

# JUSTICE 2.0: STREET HARASSMENT VICTIMS' USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA AND ONLINE ACTIVISM AS SITES OF INFORMAL JUSTICE

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*Emerging scholarship has considered the potential for online spaces to function as sites of informal justice. To date, there has been little consideration of the experiences of individuals who seek justice online, and the extent to which victims' justice needs can be met online. Drawing on the findings of a mixed-methods research project with street harassment victims in Melbourne, Australia, I consider participants' reasons for, and experiences of, disclosing their encounters of street harassment online. I examine the extent to which these 'map on to' a selection of victim's justice needs. While it is evident that online spaces can function as sites of justice, it is vital to ask for whom and in which contexts justice can be achieved online.*

Key words: street harassment, sexual violence, online justice, informal justice, justice needs

## Introduction

Street harassment is, by all accounts, a pervasive experience in the lives of many women, and same-sex attracted and gender-diverse people. Research has consistently shown that these seemingly 'minor' and 'everyday' intrusions constitute a routine part of the negotiation of public and semi-public spaces—with upper-end estimates indicating that as many as 90 per cent of women experience street harassment *at least once* in their lives (Lenton et al. 1999; Johnson and Bennett 2015). What constitutes 'street harassment' is somewhat opaque, with definitions varying considerably across research to date (Vera-Gray 2016). Most typically, street harassment includes 'minor' intrusions such as unwanted verbal comments, prolonged staring or ogling, groping or unwanted physical contact, following someone, wolf-whistling and car-horn honking, to name but a few examples (Kissling 1991; Macmillan et al. 2000; Fairchild and Rudman 2008). Drawing on Liz Kelly's (1988) continuum model of sexual violence, all of these forms of street harassment can be understood as harmful, and as constituting a form of sexual violence (Fileborn 2013; Logan 2015; Vera-Gray 2016).

Existing research clearly illustrates the harm that street harassment can cause victims, although the extent to which harm is caused can be highly context-dependent (Fairchild 2010). With this caveat aside street harassment has been shown to: negatively impact upon women's sense of safety in public spaces (Lenton et al. 1999; Macmillan et al. 2000; Johnson and Bennett 2015); impede upon women's ability to freely access and utilize public spaces (Laniya 2005; Fairchild and Rudman 2008; Dhillon and Bakaya 2014); generate negative emotional and affective states, such as feeling scared, frightened, distressed, angry, violated, and so forth (Kissling 1991; Lenton et al. 1999;

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Laniya 2005; Dhillon and Bakaya 2014); result in embodied effects (e.g. increased heart rate, shaking, sweating) or corporeal harms (or the fear of such harms occurring) (Heben 1994; Laniya 2005); and contribute towards self-objectification and body consciousness (Laniya 2005; Fairchild and Rudman 2008; Davidson et al. 2015). As Bowman (1993: 524) remarks, these supposedly 'trivial' acts 'are objectively degrading, objectifying, humiliating, and frequently threatening in nature'.

Yet, street harassment appears to be only rarely responded to within formal criminal justice settings. Of course, it is important to acknowledge here that this varies widely based upon the *type* of street harassment at hand, and the particular legal jurisdiction (Koskela and Tani 2005; Chhun 2011). For example, both Portugal and Belgium have recently introduced legislation specifically addressing certain iterations of street harassment (though the effects of this legislation remain to be seen), while other forms of street harassment may be covered under aspects of existing legislation<sup>1</sup> (e.g. sexual offences legislation). Nevertheless, in many instances street harassment remains highly under-reported, difficult to respond to within a formal criminal justice context, excluded from legal definitions of sexual harm, and often dismissed as an insignificant if not 'complimentary' occurrence—though the documented harms of street harassment suggest otherwise (Bowman 1993; Heben 1994; Kelly and Radford 1996; Nielsen 2000; Chhun 2011).

My intention here is not to debate whether street harassment *should* be responded to through the formal criminal justice system. Rather, I aim to highlight that street harassment is an often-harmful experience for which victims may desire some sense of justice, and that such justice is not currently being achieved through formal justice avenues.<sup>2</sup> In the general absence of access to the formal criminal justice system, what other mechanisms do street harassment victims' use in order to achieve some semblance of justice?

The past decade has witnessed the emergence of numerous grass-roots activist groups—most notably *Hollaback!* and the *Everyday Sexism Project*, both of which enjoy a strong online presence—aimed at tackling street harassment, and providing a platform for street harassment victims to document and share their experiences (Foster 2015; Logan 2015; Wånggren 2016). Emerging criminological debates have considered the *potential* for online spaces such as *Hollaback!* and the *Everyday Sexism Project* to operate as a site of informal justice for victim/survivors of sexual assault and rape (Salter 2013; Powell 2015a; 2015b), and street harassment (Fileborn 2014). The work of Salter, Powell and myself illustrates that online spaces can function as counter-cultural public spheres that seek to disrupt and challenge dominant representations of sexual violence, and as spaces where victim/survivors' justice needs can to some extent be met.

To date, however, there has been only minimal consideration of the first-hand experiences of victims who disclose or share their experiences of sexual violence or street harassment online. This article seeks to add to this burgeoning strand of criminological research by exploring findings from a mixed-methods, exploratory research project

<sup>1</sup>That said, the limitations and poor track records of most Western criminal justice systems in responding to sexual violence are well documented (Herman 2005; Clark 2010; 2013; McGlynn 2011; McGlynn et al. in press; McGlynn et al. 2012). Despite considerable criminal justice reform across many jurisdictions, the problems associated with addressing sexual offences in the justice system endure (Koss 2006; Larcombe 2011; Daly 2014; Clark 2015).

