ from face-to-face sexual harassment. Through a qualitative analysis of more than 200 survey responses, this study examines why employees who are harassed by a coworker on social media report their experiences or not. We use the lens of communication privacy management theory to argue that people report due to interpersonal awkwardness, personal discomfort, and factors influence them to link supervisors as co-owners. Participants who reported disclosed to protect others from harassment, because they felt fed up, and because they perceived they would receive effective social support. Participants who did not report wanted to preserve personal relationships at work, downplayed the severity, and also framed social media as a private space. Theoretical implications suggest that discernible differences in reporting correspond to personal thresholds for tolerating harassment.

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In a *Journal of Applied Communication Research* special issue about sexual harassment in academe, Wood (1992) stated, 'Prior to 1976, there were few reliable statistics on the incidence of sexual harassment' and that naming sexual harassment made it significant because 'naming evokes notice and confers importance' (p. 350). Subsequently, organizational scholars have investigated: factors that contribute to harassment such as culture (Dougherty, 2009), coping (Scarduzio et al., 2018a), and reporting (Quick & McFadyen, 2017). Recent research has been especially influenced by the #MeToo movement, which encourages survivors of sexual harassment to share their experiences using the hashtag, so the extent of harassment can be made public (Keyton et al., 2018).

Online sexual harassment is of particular scholarly interest, as online tools make harassment more accessible for perpetrators and more overwhelming for survivors (Ritter, 2014). Online sexual harassment is an important phenomenon for organizational scholars to consider, especially when social media platforms are used by employees to

facilitate harassment without surveillance from others. Not only are work/life boundaries blurred by online harassment, but employees who are harassed by coworkers online can experience different individual, organizational, and legal consequences than face-to-face sexual harassment survivors (Tenório & Bjørn, 2019).

Specifically, people harassed by coworkers online face unique decisions regarding whether to report because the harassment occurs outside the physical organization, and organizations do not usually have policies that cover online contexts (Mainiero & Jones, 2013; Scarduzio et al., 2019). Research regarding online sexual harassment in communication has examined how people cope by passively downplaying, normalizing, ignoring, or blaming themselves (Scarduzio et al., 2018a, 2018b). Yet, we know little about how employees who are harassed online by coworkers decide whether or not to report, and consequently, we have fewer means to describe, address, and ameliorate the problem.

Through a qualitative analysis of open-ended survey responses from more than 200 people, this study examines how employees who were sexually harassed on social media, specifically Facebook, decide whether to report their experiences to employers. Specifically, we argue that people use similar language of emotional discomfort to describe their experiences – whether they report or not – but those who report are more likely to also describe concerns for social relationships while those who do not report are more likely to foreground personal concerns. However, both social and personal framings exact critical organizational consequences and are related to perceptions of organizational culture and concerns for privacy. We also contend that discernable differences in reporting correspond to personal thresholds for tolerating harassment, and that personal thresholds are likely extended due to the ambiguous nature of social media. Finally, we argue for clearer organizational policies about online sexual harassment, including examples of acceptable/unacceptable behavior.

Contextualizing online sexual harassment and reporting decisions

We begin with a review of sexual harassment literature broadly, including victim reporting decisions. Next, we discuss online sexual harassment and communication privacy management (CPM), explaining how we use it to understand online sexual harassment reporting.

Sexual harassment and related reporting decisions

Sexual harassment in the United States (U.S.) legal context is defined as ‘unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical harassment of a sexual nature’ (Equal Employment Opportunity Commission [EEOC], 2019). The EEOC defines two types of sexual harassment: quid pro quo and hostile environment. Quid pro quo, or literally ‘this for that,’ involves exchanging sexual favors for workplace advantages, and hostile environment involves unwanted sexual attention, including pictures, jokes, and/or physical contact (EEOC, 2019).

Workplace sexual harassment research shows that varied organizational environments pose unique challenges related to culture (Dougherty, 2009), power differentials (Taylor & Conrad, 1992), and individual and organizational interpretations of harassment. For instance, despite EEOC definitions, people do not always agree on what constitutes

harassment (Dougherty, 2001) making paths to reporting unclear. Likewise, people may choose not to report because sexual harassment silences them (Clair, 1998), with reporting mechanisms prioritizing bureaucratic process over personal emotional experiences. For example, males often feel hesitant to report due to ideologies regarding gender and hegemonic masculinity (Clair, 1994; Scarduzio & Geist-Martin, 2008), while women and genderqueer, non-binary, and trans people describe avoiding reporting due to fear of not being believed. This creates a forced, gendered divide among individuals (Clair, 1998). When people do report harassment, they face consequences including negative job, psychological, and health outcomes (Bergman et al., 2002). Indeed, Bergman et al. (2002) encourage employees to consider the organizational climate and frequency of sexual harassment before reporting.

Much research describes organizational culture as a key factor influencing reporting (Dougherty & Smythe, 2004). Specifically, restaurants regularly feature high rates of sexual harassment, with employees describing harassment as an inescapable part of restaurant culture (Matulewicz, 2016). Harassment is often targeted toward younger employees who are less likely to report due to fears of losing their jobs and/or not being believed (Reiter, 1991). Some restaurants, like Hooters, are described as sexually objectifying environments because they promote and reinforce sexual objectification (Szymanski & Feltman, 2014). Women working in these so-called breasteraurants (Kingston, 2012) experience sexual interactions that are so normalized in the culture that they are not even described as sexual harassment (Matulewicz, 2016). Overly sexualized restaurant cultures may lend themselves to extracurricular and online harassment as well, as it might seem acceptable in that environment.

