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Online Sexual Harassment Amongst Women Students at Santa Clara University

By

Anjali Rangaswami and Elvena Gevargiz

**ABSTRACT.** Online sexual harassment has continued to be a pervasive force in universities. Scholarship suggests that female-identifying students experience particularly high rates of sexual harassment, but little research explores how it manifests in online spaces. Thus, we investigate whether women students at Santa Clara University (SCU) experience online sexual harassment, and what forms of harassment they experience. First, a survey of 50 women undergraduate students was conducted to assess whether respondents had experienced online sexual harassment, and if so, on which platforms. Selecting from survey respondents who opted-in for further research, we conducted semi-structured ethnographic interviews with four students about their experiences with online sexual harassment. In addition, we performed participant observation of an SCU Violence Prevention Program “Post-Election Debrief” event and observed the documentary Netizens, which followed the lives of women who have experienced extreme cyber harassment. The transcription and coding of our ethnographic data revealed six key themes: Social Media, Forms of Sexual Harassment, Impact of Sexual Harassment, Toxic Masculine Culture, Normalization, and Suggestions for Improvements. Our findings indicate that women students at SCU experienced many forms of online sexual harassment, which varied depending on the social media platforms students were active on. This online harassment is normalized within a wider context of gendered power dynamics offline, embodied by a culture of toxic masculinity at Santa Clara University. Importantly, respondents and interviewees strongly emphasized their suggestions for improvement at SCU, which included increasing institutional accountability, implementing preventative and educational programs for students regarding online sexual harassment, and encouraging conversation about sexual violence within the SCU community.

**INTRODUCTION**

The present COVID-19 pandemic has altered our lives significantly, necessitating that individuals must spend an increasing amount of their time online. A study conducted in April 2020 found that roughly half of U.S. adults (53%) say the internet has been essential for them personally during the pandemic (Vogels et al. 2020). Whether we are attending Zoom meetings and virtual classes, or browsing through social media and e-commerce websites, assessing the safety of virtual spaces is more important than ever— particularly for marginalized groups, like young women, who are most often subjected to violence. While some may assume that the transition to online work
protects women from workplace sexual harassment, this is far from reality; in fact, sexual harassment has become even more rampant online recently (Norris and Torrisi 2020).

Although research has indicated the omnipresence of sexual harassment on the internet, few studies deeply examine the experiences of college-aged women online. Research has established that 43.3% of college students experience online sexual harassment (Lindsay and Krysik 2012). This specific type of harassment varies from stalking, identity theft, revenge pornography, exposure of personal and private information, threats of violence, etc. Studies have also investigated the repercussions and aftermath of harassment which survivors endure after an incident occurs. Their findings revealed that online sexual harassment can lead to emotional and health problems for adolescence and college-aged individuals, and more commonly victims who are women (Fridh, Lindstrom, and Rosvall 2015; Hill and Kearly 2011; Mitchell et al. 2014; Mitchell, Ybarra, and Finkelhor 2007; Van Royen, Poels, and Vandebosch 2016; Ybarra 2004; Ybarra, Espelage, and Mitchell 2007). A few emotional and health impacts survivors may face include a loss of social and familial ties, loss of their careers, judgment or violence from strangers, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression and anxiety.

As we took into consideration the advancements of technology, previous literature on online sexual harassment and the current worldwide pandemic, we were highly motivated to conduct a qualitative and ethnographic study, focusing our research on women college students, specifically those at Santa Clara University. We proposed the question of, “Do women students at SCU experience online sexual harassment? If so, where and what form of harassment?” As the forms of harassment, specifically online, can vary, we defined online incidents of sexual harassment as unwelcome and inappropriate sexual messages, comments, posts or images targeted at the subject. Our findings revealed that women students at SCU experienced many forms of online sexual harassment, which varied depending on the social media platforms students were active on. This online harassment is normalized within a wider context of gendered power dynamics offline, embodied by a culture of toxic masculinity at Santa Clara University.