<sup>2</sup>By 'formal' justice avenues I refer to justice mechanisms administered by the state; conversely, by 'informal' justice I refer to justice mechanisms that operate independently from or outside of state justice apparatus—though I also acknowledge that these categories may not be mutually exclusive.

undertaken in Melbourne, Australia, which, amongst other aims, sought to investigate street harassment victims' reasons for, and experiences of, sharing their encounters of street harassment online. Building upon my earlier work, which considered the *potential* for online sites to function as a site of justice for street harassment victims, I consider the extent to which participants' reasons for, and experiences of, online disclosure 'map on to' a selection of victim/survivors' justice needs or interests.

Before doing so, it is helpful firstly to establish what victim/survivors' justice needs are, and how these needs might be met. Moving on from here, I outline conceptual accounts of the online sphere as a counter-cultural space(s), and briefly recap the literature to date on online justice. I argue throughout that online spaces can in some instances serve as sites of justice with respect to some justice needs. However, online spaces cannot be simplistically categorized into sites of justice/non-justice. Rather, I argue it is more productive to consider the contexts in which the online world can work to meet certain justice needs: to ask which justice needs can be met for whom, and in what circumstances. Drawing on the work of [McGlynn and colleagues \(in press\)](#), I see justice as an emergent, ongoing and situated process. Additionally, I contend that there is no one 'ideal' justice avenue for street harassment victims. Online justice presents a muted and partial form of justice in many instances. It is also one potential justice response amongst many, and the desired response will vary greatly depending upon the victim's particular needs.

### *Victim/Survivors' Justice Needs*

The formal criminal justice system has a long and problematic history of addressing sexual violence. While any detailed examination of this troubled past (and present) lies well beyond the scope of this article, it will suffice to say here that the criminal justice system has been experienced as a site of harm, injustice and dismissal by many victim/survivors of sexual offences ([Herman 2005](#); [Clark 2015](#)). Judith [Herman \(2005: 574\)](#) perhaps best encapsulates this in suggesting that:

The wishes and needs of victims are often diametrically opposed to the requirements of legal proceedings...Indeed, if one set out intentionally to design a system for provoking symptoms of traumatic stress, it might look very much like a court of law.

Despite extensive legal and procedural reform across many Western jurisdictions problems persist, with reporting and conviction rates remaining low, attrition rates high, and victim/survivors continuing to experience the system as a site of retraumatization and dissatisfaction ([Herman 2005](#); [Jülich 2006](#); [Daly 2014](#); [Clark 2015](#)). Resultantly, [Daly \(2014: 380\)](#) argues, our focus should instead shift to what she terms 'pragmatic justice', 'which relies on multiple pathways of formal and informal justice mechanisms, with an emphasis on victim participation' (see also [Koss 2006](#)).

What do sexual assault victim/survivors need to occur to feel as though a sense of justice has been achieved? Feminist criminologists have identified a range of victim/survivor justice needs or interests. These justice needs/interests are typically identified as including: participation, where the victim/survivor has meaningful input into the trajectory of their case in the formal justice system; voice, where the victim is able to express their experience in a meaningful way in their own words; validation, that the

victim's account is believed and supported by others; vindication, or recognition, that the offender's actions were wrong; and offender accountability, such as the offender receiving consequences for their actions, being denounced, or admitting to their actions (Clark 2010; 2015; McGlynn 2011; McGlynn et al. 2012; Daly 2014; 2015). Many of the participants in Clark's (2010; 2015) study expressed that they sought justice in order to protect the broader community and to work towards the prevention of sexual violence (see also Taylor and Norma 2012). Thus, justice can be a collective, rather than individual, pursuit. There are likely some differences between the justice needs of street harassment victims and sexual assault victim/survivor, or in what they need to happen to fulfil their justice needs. It may, e.g., be useful to conceptualize victims' justice needs as existing along a continuum, with street harassment victims' and sexual assault victim/survivors' needs located at different (though fluid and contingent) points. Nonetheless, as I have argued earlier (Fileborn 2014), the literature on victim/survivors' justice needs serves as a useful starting point or proxy for street harassment victims' likely justice needs.

The identification of such needs/interests shifts away from a focus on 'predefined notions contained within existing frameworks of criminal justice' towards a more victim-centred approach to understanding justice (Clark 2015: 18; see also Herman 2005; McGlynn 2011). Victims' justice needs are not static or immobile. Rather, the particular needs/interests of an individual victim shift and evolve over time, and may be met by either or both formal and informal justice avenues (McGlynn 2011; Daly 2014; Clark 2015; McGlynn et al. in press). Obtaining a sense of justice should thus be conceptualized as a situated, iterative and ongoing project: a process of becoming, rather than a single moment or achievement.

As the research of authors such as Clark (2010; 2015) and Herman (2005) illustrates, the formal justice system is often unable or unwilling to meet some or all of these needs. This suggests a need for exploring and developing innovative, informal or 'other' justice avenues—and online justice is emerging as once such informal and innovative justice mechanism. As Daly (2015: 38) argues, rather than being overly concerned with the 'type' of justice mechanism at hand (e.g. formal versus informal, conventional versus traditional), our attention should be focused on 'the degree to which a range of conventional and innovative justice mechanisms can address one or more victims' justice interests'. This is a task that I take up throughout this article with regard to online justice mechanisms and street harassment.

### *Searching for Justice Online*

What opportunities might the online world provide for victim/survivors in their quests for justice? Emerging work in this realm suggests that online spaces hold great potential when it comes to achieving justice, yet they simultaneously remain problematic and limited avenues. Salter (2013), drawing on the work of Nancy Fraser, argues that online spaces, and particularly social media, can function as a form of counter-public sphere (see also Rapp et al. 2010; Shaw 2012; Rentschler 2014; Loney-Howes 2015; Wånggren 2016). They are spaces in which victim/survivors can act to: contest dominant social, cultural and legal narratives of sexual violence; circumvent formal criminal justice channels; give voice to their own experiences; and see their perpetrators punished or publically condemned. Evidence gathering and documentation of sexual violence can

also be achieved online (Rentschler 2014). Central to this is the ability of social media and Internet users to generate their own content on the web, rather than acting as passive consumers—with the development of the Web 2.0 enabling users to produce and post content, and interact with web content without requiring specialist skills (Beer and Burrows 2007; Henderson and Bowley 2010; see Rentschler 2014 in relation to user content development and online activism).