Sexual harassment diffuses through organizational cultures as it is sustained in larger societal structures (Dougherty, 2009). For instance, discussing academia, Strine (1992), explained: ‘narratives underscore the difficulty in adequately (re)presenting and explaining sexual harassment apart from the systemic gender-based power relations normalized within the academy’ (p. 397). Furthermore, features of culture like bureaucracy make policy-driven sexual harassment regulation cumbersome and resistant to change (Taylor & Conrad, 1992). Similarly, a key aspect of culture that shapes reporting decisions is power (McGuire et al., 2006). Harassment routinely occurs to those in low-power positions (Reiter, 1991), and people frequently feel pressure to keep harassment private (Clair, 1993) – especially when perpetrators hold authority positions.

Sexual harassment is also gendered and racialized. Women of color experience harassment in different – and often more severe – ways than men or White women (Forbes, 2009; Richardson & Taylor, 2009). Black women face double discrimination and a double-bind in relation to sexual harassment because of their intersecting race and gender identities (Richardson & Taylor, 2009). Additionally, Black women both accommodate and resist harassment, though ‘resistance is never fully accomplished because of (un)conscious internalization of dominant ideologies about our gendered, raced, and sexualized identities’ (Forbes, 2009, p. 608). Indeed, some women unconsciously participate in their own subordination by not resisting or resisting with silence. For example, some women of color who experience harassment create standpoints around the role of the harasser as opposed to their role as survivor, and avoid reporting harassers of the same race (Richardson & Taylor, 2009). As evidenced in these studies, the complex relationship between sexual harassment, power, and culture is further

complicated by the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality. Furthermore, online environments offer new spaces for sexual harassment to manifest.

Online sexual harassment

Reporting decisions are more complicated when harassment occurs virtually, and outside of physical organizations. Online sexual harassment includes: gender harassment via unwelcome comments and/or pictures specifically related to gender (Vitis & Gilmour, 2017); unwanted sexual attention such as sexting or sexual requests (Henry & Powell, 2015); and sexual coercion, including threats and/or cyberstalking (Barak, 2005). Online sexual harassment is disproportionately directed at women (Citron, 2009), but unlike offline harassment, has not been codified similarly – at least in regard to legal definitions and consequences (Henry & Powell, 2015; Tenório & Bjørn, 2019).

Online sexual harassment research consistently shows the proliferation of misogyny that people, especially women, navigate online (Vitis & Gilmour, 2017). Online, '[women] are reminded of their secondary status through sexualized insults, rape threats, and beauty contests' (Filipovic, 2007, p. 303). Henry and Powell (2015) assert that legal policy and practice does not account for the 'social and psychological harm that results from the use of sexual imagery to harass, coerce, or blackmail women' (p. 104). A common response to online misogyny is to avoid digital spaces, but avoidance poses challenges for women including limiting online credibility and networking opportunities (Citron, 2009). While online harassment from strangers is an unfortunately regular feature of online life, social media also enables harassment from personal and professional contacts as well.

Online environments facilitate access for harassment from coworkers and create unclear boundaries about what counts as a personal or organizational problem. Many who are harassed online describe feeling frustrated and powerless, in large part due to the pervasiveness of social media (Scarduzio et al., 2018a). Online harassment survivors also face harsh financial and social penalties for reporting (Tenório & Bjørn, 2019). Furthermore, online sexual harassment engenders consequences for organizations, including emotional spillover at work, difficulties for managers, and the challenge of protecting privacy (Swink & Cameron, 2004). In light of social media's complexity and largely unclear guidance about online sexual harassment from organizations (Mainiero & Jones, 2013), people frequently grapple with whether to report harassment when it occurs. To explore this important area of research, we asked the following questions:

RQ1: Why do people choose to report online sexual harassment from coworkers to their employer?

RQ2: Why do people choose not to report online sexual harassment from coworkers to their employer?

Theoretical framework: communication privacy management theory

CPM is a useful theory for examining how individuals choose to disclose private information, such as online sexual harassment (Petronio, 2002). CPM defines disclosure as the process of revealing information, which is always in tension with concealing that same information (Petronio & Durham, 2015). CPM 'envisages a personal boundary

surrounding information belonging solely to an individual and collective boundaries including those that are dyadic' (Petronio & Caughlin, 2006, p. 37).

CPM theory includes five fundamental suppositions: (1) private disclosures are revealing aspects of the self not publicly known; (2) an important boundary delineates the line between private, individually owned, or co-owned information, and people decide what to reveal and conceal; (3) individuals feel vulnerable and violated when control is taken away because they face potential risks regarding how their information might be managed; (4) when individuals reveal information, others become co-owners of the information and its boundaries; and (5) dialectical tensions arise as people determine their privacy preferences (Petronio, 2002).

Privacy rules are determined by the five factors of CPM, including culture, gender, motivation, context, and risk–benefit ratio (Petronio, 2002). Controlling information or 'boundary coordination' involves three processes (Petronio & Caughlin, 2006): (1) creating privacy rules to determine who is 'linked' into a privacy boundary and will receive private information; (2) establishing and negotiating parameters of information co-ownership within the collectively held boundary through privacy rules; and (3) managing information via privacy rules which drive the level of information divulged to establish a collective boundary and determine what information can be revealed to others (pp. 38–39). Permeability rules regulate the flow of private information that goes out of the privacy boundary.

