

Post-Trauma and Post: Emotional Processing of Sexual Assault Victims in Criminal Proceedings and on Facebook

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This study seeks to explore, for the first time, the emotional experiences of sexual assault survivors who chose to participate in the social media discourse on sexual assault in Israel and share their testimonies of alleged sexual offenses committed against them. It also seeks to compare, with all due caution, the emotional process that survivors have experienced during their online exposure to the emotional process they have gone through in the criminal justice system. The study is based on in-depth interviews with 20 sexual assault survivors who published their testimonies on Facebook. The interviews were conducted between 2016 and 2018 before and after the #MeToo campaign. The findings reveal a stark contrast between the negative experience of sexual assault victims with the criminal justice system and their positive experiences of online processing of sexual trauma. Our interviewees have experienced pain, frustration, disappointment and rage at the criminal justice system. In contrast, they claim that their participation on Facebook discourses has alleviated their suffering, granted them new meaning and hope for life after the trauma. Based on the thematic analysis of the interviews with the survivors, we have conceptualized a five-dimensional model of online processing of sexual trauma, which is not probable (or perhaps even possible) in the legal process. This model is comprised of relief from shame and self-guilt, receiving empathy and support, regaining control, information sharing, and empowerment through mentorship.