My own work (Fileborn 2014), as well as the work of Powell (2015a; 2015b), has considered the extent to which online spaces may act as a mechanism or avenue for fulfilling victim/survivors' aforementioned justice needs. Using sexual assault victim/survivors' justice needs as an approximation of street harassment victims' justice needs, I have previously explored the extent to which online sites such as *Hollaback!* might be able to fulfil these needs. Powell (2015a; 2015b) has undertaken a similar analysis with regard to sexual assault victim/survivors. It is apparent that such sites have the potential to act as a location of informal justice for victim/survivors, at least with regard to certain justice needs in certain contexts. For example, both my own work and Powell's illustrate the ways in which social media and activist sites can function as a space for victim/survivors to share their experiences in their own words (see also Wånggren 2016), and in a way that is meaningful to them: they *give voice* to victims in a way that the formal justice system is often unable to. Given the supportive nature of many of these sites (although this is not universally the case, as I explore below and later), they may function as an important site of *validation*, where victims' experiences are taken seriously and believed (Fileborn 2014; Wånggren 2016). Such sites can also generate the impetus for broader social and legal change, leading to validation of the harm of street harassment on a larger, collective scale. Mindi Foster's (2015) work demonstrates that tweeting about sexism can improve well-being and foster positive psychological states, suggesting that online justice mechanisms may also have an important role to play in victims' healing and recovery.

Yet, in other respects online spaces can only provide a limited sense of justice. Salter (2013) argues that the ability to harness the power of social media in this way is highly contingent upon the skills and social media nous of the victim/survivor. Put simply, not all individuals are able to effectively use these sites to garner support or to have their stories heard in a meaningful way. Not unlike the formal criminal justice system, these are spaces of limited or partial justice, with certain voices projected more loudly than others (see also Wånggren 2016). Likewise, standards of perceived feminine 'respectability' and 'credibility' continue to be applied in the online world, influencing who becomes recognized as a 'deserving' victim (Salter 2013). Rachel Loney-Howes (2015) argues that online rape activist sites can also work to perpetuate, rather than challenge and disrupt, limiting stereotypes and problematic discourses about sexual violence. For instance, Loney-Howes suggests that the activist site *Stop Rape Now* functions to silence the voices of victims of war-time rape—predominantly women of colour from 'developing' countries—as they 'are spoken on behalf of by privileged social and political actors, for example celebrities' (2015: 13). In this respect, the site perpetuates the depiction of war-time rape as 'unspeakable, spectacular...[and] as seemingly worse-than... "everyday rape" during times of peace' (2015: 13). This can exclude and occlude certain experiences of sexual violence, curtailing the extent to which justice can be achieved for certain victim/survivors. An enduring digital divide further works to shape and limit who is able to access and utilize online justice spaces, with Internet access remaining stratified across socio-economic and age-based divides (White and Selwyn 2013).



Online justice raises some significant questions and challenges in relation to due process and vigilantism (Salter 2013; Fileborn 2014; Powell 2015a; 2015b). For instance, in one case study discussed by Salter (2013), two teenage perpetrators were publicly 'named and shamed' online after receiving what was deemed by many to be an unduly lenient sentence. As Salter notes, this is likely to result in long-term reputational damage to the perpetrators, while the extent to which this represents a fair or proportionate punishment remains unclear. However, as Powell (2015a; 2015b) counteracts, such public 'naming and shaming' appears to be relatively rare in practice, and in some instances perpetrators receive public support rather than being denounced.

Additionally, while this discussion illustrates the potential of online spaces to act as sites of justice, there is also considerable evidence documenting the ways in which online spaces represent sites of *harm*. Most notably, emerging work on technology-facilitated sexual violence demonstrates the ways in which online spaces and social media can be the sites of sexual violence, or used by perpetrators to locate potential victims to assault 'in real life' (Bluett-Boyd et al. 2013; Henry and Powell 2015; Powell 2015a). The routine sexual harassment, abuse and exclusion of women who participate in online spaces are also well acknowledged, epitomized through the popular Twitter hashtag #MenCallMeThings. Given that victim/survivors' desire a *safe* space to share their experiences (Herman 2005; Clark 2010), the lack of safety experienced (or harm actively perpetuated) through some online spaces may negate their potential to act as spaces of justice. I return to consider this in more detail later in the discussion.

### *Methodology*

This article draws on the findings of mixed-methods, exploratory research undertaken in Melbourne, Australia. The overarching aims of this project were to examine street harassment victims' understandings of 'justice' and their desired justice responses to street harassment. The study consisted of two key phases: an online survey, and focus groups. I consider each of these methods in turn.

#### *Online survey*

An online survey was conducted using the survey platform *Qualtrics*. The survey consisted of a range of fixed and open response questions, with the bulk of questions falling into the latter category. The survey covered a range of topics including: participants' demographic details; their experiences of street harassment; the impacts of these experiences; disclosure; their understandings and perceptions of 'justice' and desired justice responses to street harassment; and their use of online sites to disclose experiences of street harassment. It is this last category of questions that is of particular relevance to this article. Survey participants were asked to reflect on their reasons for disclosing experiences of street harassment online, what their experiences of doing so were like, whether they would do this again, and whether they would recommend that others who have experienced street harassment should use these sites to share their experiences.