While created to explore familial relationships, CPM has important applications in other contexts, including social media. In examining 'friending' practices between children and parents on Facebook, researchers suggest Facebook pages are collectively managed boundary sites (Child & Petronio, 2011). Individuals become co-owners when they are 'friended' and this process can be reversed when someone is 'unfriended' or blocked (Waters & Ackerman, 2011). Additionally, when an individual deletes shared information, they 'reclaim individual private rights again' (Child & Westerman, 2013, p. 48).

However, in CPM, privacy and intimacy are not synonymous. When intimate information is posted publicly on someone's Facebook wall (e.g. such as sexually harassing comments), people are likely to delete it. Facebook users also regulate permeability by 'choosing certain topics to disclose' (Waters & Ackerman, 2011, p. 104), and manage turbulence when a taboo topic is disclosed publicly. The context factor of CPM applies to people's privacy settings and the risk–benefit ratio factor determines how individuals consider posting messages publicly versus in direct messages (Waters & Ackerman, 2011).

Facebook users' approaches to privacy have shifted over time due to the increase in users and platform privacy changes (Stutzman et al., 2013). Longitudinal data revealed that users decreased the amount of personal information shared publicly, whereas the amount and scope of personal information shared with connections increased (Stutzman et al., 2013). Thus, if potential perpetrators are already connected to the potential victim online, they may also acquire valuable personal information that can be used during harassment.

Building upon these studies, we examine how online harassment survivors manage their privacy by asking the following research question:

RQ3: How does privacy management relate to the reporting decisions of survivors who experience online sexual harassment from coworkers?

Methods and procedures

To understand reporting decisions about online sexual harassment from coworkers, we analyzed open-ended questions from a large online survey about sexual harassment on Facebook. The survey asked people to disclose how much they experienced online harassment from a coworker, how often they saw the perpetrator, if harassment occurred face-to-face as well as online, and the type(s) of harassment (i.e., comments, tagging, messages, photos), in addition to why they did and did not report to their employer. Given the minimal information about reporting decisions, we analyzed survey data to get a sense of the broad themes from a large group.

Participants

To recruit participants, we advertised at a large public university where participants received course credit (or an alternative assignment). We also recruited via the authors' Facebook pages and on CRTNET to get more diverse participants. In total, 213 respondents completed the entire survey, bringing experience from a variety of occupations including customer and restaurant service, real estate, education, technology, nursing, administration, banking, farming, marketing/PR, warehousing, and landscaping. Most participants were in their early-mid 20s, with ages ranging from 18 to 42. Participants described their race/ethnicities as: African American, 19; Arab, 1; Asian/Pacific Islander, 5; Caucasian, 175; Hispanic, 3; Native American, 2; and multi-racial, 7; and their sexual orientations as: bisexual, 3; heterosexual, 203; homosexual, 2; sapiosexual, 1; and uncomfortable sharing, 2.

Of 213 participants, 69 formally reported experiences of online sexual harassment to employers. Of those, 59 described themselves as female and 10 as male. Most harassment was cross-sex. In two cases, both the perpetrator and survivor were female, and in two cases, both the perpetrator and survivor were male. Likewise, ~35% of harassment for those who reported was cross-race. A total of 144 participants chose not to report their experiences to employers. Of those, 102 described themselves as female and 40 as male. In two cases, both the perpetrator and survivor were female, and in two cases, both the perpetrator and survivor were male. Approximately 51% of unreported harassment was cross-race.

Data analysis

We began our multi-phase analysis process by considering responses to two open-ended questions: (1) What are the reasons why you came forward? and (2) What are the reasons you did not come forward? All but three respondents answered these questions. Analysis began with the first two authors individually reading the data. Then, the first author performed line-by-line open coding, assigning first-level descriptive codes to each response (Tracy, 2020), such as 'downplayed severity,' and 'uncomfortable.' The second author then performed line-by-line coding. The authors met to discuss, edit, add, or consolidate codes. The process of coding separately and coming together to discuss interpretations aligns with consensus coding (Harry et al., 2005), which is a method for ensuring trustworthiness and rigor in qualitative research.

We collectively created two codebooks – for reasons survivors did not report and one for reasons they did. Next, we counted the number of instances for each code, understanding that codes and categories frequently overlapped (see [Tables 1](#) and [2](#)). Then we put the coding into an excel spreadsheet where we linked codes with descriptive information including survivor age, survivor and perpetrator sex, number of harassment experiences, and duration of harassment. This process enabled us to make inferences between experiences of online sexual harassment and reporting decisions.

Everyone’s uncomfortable, but only some people report: results

In this results section, using CPM as a lens, we detail how interpersonal awkwardness and personal discomfort prompt new privacy rules that encourage people to make supervisors co-owners of private information about harassment. We also show how other survivors foreground online harassment as private and the resulting repercussions. Here, we discuss the top three categories of reasons people described for reporting: emotional discomfort; social support; and feeling fed up, as well as not reporting: maintaining independence; emotional discomfort; and downplaying severity.

Why they reported

Approximately one-third of participants described reporting harassment, offering common reasons including feeling uncomfortable, feeling afraid or unsafe, that harassment affected their work performance, and that they wanted to stop the harassment and/or punish the perpetrator.

Emotional discomfort

The most common reason participants gave for reporting online sexual harassment from coworkers stemmed from interpersonal discomfort. Echoing the sentiments of dozens of others, a White female retail worker, said: ‘I came forward because I no longer wanted to feel uncomfortable,’ after experiencing harassment from a White male coworker several times during one week.

