

'Naming, Blaming, Shaming': Sexual Assault Survivors' Perceptions of the Practice of Shaming

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Abstract : This interdisciplinary study, to our knowledge the first in this field, is located on the intersection of victimology-law and society-and media literature, and it corresponds both with feminist writing and with cyber literature which explores the techno-social sphere. It depicts the multifaceted dimensions of shaming in the eyes of the survivors through the following research questions: What are the motivations of sexual-assault survivors to publicize the assailants' identity or to refrain from this practice? Is shaming on Facebook perceived by sexual-assault victims as a substitute for the CJS or as a new form of social activism? What positive and negative consequences do survivors experience as a result of shaming their assailants online? The study draws on in-depth semi-structured interviews which we have conducted between 2016-2018 with 20 sexual-assault survivors who exposed themselves on Facebook. They were sexually attacked in various forms: six participants reported that they had been raped when they were minors; eight women reported that they had been raped as adults; three reported that they had been victims of an indecent act and three reported that they had been harassed either in their workplace or in the public sphere. Most of our interviewees (12) reported to the police and were involved in criminal procedures. More than half of the survivors (11) disclosed the identity of their attackers online. The vocabularies of motives that have emerged from the thematic analysis of the interviews with the survivors consist of both social and personal motivations for using the practice of shaming online. Some survivors maintain that the use of shaming derives from the decline in the public trust in the criminal justice system. It reflects demand for accountability and justice and serves also as a practice of warning other potential victims of the assailants. Other survivors assert that shaming people in a position of privilege is meant to fulfill the public right to know who these privileged men really are. However, these aforementioned moral and practical justifications of the practice of shaming are often mitigated by fear from the attackers' physical or legal actions in response to their allegations. Some interviewees who are feminist activists argue that the practice of shaming perpetuates the social ancient tendency to define women by labels linking them to the men who attacked them, instead of being defined by their own life complexities. The variety of motivations to adopt or resent the practice of shaming by sexual assault victims presented in our study appear to refute the prevailing intuitive stereotype that shaming is an irrational act of revenge, and denote its rationality. The role of social media as an arena for seeking informal justice raises questions about the new power relations created between victims, assailants, the community and the State, outside the formal criminal justice system. At the same time, the survivors' narratives also uncover the risks and pitfalls embedded within the online sphere for sexual assault survivors.

Keywords : criminal justice, gender, Facebook, sexual-assaults

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