In order to participate, participants were required to be aged 18 or over, and to have experienced street harassment (self-defined) in Melbourne, Australia. Participants were

otherwise a self-selecting convenience sample. Participants were recruited through a range of avenues, including social media (particularly Facebook and Twitter), and email newsletters of relevant organizations, such as sexual assault centres, LGBTIQ+ organizations, organizations supporting women with disabilities, and so on. Many of these organizations also promoted the survey through their own social media accounts. As this project was exploratory in nature, I purposefully sought to recruit participants of diverse gender and sexuality, race/ethnicity and living with a disability. The survey was thus open to anyone who had experienced street harassment, rather than limiting participation according to narrow demographic boundaries or preconceived notions of who was 'likely' to have encountered harassment. This was reflected in the organizations approached to promote the study.

A total of 292 participants were recruited to take part in the survey. An overview of these participants according to gender, sexuality and age is provided in Tables 1–3. Excerpts from survey participants are identified as such in the ensuing discussion, with participants' gender, sexual orientation and age specified.

### *Focus groups*

A total of six focus groups with 14 participants were held, with group size ranging from one to four participants. Focus groups were used to examine the ways in

TABLE 1 *Survey participants' gender<sup>a</sup>*

Gender	Number of participants
Cisgender woman	79.5% ( <i>n</i> = 232)
Cisgender man	7.5% ( <i>n</i> = 22)
Transgender woman	2.1% ( <i>n</i> = 6)
Genderqueer	3.1% ( <i>n</i> = 9)
Genderfluid	2.4% ( <i>n</i> = 7)
Non-binary	2.1% ( <i>n</i> = 6)
Other	3.4% ( <i>n</i> = 10)
Total	<i>N</i> = 292

<sup>a</sup>Survey participants were provided with a list of gender identities and sexual orientations to select from, but were also able to enter their preferred terms if they were not listed. Participants are referred to using the terms they selected or specified throughout the paper. Participants' gender and sexual orientation was self-defined, and individuals may use the same term (e.g. 'queer') to refer to different manifestations of gender identity or sexual orientation.

TABLE 2 *Survey participants' sexual orientation*

Sexual orientation	Number of participants
Lesbian	6.5% ( <i>n</i> = 19)
Gay	3.4% ( <i>n</i> = 10)
Bisexual	18.2% ( <i>n</i> = 53)
Heterosexual	46.2% ( <i>n</i> = 135)
Pansexual	8.6% ( <i>n</i> = 25)
Asexual	2.4% ( <i>n</i> = 7)
Queer	10.6% ( <i>n</i> = 31)
Other	4.1% ( <i>n</i> = 12)
Total	<i>N</i> = 292

TABLE 3 *Survey participants' age*

Age group	Number of participants
18–19	5.5% ( <i>n</i> = 16)
20–24	21.6% ( <i>n</i> = 63)
25–29	30.8% ( <i>n</i> = 90)
30–34	21.2% ( <i>n</i> = 62)
35–39	9.2% ( <i>n</i> = 27)
40–49	9.2% ( <i>n</i> = 27)
50–57	2.4% ( <i>n</i> = 7)
Total	<i>N</i> = 292

which street harassment is discussed and constructed within a social context. Given the exploratory nature of the project, the use of focus groups was also intended to enable an examination of a more diverse range of experiences and perceptions than individual interviews would have allowed within the timeframe of the project. The focus group discussions explored a similar range of topics to the survey, with the notable difference that participants were asked to focus on their perceptions and understandings of street harassment, rather than their personal experiences. Such an approach was taken in order to minimize the ethical issues raised by asking participants to discuss experiences of potentially upsetting or traumatizing events, although many participants volunteered information about their own experiences regardless. Focus group participants were asked more directly to discuss the extent to which they thought online activist sites and social media could function as a form of justice in response to street harassment, and I draw on the outcomes of these discussions here. The focus groups were recorded and transcribed by an external transcription service with the consent of participants. All focus group participants are referred to by a pseudonym in the ensuing discussion, and all excerpts have been de-identified.

Focus group participants were recruited through the online surveys. At the end of the survey, participants were asked if they would be interested in receiving information about taking part in a focus group, and to provide a contact email if they would like the researcher to contact them. These contact details were not linked to participants' survey data. A small number of focus group participants were also (unexpectedly) recruited through a snowballing method.

A total of 96 survey participants indicated they would like to receive information about the focus groups. However, despite a seemingly high level of interest, this did not translate into participation in the focus groups. The reasons for this attrition are not entirely clear, although some potential participants did indicate that the scheduled focus group times did not suit those who worked full-time. Due to out-of-semester campus hours, the focus groups had to start at 5 pm, and those who worked full-time were often unable to attend. In one instance, a focus group was run as a one-on-one interview after other participants failed to attend. Those who took part in a focus group were compensated for their time and transportation costs with a \$10AUD gift voucher for a supermarket and department store chain.

An overview of the focus group participants is provided in [Tables 4](#) and [5](#).



TABLE 4 *Focus group participants' gender*

Gender	Number of participants
Cisgender woman	<i>N</i> = 10
Cisgender man	<i>N</i> = 3
Genderqueer	<i>N</i> = 1
Total	<i>N</i> = 14

TABLE 5 *Focus group participants' sexual orientation*

Sexual orientation	Number of participants
Heterosexual	<i>N</i> = 10
Lesbian	<i>N</i> = 1
Gay, queer and lesbian	<i>N</i> = 1
Gay	<i>N</i> = 1
Bisexual	<i>N</i> = 1
Total	<i>N</i> = 14

### *Data analysis*

The quantitative survey data were analysed using the software program SPSS. A descriptive analysis of the data was undertaken, with the analysis focused on produced basic frequencies and cross tabulations. The cross tabulations were predominantly focused on examining any relationships between participants' gender and sexual orientation, their experiences of street harassment and their desired justice responses.