Many comments emphasized personal discomfort, awkwardness, and how those feelings lingered in and out of work. One woman, a restaurant server who endured harassment several times per week by a Black male coworker over many months, admitted: ‘It

Table 1. Top reasons why people chose to report online sexual harassment from a coworker

- 1. Emotional discomfort** – 46% of participants described feeling uncomfortable or awkward as a result of online sexual harassment, and wanted to stop feeling that way at work
- 2. Social support** – 23% of participants described seeking or cultivating social support, primarily among colleagues. This included being inspired by a coworker to report, venting with others who had experienced the same treatment, or seeking advice
- 3. Feeling fed up** – 23% of participants described reaching the limits of what they can take, feeling tired of the treatment, and coming forward to help end it
- 4. Fear** – 11% of participants described feeling afraid to go to work or that the work environment was unsafe
- 5. Job impact/workplace consequences** – 11% of participants described how the harassment negatively impacted their ability to do their jobs or their desire to even go to work

Note: This table includes the top categories of reasons why people reported online harassment from a coworker. Several categories overlap, meaning the same person might have described feeling uncomfortable as well as negative consequences for their work.

Table 2. Top reasons why people chose not to report online sexual harassment from a coworker

- 1. Maintaining independence** – 21% of participants described handling the situation themselves
- 2. Emotional discomfort** – 15% of participants described emotional discomfort, including feeling awkward and uncomfortable with the harassment, or that reporting would bring awkwardness or embarrassment
- 3. Downplaying severity** – 15% of participants described harassment as ‘not that bad’ or not severe enough to report
- 4. Private/personal** – 11% of participants described not reporting as social media is not a work concern/or that the situation is private and not something to bring up at work
- 5. Workplace consequences** – 8% of participants perceived there would be work-related consequences to reporting such as victim blaming, altered work culture, firing, and/or harassment escalation

Note: This table includes the top categories of reasons why people avoided reporting online harassment from a coworker. Several categories overlap, meaning the same person might have described feeling uncomfortable as well as negative consequences for their work.

made me uncomfortable just to be around him. I steered clear of him after that.’ Another person, a White male fast-food worker who identified as bisexual, experienced harassment several times in a month from a Black female coworker. He stated: ‘I was tired of hearing the comments ... It made me very uncomfortable and I always had the thoughts ... in the back of my head.’ In the language of CPM, interpersonal awkwardness and personal discomfort initiate new privacy rules prompting survivors to link important others like supervisors into their private experiences of harassment. Furthermore, the personal discomfort that participants felt allowed them to release some information about their experiences (Petronio, 2002).

Other descriptions of discomfort emphasized the impact that being uncomfortable had on the work environment, including decreased productivity and difficult interactions with coworkers and supervisors. A White female server, who suffered harassment daily for two months from a White male coworker, shared how feeling discomfort made work full of uncertainty: ‘Coming to work felt uncomfortable and I never knew how the day would go. [I] would have good days and bad days, but in the end, [I] felt uneasy all the time.’ Others, including a White restaurant hostess who faced harassment several times per week by a White male colleague, emphasized how the discomfort made work awkward and unproductive: ‘It made me uncomfortable to work with them – Afraid I would get hit on. And it was preventing me from doing my job.’

Another White female restaurant server, who experienced harassment four to five times in one week from a Black male coworker, described specifically reporting the harassment to explain her scheduling requests: ‘I was feeling so uncomfortable and did not want to be scheduled to work when he was and had to give my boss a valid reason why.’ This comment highlights how the online sexual harassment spilled over into the organization such that the participant wanted to change her schedule. In terms of disclosure, organizational factors like schedule changes and lack of productivity motivated participants to link employers into private information. Even though the information was personal, the need to reduce discomfort facilitated making their private information public.

In some cases, participants admitted that feeling uncomfortable made them contemplate finding other employment. One White female cashier, who encountered harassment by a White male coworker more than 10 times, revealed: ‘I felt extremely uncomfortable and wanted to quit my job,’ while another White male, an IT worker who endured harassment by a White female colleague repeatedly over one month, indicated, ‘I was no longer comfortable in my workplace. I wanted to not even go to work or find another job. But I needed the money.’ These comments emphasize how personal and

interpersonal discomfort can generate significant organizational consequences including active distancing from perpetrators, schedule changes, and quitting employment, among others. These organizational consequences can also be motivators to disclose private information with coworkers and supervisors.

Social support

While enumerating the many aspects of discomfort, participants also emphasized social reasons for reporting harassment, such as to vent, get help reporting, or to support others.

Some emphasized reporting in order to gain help stopping the harassment, including a White restaurant hostess who suffered harassment by a Latino colleague 4–5 times: ‘I was fed up with doing everything I could on my own to tell him “no”, so I got someone else involved to help me end it.’ Likewise, a White waitress, who endured harassment four to five times by a Black male colleague, elaborated: ‘I was tired of being treated and seen as solely an object by this person and needed help and support to put an end to it.’ Others shared how talking to coworkers actually helped them to consider or decide to report.

One White student assistant described how coworker feedback inspired her to report: ‘It had gotten around to other coworkers and they told me that it was a bigger deal than I had originally thought.’ In this case, she withstood harassment four to five times over several weeks from a White male colleague and was actively convinced to report. While CPM theory suggests possible conflict when private information is shared with others outside of a person’s rules/boundaries, in the case of sexual harassment, information sharing actually enabled important social support for a participant which convinced her to formally report. Thus, in distressing situations, when a disclosure is made, and *appropriate* and *effective* social support is offered, the disclosure may actually help rather than harm people. Indeed, for some, linking others into the information by reporting and discussing harassment was a specific strategy to garner social support. For example, a White hostess who experienced harassment numerous times by a White male coworker, said: ‘I felt extremely uncomfortable coming to work, and I knew other girls did too... [It was] nice to... talk to female coworkers about it because they understood how I felt.’