METHODS

Over a period of two and a half months, we collected sufficient ethnographic data to better understand our research question. In this section, we will discuss the methods used, by analyzing and discussing themes that emerged from our survey, interviews, fieldnotes, memos, as well as highlighting the significance of our most important focused codes by demonstrating the connection between online harassment and offline culture, normalization, gendered power, and institutional accountability. Understanding the online-offline connection is crucial in assessing incidents of sexual harassment, as there is a larger underlying connection between the culture represented and essentially normalized, within the greater presence of society that has transitioned into the realm of the online world.
Survey

In sociology, the word survey refers to the study of a population through observation of its members (Jansen 2010). Collecting survey data is very beneficial to research, especially when it is used to compare and contrast with the data findings from conducted interviews. To begin our research findings, we created a short preliminary survey consisting of 10 multiple choice and open-ended questions, asking participants of their experiences either as witnesses and/or survivors of online sexual harassment, their awareness of resources provided by SCU, the type of social media platform the incident occurred on, how many times they have been victimized by online perpetrators, as well as how their experiences were after the incident. As this topic has the potential to be triggering for respondents, we chose to make each question optional, and thus some questions were skipped by participants.

The survey was completed by 50 women students at SCU, consisting of 1 first-year, 5 sophomores, 9 juniors, and 27 seniors, as well as 8 alumni. Once the survey was completed by the 50 respondents, we were intrigued by several of the findings. Fifty-eight percent of respondents said that they had witnessed some form of sexual harassment occur online, while 53% said that they themselves were survivors of online sexual harassment. We see here that a majority of women have either observed another person be targeted by online perpetrators or have personally experienced harassment firsthand. When asked about the number of times respondents were targeted online, 23% said that they had been sexually harassed online between 5 and 10 times, while 33% had been targeted between 2 and 5 times. With this data, it is clear that the consistency of online sexual harassment is very rampant and unfortunately, very common amongst women students.

Although a majority of our findings from our survey were surprising, there were a few that were unsurprising. When asked about their experiences online, our results showed that 63% of respondents felt less safe being present online after their incident occurred. As we will discuss later on within our ethnography section, the film *Netizens* portrays the ways in which social media and the internet in general provides perpetrators with a sense of power over a survivor and how they feel, especially when it comes to their safety or self-esteem. Whether it be with inappropriate comments, sending graphic photos or threats to their safety, perpetrators affect the mental health and social life of the women they choose to attack. With regards to the topic of sexual harassment on SCU’s campus, we wanted to ask respondents if they felt this was something that occurred within their community. We found that 90% of respondents reported that they believed sexual harassment does in fact occur at SCU. Thus, it appears that sexual harassment has become very normalized within the campus and its community. As we continue on with our data analysis further on in our study, we will delve deeper into how sexual harassment, specifically online, is normalized and essentially “brushed off” within the community at SCU as well as within our larger society.
Interviews

In qualitative research, it is important to utilize interviews to better understand the population and specific topic a researcher is studying. Interviews are great tools to provide further insight or evidence to a research question as well as possibly uncover new emerging themes which a researcher may not have previously taken into account. When we actually interview someone in the situation, we inevitably discover that we did not understand fully, and perhaps not at all (Weiss 1995). In addition, we felt the need to be very mindful of our word choice and how we went about framing and presenting our interview questions to participants. We chose to refrain from presenting any leading questions and also kept in mind that there would be some participants who would encounter difficulties expressing themselves and their experiences with us during the interviews. As we are both considered “insiders” within the targeted population, we wanted to use this to our advantage to gain the trust of our interviewees. As stated in Lofland, “the participant researcher who is already a member or insider... has the advantage of already knowing the ‘cast of characters’ or at least a segment of the cast” (Lofland et. al 2006: 41). This thus gives us an opportunity to present our selective competence as it “may be beneficial to reveal a degree of insider knowledge, skill or understanding... in order to make informants feel comfortable and more connected with [us]” rather than researchers invading their personal experiences for personal gain (Lofland et al. 2006: 70).

When looking at the relevance of subjectivity and what role it plays within qualitative research, it is important that as a researcher, you are aware of your subjectivity not only prior to conducting or beginning your research process, but are also paying attention to it actively throughout the entire process. The relevance of this is to “enable researchers to be aware of how their subjectivity may be shaping their inquiry and its outcomes” (Peshkin 1988: 17). The importance of reflecting one's own feelings and reactions allows for both sides of the research to be analyzed, preventing any neglect of the opposite spectrum of research at hand. As we are looking at online sexual harassment and the connection to where and in what form our participants have experienced it, it is important that we analyze our own premeditated judgements, prior to assuming our participants have also encountered the same experiences as us.