Qualitative data from the surveys and focus groups were analysed thematically. The researcher undertook an initial reading of the qualitative data in order to identify emergent themes. A second reading of the data was then undertaken, with exemplary quotes being sorted into Excel spreadsheets. The question themes were used as higher-level codes (e.g. 'experiences of street harassment', 'impacts of street harassment', 'understandings of justice'), with the data further sorted into sub-codes based on the repeated thematic patterns identified in participants' responses. Particular care was taken to identify the complexity, contradictions and divergences in participants' responses. Following Law (2004), attention was paid to the 'messiness' of the social world. I also sought to examine any apparent differences or similarities in responses according to gender, sexuality, race/ethnicity and disability.

### *Shouting Back Online*

A total of 69 survey participants (23.6 per cent) indicated that they had shared their experiences of street harassment on an online site such as Facebook, Hollaback or the Everyday Sexism Project. Although these particular sites were mentioned to participants as examples, some participants interpreted this as meaning they could *only* talk about using these specific websites (and thus indicated they did not discuss potentially relevant experiences of sharing their experiences on other sites or social media platforms), while others did discuss sharing experiences on other sites, such as Twitter. As such, this figure likely underestimates the actual extent to which participants shared

their experiences online. Additionally, the research did not explicitly differentiate between the use of different sites, or focus on any one website in particular. The following discussion can only reflect on street harassment victims' use of websites and other social media to share their experiences in a general sense. Notably, only two male survey participants and one male focus group participant indicated that they had shared experiences of harassment online. While this at least in part reflects the fact that street harassment is a highly gendered experience, and one much more likely to be encountered by women and gender-diverse people, future research may wish to further interrogate this apparent gender divide.

Nonetheless, these results suggest that a significant minority of street harassment victims—at least within the context of this project—disclose or share their experiences of street harassment online. I move on now to examine participants' reported reasons for, and experiences of, disclosing online, and consider the extent to which participants' responses map onto the justice needs identified by those such as Clark, Daly and Herman. That is, to what extent is the use of Internet sites to disclose experiences of street harassment functioning to fulfil victims' justice needs?

### *Validation and Affirmation*

The concepts of validation and affirmation were central to many participants' explanations of why they chose to disclose their experiences of street harassment online. McGlynn et al. identify a similar need as 'recognition', which extends beyond merely being believed to 'encompass...the significance of the experience being acknowledged' (in press: 3). As the following survey participant articulated with regard to her experience of disclosure:

It validated me, completely. I had a heap of mainly female friends show solidarity and understanding. (Survey participant, 32 years, cisgender woman, heterosexual)

For some, disclosing online represented an important first step in working towards achieving some semblance of justice for street harassment victims, and in laying the groundwork for ultimately preventing this behaviour:

I think it's crucial we keep publicly calling bullshit on this type of behaviour...I think this is going to be one of the most powerful tools in supporting the validation of others' experiences, whilst also forcing it on the agenda of public authorities. (Survey participant, 30 years, cisgender woman, queer)

Indeed, many participants stressed the desire for their experiences to be taken seriously and listened to by others, to have their experiences acknowledged. This was important on an individual level, but also in working towards broader social change and recognition of the harms of street harassment. It may be relatively simple to dismiss the experience of one person as insignificant. It is harder to deny the weight of the thousands of collective narratives collated online. For this reason, a number of participants stressed the importance of sharing their individual experiences as a way of documenting them, but also the pervasiveness and impact of street harassment in the lives of many women and queer people. For example, one survey participant commented that this collective sharing 'proves it's a serious problem' (Survey participant, 25 years, cisgender woman, bisexual), while another felt 'it's important to document what is really going on so we can actually refer to statistics when discussing this topic' (Survey participant, 28 years,

cisgender woman, heterosexual). In this sense, online disclosure is a way for street harassment victims to bear witness to the prevalence and harms of street harassment.

Validating and affirming experiences of street harassment was a vital step for many participants in challenging and changing the cultural narrative that too readily dismisses these harms. It enabled victims to make ontological claims about their experiences: this *happened* to me. This is my truth. It gives a sense of permanence and solidity to what is often a fleeting or ephemeral moment. As one participant said, the support and solidarity that could be experienced through online communities:

Will be there to remind you that you're not crazy or making it up, that it does happen and they have experienced similar things. (Survey participant, 29 years, cisgender woman, bisexual)

However, this participant also cautioned that this could depend on whether the online community was a *safe* one. For focus group participant Sandra, sharing her experiences online also helped to validate and affirm her experience, and to provide her with a sense of ontological reassurance. Posting online helped to establish that:

You are not imagining it...you feel...like did that really happen maybe it didn't happen, maybe I am just being sensitive so then when you see like a website where everyone lists some things – like no it did happen and I am not being sensitive.

These were communities where street harassment victims were able to share their experiences in a meaningful way, in a 'community...where I would be heard' (Survey participant, 32 years, cisgender woman, bisexual) and where 'whatever I felt or thought about it was accepted without judgment' (Survey participant, 28 years, cisgender woman, heterosexual). Disclosing online thus contributed towards providing victims with a sense of voice: to provide a forum where street harassment victims can share their experiences in their own words, in a space where they will be supported, affirmed and believed.