Some went further by framing their reporting as an effort to preemptively protect others, including a White female sales associate who experienced harassment from a White male coworker: ‘I felt that I should speak up before it happened to another coworker.’ Additionally, a White female cashier who suffered harassment four to five times by a male Nepali coworker concurred, ‘Because I believe that people should be informed of sexual predators.’ These comments emphasize how online harassment can engage social resources and potentially protect other coworkers. Thus, participants framed privacy violations as necessary to potentially assist other people.

Feeling fed up

When participants described why they reported, many used language to indicate feeling fed up, tired, and that the harassment had surpassed their ability to cope. One White female fast-food worker, who experienced harassment numerous times over several weeks by a White male coworker, described reporting: ‘Because it got out of hand. It made me scared to go to work’ while another White female sales associate, who sustained

harassment several times by a Latino colleague, said: 'Because I was tired of feeling uncomfortable and targeted by harassment.' Feeling fed up led to reporting, especially when harassment made participants feel extremely uncomfortable, and when harassment impacted work and home life.

Inhibiting the ability to work normally was a major reason why participants described feeling fed up, especially when harassment transcended online contexts and came to work in the form of lewd comments, physical harassment, or requests for romantic or sexual involvement. A White hostess who was harassed four to five times by a White male coworker discussed how hiding the harassment was a burden: 'I was fed up with dealing with all of it, and I hated keeping it inside and not telling anyone ... It's something that was wrong and needed to be stopped immediately.' Another White female supervisor, who was harassed repeatedly by a Black male colleague, described how the harassment was not only tiresome, but observable to others: 'I was tired of dealing with it and my other coworkers were starting to notice.'

Overall, participants who were fed up lamented feeling tired of harassment and believed reporting would hopefully end the perpetrator's frustrating behavior. Considering CPM, feeling fed up personally and about the inability to work, can be viewed as a prompt for disclosure and shows how privacy rules are developed in response to harassment. Additionally, when participants felt fed up, the desire to keep something private and save face may be not as important as gaining relief from the incessant and frustrating harassment.

Why they didn't report

In contrast, two-thirds of our participants described choosing not to report online sexual harassment by a coworker. Participants discussed wanting to handle the situation themselves and feeling: uncomfortable, afraid, like the harassment did not warrant addressing, or that reporting would make the harassment worse. Several admitted they felt concerned about backlash – that coworkers or employers would find *them* at fault rather than the perpetrators. Many emphasized that because the harassment occurred online and not at work, it was a private issue that they should handle independently. These framings relate to how participants view privacy boundaries and choose to manage disclosure.

Maintaining independence

The majority of participants who did not report harassment described preferring to handle the situation independently and retain control of their private information. For instance, a White female cashier who experienced harassment by a White male colleague a few times in one week, said: 'I handled the situation and did not feel the need to get others involved.' Some described Facebook features that enabled quick handling of harassment, such as a Black female smoothie maker, who endured harassment by a White male coworker several times during one month: 'Since most of the behavior was done online, the easiest solution for me was to block the person and try to move forward.' In this instance, features of the social networking platform offered the ability to uphold boundaries and prevent turbulence, supporting existing research (Waters & Ackerman, 2011). However, of all the participants in this study, only one person reported unfriending and two people discussed blocking the perpetrator.

Reasons for maintaining independence varied, including: feeling able to handle it alone, harassment not being severe enough to warrant support, and wanting to keep personal affairs private. Several participants emphasized how their ability to handle harassment independently connected to the perceived severity. A White female server who suffered harassment by a Latino colleague several times in one week said: 'I felt I could deal with it by myself ... because it wasn't severe.' A White female bakery associate who experienced harassment several times in one month by a Latino colleague, described: 'I did not feel it was a threat in which I could not handle on my own.' Also, a White female salon manager who received harassment by a White female coworker numerous times in one month, stated: 'The situation was relatively quickly resolved, and I did not feel threatened to the point of contacting an outside source.'

Some participants did reveal willingness to seek organizational help if needed. For instance, a heterosexual White male sandwich artist who experienced harassment from a gay biracial male colleague a few times in one week, stated: 'I can handle things myself, but if things were to get more serious, I would've come forward.' Similarly, a Latina law intern who endured harassment by a White male colleague several times over a few weeks, described giving an ultimatum: 'After I messaged the person a couple times asking them to stop, and finally saying I would go to HR if not, they stopped ... I did not see a need to discuss with anyone else at work.' These comments suggest that time, severity, and perceived self-efficacy in handling threats are factors that influenced participants' decisions not to report, and relate to the development of privacy rules.

Many participants kept control by framing harassment as personal, not an organizational concern. For instance, a White waitress who experienced harassment by a Latino colleague four to five times during one month, said: 'I didn't want to make it a big deal in the workplace and I like to handle my personal issues in personal ways.' Likewise, a White male lifeguard, who experienced harassment by a Native American female coworker four to five times in a month, described: 'I did not want to bring up my personal life and I could handle it on my own,' while a White male server who was harassed by a White female coworker several times in one week, said: 'I handled the issue myself and there was no reason to get other parties involved.' While these comments demonstrate high self-efficacy and agency, they minimize the organizational elements and avoid acknowledging the toll harassment takes on organizational contexts and relationships. The comments do, however, demonstrate a desire to retain tight control over personal information and clear boundaries between public and private spheres when sexual harassment occurs online.