For our interviews, we utilized convenience sampling to focus our research population on women students at SCU and found a total of 4 participants who agreed to be interviewed. To protect our interviewees as well as ourselves during the COVID-19 pandemic, we conducted these interviews via Zoom, which lasted a span of approximately 45 minutes to an hour each. Subjects were identified and chosen through our preliminary survey that was discussed earlier. We reached out to respondents who left their contact information at the end of the survey, asking if they would be willing and comfortable to further discuss their experiences in a one-on-one interview. To ensure the safety of our participants, we made it clear that their confidentiality and anonymity would be protected if they were to agree to speak with us further.
While we purposively sampled for homogeneity on the gender of subjects (women), we also purposively sampled for a variation of SCU social involvement. Considering that as researchers, we each come from different social groups at SCU (athletics and greek life), we wanted to ensure that the representation of multiple perspectives was present throughout our collection of data. In addition, we each experienced an insider and outsider researcher perspective by interviewing one subject from each social group—specifically, one subject we knew and one we had never met before.

All 4 of our interviewees provided us with different perspectives and experiences, but we found that they all shared similar themes. Some overlapping themes or discussions that emerged within the interviews were the frustrations of how normalized online sexual harassment and sexual harassment has become normalized at SCU and within our society. One interviewee stated, “Our President right now [Donald Trump] is a known sexual predator, our possible future president [Joe Biden] is also a known sexual predator, and those are the two people that are tryna run the country, so if that's not normalization then, I don't know what is.”

We see this dynamic all too often. Men in positions of power seem to get away with being perpetrators of sexual harassment, instead of being held accountable. In addition, the issue of sexual harassment is not limited only to men in powerful positions, but is also perpetrated by men who are from more privileged backgrounds. A notorious example of this would be ex-Stanford swimmer Brock Turner who was convicted of sexual assault back in 2015 (Shapiro 2019). In addition, Aaron Persky, the judge for Turner's case, who was a former Stanford alumni, had received backlash for his lenient sentencing on Turner (Shapiro 2019). With these case details, we see that even within the realm of U.S. law, there is no accountability demanded from those who participate in such criminal behavior. Perpetrators are often let off the hook and able to walk away with only a slap on the wrist while survivors are left to pick up the broken pieces and live a completely new life, oftentimes unable to move on from the trauma. With this lack of accountability, we are essentially indirectly teaching survivors to believe they are inherently bound to experience sexual violence several times throughout their lives, whether it be in the workplace, schools, athletics teams, social groups, etc. It has essentially become a “norm” of what it means to be a woman. As a result of this standard, we see that there is a need to reevaluate our accountability as individuals, as social media platforms, as news outlets, as legal institutions, and beyond.

**Ethnography**

Our interviews were supplemented and contextualized by conducting two additional ethnographies. As one of us is part of the Violence Prevention Program (VPP) on campus, we thought this would be a perfect opportunity to attend a meeting, especially as VPP was mentioned by multiple interview subjects as a stakeholder in suggestions for improvements. We attended and observed the VPP event which was a “Post Election Debrief,” hosted over Zoom in mid-November, 2020. One of us attended as an observer, while the other attended both as an observer and a group discussion leader. During this meeting, we were able to observe women students from SCU discuss their
opinions on the recent presidential election. Participants shared their feelings from before, during, and after the election, as well as their fears and hopes for the upcoming presidency with regards to the topic of violence against women. Many women also discussed how the election impacted their lives academically, socially and emotionally. Their main struggles consisted of being unable to focus on their classes and complete assignments to the best of their ability, feeling frustrated in discussions with family members or friends who had different political perspectives than them, as well as being fearful for what the future held for the lives and rights of women. As this was a discussion based around violence against women, many participants were disappointed with the portrayal of women, particularly women in power. One participant used the example of how Kamala Harris was portrayed within the media as well as in society as a whole, after the vice presidential debate. Rather than Harris being critiqued for her capabilities of assisting Joe Biden in running the country, she was criticized for her character and appearance. When women are put in situations where they feel the need to defend themselves and strongly assert themselves in doing so, they are labeled as “emotional” or “incapable of handling criticism,” but in contrast, when a man asserts more dominant behavior to defend himself, he is seen as confident and passionate. Throughout this presidential election, we saw an intensely unequal dynamic regarding gender stereotypes about power and authority, which reflected our society’s present social constructions and biases.