#### *'Silence Is the Best Friend of Violence': Consciousness-Raising Online*

For many of the participants in this project, disclosing experiences of street harassment online was engaged in overtly as a political practice. That is, participants indicated that they shared experiences online in order to raise awareness of street harassment, and to help to locate their experiences within a broader pattern and within gendered power structures (see [Loney-Howes 2015](#) for a general discussion of the role of consciousness-raising in feminist activism against sexual violence). In this respect, online disclosure was functioning as a form of consciousness-raising. [Wånggren \(2016: 5\)](#) has highlighted the ways in which the use of storytelling on the Hollaback! site represents 'a pedagogical and consciousness-raising practice'. This was clearly demonstrated in the following comments from participants regarding why they decided to disclose online:

I wanted to show solidarity with others who had experienced it, and share in that feeling of a group fighting back against it and saying 'Yes, this happens, it really does'. (Survey participant, 30 years, cisgender woman, asexual)

It just shows you how many people are in the same position, and I think also shows people who DON'T experience it how prevalent it is (Survey participant, 25 years, cisgender woman, heterosexual)

Because I knew my experience was not just my own and I wanted others to know their experience was not just their own. (Survey participant, 42 years, cisgender woman, queer)

For these women, online disclosure was a way of forming solidarity and support with other victims of street harassment (see also [Rentschler 2014](#)). It enabled victims to situate their experience within broader structural forces, and assisted some participants in resisting the idea that they were responsible for their own experience. For instance, one survey participant recounted how she was relieved to realize that she was not alone in her experiences of street harassment. In sharing their experiences, participants often hoped that they would assist in creating the virtual space for others to step forward.

As the second participant's response quoted above highlights, while supporting other victims was a crucial aspect of online disclosure, it also has a potentially educative function for the broader community. This community-wide or collective consciousness-raising was positioned as a vital step in starting to generate social and cultural change—and this reflects and affirms [Rentschler's \(2014: 69\)](#) argument that young women's 'use of social media produces, organises and deploys a capacity to respond to cultures of harassment and sexual violence'. As [Clark's \(2010\)](#) work with sexual assault victim/survivors illustrated, victim/survivors often engage with justice processes out of a desire to help prevent others from experiencing the same harms (see also [Taylor and Norma 2012](#)). Working towards the prevention of street harassment in order to protect others was also a clear motivation for disclosing in online spaces: justice is seen here to operate at a community rather than individual level. That said, another participant found disclosing online to be 'a bit "preaching to the choir"' (Survey participant, 24 years, cisgender woman, pansexual), raising questions about the extent to which online disclosure is actually able to achieve broader educative and social change in practice.

Another participant illuminated the importance of online spaces as a sphere for women to 'keep telling their stories' (Survey participant, 32 years, cisgender woman, heterosexual). Given that women (and other marginalized groups) are often excluded from mainstream or public dialogue (or, where they are included, their voices are muted and restrained), this shows the potential of online spaces to be claimed by women and other diverse groups as a counter-cultural space, and that online spaces can be actively valued and utilized by marginalized communities for this reason. This participant went on to comment that 'having an open dialogue about the realities of life as a woman is the first step towards improving things'. Thus, this process of consciousness-raising and storytelling opens up a space for street harassment victims to have voice—a vital component of justice for many victim/survivors ([Herman 2005](#); [Clark 2010](#); [McGlynn et al. in press](#)). It is an avenue through which we can come to know the experiences of victims—though these are nonetheless stories that are being produced for a particular audience. Storytelling is performative and situated, and the ways in which street harassment victims tell, or are able to tell, their stories likely has important implications for whether or not they are heard. We must ask the question of *whose* voices can be heard in the online sphere (and in which virtual locations), an issue I return to later in this discussion.

### *Emotional Catharsis*

Online disclosure was commonly engaged in as a form of emotional release or catharsis, and transformation. While this is not necessarily strictly related to achieving a sense of justice, it was often interlinked with other forms of justice needs. For example, one

individual commented that she shared her experience of street harassment online due to:

A combination of being fed-up with it and needing to vent, as well as wanting to feel validated in the fear and emotions I felt. (Survey participant, 21 years, cisgender woman, bisexual)

Another participant said that:

It's really cathartic to do this with a big group of people online! Validates your feelings of anger. (Survey participant, 32 years, cisgender woman, heterosexual)

For these women, talking about their experiences was connected to feeling validated in their responses, and in having the harms and negative impacts of their experiences affirmed by other community members. Indeed, it was vital to many participants that they were disclosing experiences in respectful and understanding spaces where they were supported. Emotional catharsis is also linked to the need for voice: expressing the emotional harm and impact of street harassment is a way in which victims can share their experience in a way that is meaningful to them. Documenting the emotional harms of street harassment was a way for some participants to challenge the notion that street harassment is a 'minor' or 'complimentary' act. Thus, disclosure was aimed towards serving a broader educative function, and to challenge popular perceptions of street harassment. Feeling angry or frustrated about experiencing harassment was also a powerful motivator for engaging in online disclosure in the first place.

Likewise, online disclosure could mark a point of departure from the negative impacts caused by an incident of street harassment, helping victims to heal or recover from their experience, and to move on with their lives. One participant noted that for her online disclosure could help to 'vent frustration rather than let it boil in myself' (Survey participant, 25 years, cisgender woman, pansexual), while another found it helped her 'let off steam' (Survey participant, 29 years, cisgender woman, bisexual). Online disclosure could thus function as a point of rupture and catharsis—though this is not to imply that healing and recovery are linear processes.