Emotional discomfort

As with those who reported, participants who opted not to report cited feeling extremely uncomfortable, awkward, and/or embarrassed as a result of online harassment from a coworker. Some described the whole experience of harassment as embarrassing, which created an uncomfortable work environment, but that the thought of reporting was awkward or more embarrassing than remaining silent. As one White female bakery cashier revealed: 'I was embarrassed ... and did not want anybody to know about what was happening to me.' As a result, a great majority of participants in this study described not reporting specifically to avoid compounding their emotional discomfort.

Several reflections evidence important and complex issues that participants experiencing online sexual harassment face when considering reporting. For instance, the following exemplar shows how participants may tolerate the discomfort of harassment to avoid organizational repercussions:

Although it was very annoying and persistent, I didn't feel threatened. I just felt uncomfortable and creeped out. I also was very young and didn't want anyone to find out and make me quit my job because I loved my job. I felt like I needed to handle it on my own.

In this example, a White female chose to stay silent to avoid further embarrassment and to keep a beloved job, despite being bothered by a Black male coworker numerous times in a month. Her comments reflect a willingness to prioritize work over her personal well-being, as well as the tacit assumption that the repercussions of reporting would impact her but not the perpetrator. Here, privacy rules seem fear-based, but also connected to exposure to the perpetrator and job commitment. Furthermore, she downplays her need for assistance because she was 'young' and fearful. Past research shows young women who experience sexual harassment online are less likely to report because they view their jobs as temporary or they downplay or normalize harassment (Herovic et al., 2018). It seems that participants in this study similarly downplay harassment to avoid having to disclose information to others.

The fear of discussing harassment surfaced frequently. Some felt reporting would make things awkward at work. In comments from a White female lifeguard who received harassment by a Black male coworker numerous times over several months, concern extended to supervisory relationships and the harasser's response: 'I felt embarrassed to present information like this with my boss. I was also a bit scared about how my harasser would react when the subject got brought up through our boss.' In fact, worrying that perpetrators would learn about reports seemed like a significant reason why participants did not disclose. One White female sales associate harassed by a White male coworker numerous times during one month, explained: 'It made me uncomfortable because if my boss ended up talking to this person then the person would know I said something.' Unlike the social aspects enumerated in the 'Did Report' section, the concerns here show a fear of reprisal and work consequences not only for themselves but also for the perpetrators. In other words, some felt concern about how reporting the harassment would disrupt relationships in the organization among multiple organizational members and how reporting could negatively impact the *perpetrator's* work experiences, too. In these instances, participants enact firm boundaries over private information and avoid linking in managers to prevent turbulence.

Many described not reporting to preclude personal credibility attacks or having the culpability for harassment transferred to them. Numerous people described not reporting out of fear they would not be believed, especially because the harassment occurred online and not face-to-face. For instance, one White female server harassed by a White male colleague several times in one week, said:

I did not think that Facebook served as enough justification to fire my harasser from my main bosses' perspective. I think it would have just got ignored, and I was worried if my

harasser knew I was talking about it aloud that they would become more aggressive ... I always kept my head up and just ignored what happened on social media.

In this circumstance, a participant swallowed the personal discomfort in order to avoid escalating the harassment. These comments suggest a possible futility of linking a manager to private information like online harassment, purely because of the modality of the information, and not the content itself.

Others similarly described not reporting because they wanted to avoid blame. For example, one White woman who experienced harassment by a Black male coworker four or five times, said: 'I didn't want to draw attention to the situation or be accused of leading him on/causing issues in the workplace' while a White female cashier who endured harassment more than 10 times by a Black male coworker indicated: 'He was a senior employee and I would have been fired or looked at as a slut if I had come forward about flirting with him when we first met and then him [harassing me later].' To deal with the discomfort of harassment, people chose avoidance as a strategy to prevent escalation or other organizational consequences. It is concerning that these participants, who were linked into someone else's private information without their consent (e.g. comments, photos of a sexual nature), now have to manage that co-owned information to potentially avoid it being used against them. Past research has discussed the legal challenges of these 'embodied harms' (Henry & Powell, 2015).

Downplaying severity

As participants discussed reasons for not reporting, many described downplaying the severity of harassment or worrying that others would downplay it.

When participants downplayed severity, they were likely to mention duration and perceived intent of the harasser. For instance, some framed harassment as merely annoying, especially if short-lived. As a White male technical specialist who experienced harassment a few times by a White female coworker, said: 'I did not feel threatened, and the matter was settled after two weeks.' Others emphasized that the harassment was not serious or malicious, as evidenced in comments like: 'I felt like it was sort of petty, as if it was not important enough to tell my boss,' 'Because it was just a picture and I didn't think it was necessary [to report],' and 'I saw his attempts as being harmless ... He had no intentions of forcing me into anything.' By downplaying severity, participants of online sexual harassment protected the perpetrators and normalized the behaviors by choosing to keep the issue private. Thus, their choices to not come forward actually reified that sexual harassment was typical (Clair, 1993) while allowing the behavior to continue.

Another severity factor featured in participants' decisions not to report relates to perceptions that *authority figures* would downplay the severity of harassment or not believe participants. 'I did not inform anyone at work about the sexual harassment because I didn't think anyone would take me seriously,' said a White female employee for a children's inflatable bounce house company who experienced harassment by a White male coworker numerous times during one month. She continued: 'I was working with lots of men and I didn't think they would acknowledge it or take action.' Sex and gender seemed to be critical elements in decisions not to report, as several people worried about not being taken seriously because of being women. For instance, a Black female

cashier who endured harassment by a Black male colleague several times over one week, mentioned: ‘I was too afraid of what people were going to think of me especially being a woman. I didn’t know if they were going to think I was lying.’