For our second observation, we independently watched a film called Netizens (2018), a documentary following the stories of three women whose lives were altered dramatically due to online sexual harassment. The forms of harassment varied from non-consensual (“revenge”) pornography, cyber-stalking, threats of violence, exposure of private and personal information, online identity theft and impersonation, defamatory character attacks, and more. In addition to highlighting new forms of harassment prevalent online, Netizens delved deeper into the real-life repercussions which survivors are forced to endure.

As evidenced by our ethnographies, the connection between online sexual violence and the wider normalization in culture is not limited only to the SCU community. For example, the survivors of sexual harassment interviewed in Netizens were mostly middle-aged women from a variety of backgrounds and professions. Their cases demonstrated the inefficacy of social media and web services companies in addressing sexual harassment on their platforms— although, notably, these companies are rarely held accountable by the relevant government institutions. In addition, law enforcement and judiciary institutions frequently denied formal and informal assistance to survivors, often not taking reports of harassment seriously (even when provided evidence) or declaring that there were no avenues for police investigation or legal recourse. Thus, the lack of protection against sexual violence online seems to be a macro-level issue which has been reproduced in the microcosm of Santa Clara University.

Coding Process
After hours of participating in, observing and taking notes about ongoing events in a social setting, most fieldworkers return to their desks and their computers to begin to write up their observations into full fieldnotes (Emerson et al. 2011). As we collected all of our data, we decided to transcribe all four of our conducted interviews as well as type out all our collected notes from both ethnographies into more comprehensive and fully detailed field notes. Once this process was completed, we decided to delve deeper into the data by coding our findings. The process of coding enabled us to sort and organize our data into categories that were meaningful to our research question and theoretical framework (Lofland et al. 2006).

In qualitative research, coding is essentially the process in which you label and organize your findings that were collected, in order to identify different themes and the relationships between them (Medelyan 2020). We began the coding process by completing an initial run through of our interview transcripts and ethnographic field notes and identifying our open codes. Open coding is a more inductive approach, starting from scratch and creating codes based on the qualitative data itself (Medelyan 2020). This is done by breaking down the data set into smaller samples and readings through them, then assigning codes to them that best describe the sample from the data. Once this was done throughout all of the interview transcripts and field notes, we then did a second run through of our data, forming focused codes. Focused coding is the process in which our open codes are combined and placed into more specific categories that uncover an overarching theme within the data. This involves building up, and in some cases, further elaborating analytically interesting themes, both by connecting data that initially may not have appeared to go together and by further delineating subthemes and subtopics that distinguish differences and variations within the broader topic (Emerson et al. 2011). The 6 main focus codes we felt were most relevant and representative to our research were Social Media, Forms of Sexual Harassment, Impact of Sexual Harassment, Toxic Masculine Culture, Normalization and Suggestions for Improvements.

**Ethical Considerations/Concerns**

Throughout our study, we did not encounter significant ethical dilemmas; however, we did believe that as researchers, it was a priority to ensure the comfort, anonymity and confidentiality of our interviewees. Ensuring students had a safe, non-judgemental environment to speak on their experiences with us was paramount in creating confident participant-researcher relationships. Before beginning our interviews, we reminded all interviewees that every question was optional and that the interviews could be stopped or paused at any time. In addition, we phrased our questions as neutrally as possible, ensuring that they did not imply or suggest blame or shame on the part of the survivor. To ensure our interviewees’ safety and anonymity, we decided to give them pseudonyms of Maya (first interviewee), Tierra (second interviewee), Rose (third interviewee) and Zoe (fourth interviewee). As 2 of our participants were on athletics teams and the other 2 were a part of greek life organizations, we decided to keep the specifics of what teams and sororities these women were a part of private to protect their identities from being exposed. We also protected their identities to prevent any
re-traumatization, shame or other harmful social effects such as gossip or personal threats from their perpetrators, other students on campus, or faculty and staff members.