Disclosing online could, however, also generate a range of negative emotional states. For instance, one participant highlighted the emotional labour that online disclosure could create. While this participant described her online experiences as 'mostly positive', they also:

Resulted in a lot of people disclosing their experiences for the first time, which made me feel emotionally responsible for them. (Survey participant, 45 years, cisgender woman, lesbian)

Although online spaces were highly valued for their potential to be sites of support and solidarity, this participant's comments draw our attention to the emotional burden this can at times create. There is thus a tension between street harassment victims' need for support and advice from other community members, and the strain this might place on some members of online communities who feel ill-equipped or are unwilling to provide such support. Online disclosure can be read here as a form of emotion work or emotional labour. The emotional labour of caring for and assisting street harassment victims is outsourced to online communities, particularly in the general absence of state action in response to street harassment. This emotion work is notably gendered, given that women are by and large the victims of street harassment. As [Arcy \(2016: 365\)](#) asserts, emotion work is a highly gendered aspect of labour on account of 'women's

assumed expertise in emotion management', and that the expectation that women will undertake this emotional labour is 'intensified in the digital realm'. There is the expectation here that other community members (other *women*) are willing and able to provide emotional support to their peers—although the particular 'feeling rules' (to draw on Hochschild's (1983) terminology) governing this online emotional labour are not well articulated in participants' responses, and this is an area that warrants further exploration. The comments from this participant also suggest that sharing experiences online cannot simplistically be characterized as being cathartic and healing, or as a point of rupture enabling victims to move on from their experience. Rather, it is a question of for whom online spaces can be experienced as emotionally cathartic or as a site of justice, and in which contexts?

*Geographies of Online Justice: Mapping Trajectories of Justice and Harm (or: Don't Read the Comments)*

As the discussion above began to intimate, there are some serious questions regarding the extent to which online spaces can act as sites of justice. While certain online communities could act as sites of support and affirmation, this was not universally the case. Nor were *all* online spaces encountered as supportive ones. Indeed, as my earlier discussion illustrated, online spaces are often sites of harm and abuse where sexual violence and harassment are perpetrated (Bluett-Boyd et al. 2013; Henry and Powell 2015; Powell 2015a). This fact was not lost on participants, some of whom openly discussed whether some online spaces could themselves be considered sites of public harassment (see also Vera-Gray 2016):

This sort of discrimination and harassment often happens online as well. It would be interesting to consider whether the Internet is a public space or not? (Rhea, focus group participant)

For this reason, it is important to consider and map the virtual geographies of justice, and spaces where it may be considered 'safe' to disclose (and safe for *who* to disclose in which circumstances?). In some instances, the safety of a space is emergent: it cannot be determined until after a post is made. It is dependent upon the particular assemblage of virtual bodies that happen to encounter and interact with the post on that particular day. It is also constantly evolving and (re)negotiated—online spaces are not static or immobile.

Many participants spoke of the ways in which they negotiated the perceived safety of online spaces, and were highly selective of where they chose to disclose. Similarly to navigating safety in 'real-life' spaces (England and Simon 2010) participants developed 'virtual safety maps' that governed their disclosure activities. For instance, one woman said she shares her experiences 'only in private groups. Because trolls' (Survey participant, 28 years, cisgender woman, pansexual). Indeed, a number of individuals commented that they only disclosed in private, feminist-friendly spaces and groups. Individuals who have experienced street harassment may thus make calculated decisions about the online spaces they inhabit and participate in in order to minimize the potential to experience abuse, harassment or dismissal of their experiences. This also suggests that being able to *safely* share experiences online is mediated by privilege and cultural capital. It relies on possessing the relevant social and cultural capital to know about and access private and often exclusive online networks.



For some participants, particularly those from more marginalized (such as sexuality and gender diverse) groups, there was awareness that they may be excluded from online spaces that otherwise purport to be supportive of street harassment victims. As one participant said when reflecting on whether she would recommend that others share their experiences online:

There's a lot of power and privilege in feeling able to do that. We also need to be mindful of providing safe and inclusive spaces for those who don't feel it's something they can engage in. (Survey participant, 30 years, cisgender woman, queer)

Another participant recounted attending a meeting for the local chapter of an online activist group with a friend who:

Is a wheelchair user and she also has had many experiences with street harassment. We attended to discuss their tactics and the exclusionary framework. She voiced her opinions, but there were no changes to the framework or suggestions and we left early. (Survey participant, 32 years, cisgender woman, queer)

In particular, this participant and her friend were concerned that much of the safety advice provided by this group was underpinned by the assumption of being able-bodied. As a result of their concerns being dismissed, this participant indicated that she no longer engaged with this particular activist site. This suggests that, much like the formal justice system, online justice is also shaped and limited by particular structural factors. 'Storytelling', Wånggren notes, 'is not neutral, but requires an ongoing evaluation of *whose stories* are given the dominant place' (2016: 11, original emphasis). Online spaces, including overtly feminist ones, can often perpetuate existing power inequalities and oppressions (Wånggren 2016). Those who are excluded and marginalized in 'real life' may continue to experience this in (at least some) online spaces. These are not spaces that are necessarily inclusive and open to all. Nor is there necessarily equality in terms of who is able to harness online spaces in an attempt to fulfil their justice interests or needs. For this reason, the potential for online spaces to function as sites of justice must be considered as inherently limited (though no more so than other avenues).

For some people, sites of online disclosure could become sites of re-victimization and virtual harassment. One woman said that disclosing online was the 'worst decision. I got way more backlash than I did support' (Survey participant, 18 years, cisgender woman, heterosexual). Another said that 'you've got to not read the comments. Trolls can do a lot of additional damage' (Survey participant, 42 years, cisgender woman, queer), suggesting that safety is, to some extent, contingent on *how* we engage with different online spaces. Rather than being sites of justice, these comments illustrate that those disclosing experiences may experience further harm and victimization—perpetuating, rather than redressing, the harms of street harassment. Another individual suggested that she would share her experiences online 'if I felt at the time I had the mental fortitude to deal with the inevitable male backlash' (Survey participant, 30 years, cisgender woman, asexual), highlighting that the perceived safety of online spaces can be context-dependent and influenced by individual affective or emotional states. It is, therefore, not necessarily or always possible to define online spaces as safe/unsafe—rather the safety of a space is contingent and shaped by a range of fluid factors. In certain contexts, some participants indicated that it was more productive for them

to talk to friends and family rather than disclose online. The ability of online spaces to function as a site of justice is thus also contingent and fluid.