As gender and culture are key features that influence the development of privacy rules (Petronio, 2002), and fear of not being believed is a critical reason people do not report harassment (Clair, 1993), these findings are not necessarily surprising. However, what *is* surprising is despite the harassment modality offering virtual proof, people *still* worry about being believed or having their experiences downplayed, and choose to protect that private information. Thus, these findings corroborate assertions that sexual harassment has more to do with power than sex (Taylor & Conrad, 1992).

Theorizing reporting decisions about online sexual harassment from a coworker

This study examined why people who experienced online sexual harassment from coworkers chose to report the abuse to their organizations or keep it private. We analyzed open-ended survey responses from more than 200 people, and explored the top three categories of reasons why people report: emotional discomfort; social support; and feeling fed up, and the top three categories of reasons they did not: maintaining independence; emotional discomfort; and downplaying severity. Below we offer theoretical and practical implications of these findings as well as limitations and directions for future research.

Privacy management implications

This research offers several important implications for the study of employee online sexual harassment and CPM. When participants reported, we found several reasons that tie directly to disclosure of private information and public/private boundary negotiation. Some participants felt awkward about the harassment they experienced online, but through disclosure, they allowed others to be co-owners of the information surrounding their experiences. Our findings suggest that the personal and distressing nature of harassment can sometimes outweigh the need to keep sensitive information private. Furthermore, our findings highlight that when organizational consequences are imminent (e.g. fear of firing), participants may feel motivated to make private harassment information public. Importantly though, there appears to be a link between the decision to share private information and the type of social support people expect to receive. In our study, participants shared information with others they perceived would provide appropriate support.

Another interesting theoretical implication of our study was that sometimes people will risk their own face and violate personal privacy to offer resources or prosocial help to others. As such, some participants reported to ‘protect’ other current or future coworkers who might experience harassment, showing that disclosure is not always about individual well-being or privacy, but also relates to organizational relationships and climate. However, prosocial concern functions as a double-edged sword. Numerous participants described not reporting to avoid disrupting their relationships with the perpetrator or other coworkers, or even to protect the *perpetrator’s* relationships with others or their livelihoods. These findings suggest complex relational work related to privacy

management, and that people navigate personal, relational, and material concerns when deciding to disclose and make others co-owners of their harassment experiences.

Our analysis also illustrated that people desire to keep privacy boundaries tighter when sexual harassment occurs on social media. This finding may be related to CPM's factor of context. Because the harassment occurs outside of work, employees may be more likely to feel that the information should be kept private. Indeed, past research shows that survivors of online harassment from coworkers struggle to conceptualize harassment as purely a work problem (Scarduzio et al., 2019). Additionally, the privatization of harassment places the responsibility to handle harassment on survivors. Indeed, in these situations, the organization and the harasser are free from consequences or responsibility because the blurring of boundaries between work/life and public/private selves is not considered. Some platform tools like blocking or 'unfriending' allow survivors to maintain control over private information, without relational or organizational repercussions beyond personal discomfort. These features may encourage the privatization of harassment however, as they enable agency of survivors, but also relegate harassment to a purely personal context. That the impetus to stop harassment is placed on the survivor is problematic because it makes sexual harassment a personal rather than an organizational concern. Consequently, policies and changes needed at the organizational level to prevent online sexual harassment may not occur.

Finally, and perhaps most critically, we found that even with a virtual trail of evidence, many participants felt they would not be believed and so stayed silent. Many of our participants were young women who worked in restaurants or customer service. As past research shows, some service occupations normalize sexual harassment – especially of women – creating environments that suppress employee voices (Matulewicz, 2016; Szymanski & Feltman, 2014). Echoing those findings, our study showed that employees, many in service, referenced their age, gender, and assumptions of being seen as less credible as a justification for protecting private information. In a cultural context where survivors must manage the burden of proof, even digital evidence is not enough to help them feel confident coming forward.

Theorizing personal thresholds

Taken together, our findings illustrate that while most survivors of online sexual harassment from coworkers feel discomfort, only some report and make their private information public. To understand why, we propose that *personal threshold levels* inform survivors' decisions about reporting. In other words, everyone develops a threshold of how much they can handle in regard to workplace sexual harassment. When that threshold is crossed – as it was for participants who described feeling 'fed up' or that harassment got 'out of hand' – people are more likely to report. Conversely, people who did not have their personal thresholds crossed by the harassment opted instead to manage emotional discomfort and handle the situation independently. As mentioned, participants who did not report, and we would argue, had not met their personal thresholds level, also downplayed the severity of the harassment.

In our analysis, we speculated that personal threshold might relate to amount and duration of harassment. Because this study included open-ended questions from a larger survey, we also analyzed related data including: how many times the harassment

occurred (number of instances), how often survivors saw the perpetrator face-to-face at work during the harassment (frequency), and how long the harassment occurred (duration). However, when we analyzed these categories and compared reporting decisions, no discernable pattern emerged for every single category.

Intriguingly though, in numerous cases, individuals who *did not report* experienced a higher prevalence of harassment, frequency of times they saw the perpetrator at work, and time the harassment occurred in total. For example, when harassment lasted two to four weeks, 26 of the participants reported when compared with 54 participants who did not. Additionally, when harassment occurred four to five times, 21 participants reported and 51 participants did not. And finally, when participants saw the perpetrator three to four times per week, only 34 people reported when compared with 64 people who did not. These findings are particularly notable because they demonstrate that in regard to duration, frequency, and number of instances, survivors who did not report often experienced *higher* duration, *higher* frequency, and *more* instances of harassment – yet still did not come forward.