*Virtual Boundaries of Online Justice: Multiplicities and Retraumatization*

Finally, it is important to note that for a number of participants (in some circumstances) disclosing street harassment online was not a productive avenue for having their justice needs or interests met. For some, disclosing online was a retraumatizing, rather than healing, experience. As one participant said 'it can be draining to revisit experiences' (Survey participant, 26 years, cisgender woman, doesn't like labels). For another, disclosing online 'was hard. I didn't want to bring it back up' (Survey participant, 23 years, cisgender woman, asexual lesbian). The first survey participant also suggested that her decision to disclose online would depend on how she was feeling at the time. In some circumstances, online disclosure could be an appropriate avenue, while in others it could be 'draining'. While having voice can be an important element of victims' justice needs, it is vital not to create an *imperative* for victims to talk, or to view sharing one's experience as a proxy for achieving justice (see, e.g., [Henry 2010](#)).

Another participant highlighted that, for her, disclosing online was inherently limited in meeting her justice needs/interests. While online spaces were vital for 'calling out' men on their inappropriate behaviour, focus group participant Madeline said 'another step I'd want to go to is holding people accountable so...they have to talk publicly...and be held responsible for their behaviour'. Although participants' understandings of justice have not been a focus of this article, it is important to note here that for many participants having a perpetrator held accountable for their behaviour, or, less commonly, punished, were vital elements of justice. These are justice needs or interests that are, by and large, simply unable to be met in online spaces. This does not suggest that there is no value in attempting to meet victims' justice needs or interests online. It does, however, suggest that online justice avenues may only provide a limited or muted sense of justice depending on the particular justice needs of a victim. As [McGlynn \(2011: 838\)](#) astutely notes, victims' understandings of justice are 'varied and complex', demanding a 'diverse approach to justice'.

The limitations of online justice were also encapsulated in participants' responses to the question of whether they would recommend other street harassment victims should share their experiences online. Many participants were keenly aware of the multiplicity of victims' justice needs, and that disclosing online may or may not be an appropriate option:

I think it's a personal choice for the individual. People deal with trauma/confrontation in their own way. I don't think there is a right and wrong way to respond. (Survey participant, 32 years, cisgender woman, bisexual)

There was a strong element of 'each to their own' in these types of responses. Such comments suggest a need for a suite of justice responses or avenues for street harassment. As [McGlynn et al. \(2012\)](#) have observed in relation to justice responses to sexual violence, we need a range of options for truly 'victim-centred' justice. It would appear that this is also the case for victims of street harassment. For some individuals, online avenues of justice may be simply unable to meet some or all of their justice needs/interests in certain contexts or points in time. There is no one option that will be appropriate for

all street harassment victims in all circumstances. Rather, victims' justice needs are multiple, fluid and context-dependent, and this should be reflected in the types of justice options developed in response to street harassment. Justice can be conceptualized, according to McGlynn and colleagues (in press), as 'kaleidoscopic'. That is, justice is a 'continually shifting pattern...constantly refracted through new circumstances, experiences and understandings...with multiple beginnings and possible endings...[and an] on-going and ever-evolving experience' (in press: 3). According to this approach, sharing experiences of street harassment online can best be understood as one component of an ongoing justice *process* or *journey*, rather than a finite mechanism where victims' justice projects are completed with some sense of finality. Rather than following a set path, victims' justice journeys are unique. Online disclosure may feature as a key destination, a brief stop along the way, or be completely absent from other's routes.

### *Concluding Comments*

In this paper I set out to examine street harassment victims' reasons for sharing their experiences online, and the extent to which these reasons 'map on to' previously established victims' justice needs or interests. The findings of this mixed-methods project illustrate that online disclosure can clearly function as a pathway to meet elements of victims' justice needs. Notably, sharing experiences online was strongly associated with experiencing a sense of validation and affirmation. Online communities could provide collective support and acknowledgement for victims. They also enabled street harassment victims to share their experience in their own voice. Validation, affirmation and voice are core justice needs, suggesting that online spaces have much to offer as a site of justice in this regard. Disclosing online also had an overt political element for many participants. It functioned as a form of consciousness-raising and an educational tool, working towards the collective aim of preventing street harassment by challenging cultural norms that dismiss and downplay the harms of this behaviour. In this sense, online justice holds the potential to contribute towards broader social justice efforts by providing a forum in which the power structures and oppressions underpinning street harassment are identified, challenged and, ultimately, dismantled.

At the same time, online spaces were also clearly a *limited* avenue of justice in many respects. For some participants, these were spaces of retraumatization, revictimization, silencing and exclusion. As I have argued throughout, at issue here is not *whether* online spaces can function as sites of justice, but rather for whom and in what circumstances. Achieving justice online requires users to negotiate and navigate online geographies of safety/unsafety. It is important to continue to question and identify who is able to effectively use online spaces as sites of justice, and to work towards closing the justice 'gap' when it comes to achieving justice online. In particular, continuing to address the impacts of online hate speech, abuse and trolling, and the exclusion of marginalized groups from feminist spaces, is vital. For others, online spaces were simply unable to fulfil their particular justice interests or needs. Online justice is a necessarily limited, partial, and muted site of justice. However, Daly's concept of pragmatic justice suggests that we should not dismiss online justice in its entirety because of this. A limited or muted sense of justice is better than *no* justice, and all justice responses have their respective benefits and limitations. This is perhaps particularly the case for street harassment, which, as established earlier, is often excluded from and difficult to respond to using

formal justice avenues. In this sense, street harassment demands a pragmatic approach to achieving justice. The multiple, fluid and fragmented nature of justice needs means that it is necessary to develop a suite of justice responses in order to enable street harassment victims to achieve some semblance of justice.

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