It might be assumed that if a survivor was harassed more regularly, for a longer period of time, they would be more likely to report the behavior. However, we argue it is not duration, frequency, or number of instances that prompts reporting, but instead an individual's personal threshold. As past research shows people do not always agree on what harassment looks like (Dougherty, 2001), it may be that certain people have higher tolerances for harassment, and/or work in organizational cultures that frame harassment as a 'normal' part of the job and something to be tolerated as with 'breastaurants' (Kingston, 2012). In those cases, it would take more extreme circumstances to meet or exceed someone's threshold.

Something that likely contributes to thresholds is the online context. When face-to-face sexual harassment occurs, there is already a high degree of ambiguity about whether employees should report (Herovic et al., 2018). When harassment occurs on social media, the ambiguity increases. Consider that many of our participants mentioned Facebook being a private context, outside an employer's purview. However, 53% of our participants admitted harassment occurred online *and* face-to-face. In fact, 71% of people who reported experienced harassment online and face-to-face. It makes intuitive sense that the combined pressure of harassment in two contexts would push people past their threshold and spur reporting. However, 55% of those who did not report *also* experienced harassment online and in-person. These findings suggest that the face-to-face context is not an ultimate catalyst for reporting either.

Given our findings and past literature, we argue that personal threshold is likely derived from a combination of factors including personal characteristics, local and broad social discourses that contextualize harassment in private and public spheres, occupation, power dynamics, and organizational culture. For instance, it seems likely that people who have low thresholds for harassment might have been raised to be assertive about emotional discomfort and not tolerate harassment, or work in environments where harassing behavior is explicitly discouraged or would conflict with the culture. To further conceptualize personal threshold, we offer several future research suggestions in the conclusion, and would also point out the necessity for examining emotion processes specifically.

Practical implications

As discussed, the current context of the #MeToo movement and the pervasiveness of social media make conversations surrounding sexual harassment at work vital. As demonstrated, some people believe that online sexual harassment from coworkers is not a work concern, and indeed, past research shows that employees grapple with a public/private divide (Scarduzio et al., 2019). Survivors sometimes fear that their experiences online can carry over into the workplace, creating hostile environments, situations where organizational relationships will be disrupted, and potentially cost people their jobs.

Furthermore, online harassment is a critical issue for individuals and organizations alike. While organizations can benefit from employee silence – enjoying the advantages of employees privately dealing with harassment and not upsetting the organization – fully 15% of our participants admitted that online harassment from a coworker continued for days, weeks, months, and in a few cases, *years* after their employment ended. While framed as a purely private issue, although one with organizational implications, the harassment directly tied to their employment. When harassment continues even after quitting, employees may take the repercussions of harassment – stress, depression, discomfort – into their *new* jobs as well. Thus, organizations would benefit from helping employees manage online harassment to prevent losing employees, encourage healthy workplace cultures, and avoid perpetuating cycles of abuse.

Of course, experiences of online harassment are exacerbated by the fact that most organizations do not have sexual harassment policies that extend beyond the physical workplace (Mainiero & Jones, 2013; Scarduzio et al., 2019). Thus, when harassment occurs on social media, there is no clear guidance about reporting. Due to this lack of guidance, we argue, it likely takes more to push through the survivor's threshold and reach a level of severity where they are apt to report. Given the prevalence of social media, the utility of online platforms as tools for harassment, and the ways online sexual harassment can diffuse to face-to-face, organizational leaders must create policies that deter sexual harassment on social media. As suggested by past research (Mainiero & Jones, 2013; Ritter, 2014), organizations can provide demonstrations of what is acceptable or not in online settings. Policies that clearly define what online sexual harassment is and what to do if it occurs can help build a more comfortable work environment.

Conclusions and directions for future research

This study provided an important look at reasons why survivors report online sexual harassment from coworkers or not, using CPM as a theoretical lens. There are also opportunities for future research. First, the idea of personal threshold levels needs to be developed. Because we examined open-ended responses from a survey, we were unable to probe further. We do not necessarily know why people downplayed severity or sought social support – unless they provided the reason in their response. Future research should examine threshold levels through richer in-depth interviews to understand why there is such variation in reporting and not reporting. An important example would be to consider another threshold-related communication theory – the Integrative Theory of the Division of Domestic Labor (Alberts et al., 2011) – which

emphasizes relationships between personal response thresholds, as well as social organizing, culture, and sensemaking. Future research should also connect micro-level experiences of survivors with larger macro-level discourses to understand how, for instance, power, rationality, and pressures of capitalism shape how people report harassment or not.

Second, we focused on reporting decisions, and how identities might influence decision-making. Future research should consider how the sex make-up of the dyad and sexuality play into reporting disclosures. For example, when harassment is same-sex (e.g. male-to-male or female-to-female), do survivors maintain a higher threshold because they are more concerned about privacy? Or when female perpetrators harass male survivors do the men try to 'handle the harassment themselves' because gender scripts imply that men should be able to handle their own problems (Scarduzio & Geist-Martin, 2008)? Likewise, future research should explore racial/cultural dynamics involved in reporting decisions. Thirty-five percent of those who reported online sexual harassment and 51% of those who did not report were harassed by a coworker of a different race/ethnicity. What cultural factors are involved in reporting decisions? As mentioned, Black women and other women of color face double discrimination due to their race and gender (Forbes, 2009; Richardson & Taylor, 2009). Future research should continue to investigate how women of color negotiate harassment and how reporting decisions may relate to the different contextual histories that shape their lives.

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