RESULTS

Social Media

Social Media was most frequently described by subjects as a place where harassment occurred, though sometimes also as a potential tool for support or positive change. The social media platforms which women SCU students reported experiencing sexual harassment on were GroupMe, Snapchat, Tinder, VSCO, and greek life websites. On our initial survey, respondents had also reported experiencing sexual harassment on Instagram and Zoom, although incidents on these platforms did not arise in our interviews. Many respondents described how social media platforms encouraged or enabled perpetrators to sexually harass women very easily, with one specifically noting the ease at which someone can, for example, leave an inappropriate comment on someone’s picture. Another subject explained, “In the ways of encouraging online harassment, it [social media] creates a barrier for those cowardly people that wouldn’t say these things to someone else’s face — they can say it online behind a screen.” The theme of perpetrators feeling more able or more comfortable sexually harassing from “behind a screen” also arose across interviews with SCU students. Another factor which contributed to emboldening harassers online was the anonymity granted by many social media platforms, with one subject noting, “I think not having to attach your name to something is incredibly powerful in a bad way.” Anonymity allows for people to sexually harass others without fear of being identified and facing repercussions.

When discussing social media movements, #MeToo was viewed as having limited success, causing negative male reactions to activism, or promoting white feminism which erased the intersectional experiences of Black women and women of color. In contrast, Black Lives Matter was discussed more favorably and perceived as a better model for future movements. Interestingly, one subject mentioned that “I don't think like (...) any social media app creators intentionally were like, ‘Oh, we want to make social justice a thing,’ but I think it [social media] just creates a space for people to be creative and come up with ways to broadcast things that like the news and other traditional forms of media wouldn’t cover.” While allowing for creativity and non-traditional media coverage may not have been the intent of social media creators, this has become a positive externality of their platforms. Multiple interviewees thought that posting educational information as a form of raising awareness on social media was a necessary part of addressing sexual harassment.

In addition, the value of survivors finding communities of support on social media arose in two interviews. One subject mentioned that “there are a lot of support groups out there for victims who have been affected, or their family members have been affected, and so it offers another layer of support that you can connect with people from around the world, around the country, that you may have not had contact with before.” She highlights the possibility of expanding your network of support using social media, which
could be especially valuable for survivors who do not have sources of support in their offline lives. Another subject specifically highlighted TikTok as a supportive space for survivors, describing the app as “creating this platform where you can inform others on things that you've gone through, and then you get support, and also like people just become informed overall.” It was particularly interesting how she noted that the process of sharing your story and receiving support on TikTok also resulted in others becoming more “informed overall,” which was another unexpected positive aspect of online support groups.

The *Netizens* documentary illustrated the more extreme effects of social media and online harassment on women’s lives. One subject, Alexis, described, “I’m expected to accept online harassment as the price of being a woman with an opinion.” In Alexis’ case, she had founded a feminist YouTube channel which discussed sexist tropes in media. After posting a video about the sexualization of female video game characters, she became the subject of violent, threatening, and seemingly unending harassment and sexual harassment by male trolls online. Alexis described how the internet can “bring people together in communities," but that as in her case, this can quickly become problematic when “people who hate women find thousands of other men who agree with them” and empower each other to attack women. As best described by Alexis, “It’s not like misogyny started when Twitter started.” She points to the idea that the link between the online and offline world is inherent and that misogyny has always been present in our society. Sexual harassment does not occur within a vacuum online, and is still an unfortunate reality within our offline world. In fact, the offline-online connection is a key theme which appeared in our research as we examined how SCU culture dictated the sexual harassment which women SCU students experienced online.

### Forms of Harassment

The specific forms of harassment experienced online varied across our interview subjects depending on the social media platforms that their perpetrators or themselves were active on. One subject, who we will call Maya, discovered that a member of the Men’s athletic team had created a poll in his team’s GroupMe on whether he should take Maya’s virginity. Another subject, who we will call Tierra, was subjected to unwanted advances from a fraternity member over Snapchat and text. Additionally, when Tierra was attending a fraternity formal dinner, fraternity members displayed an inappropriate Snapchat screenshot of her on a slideshow presentation. Our third subject, who we will call Rosa, was persistently sent unwanted and uncomfortable messages by a perpetrator on Tinder. Our final subject, who we will call Zoe, had a selfie screenshotsed by fraternity pledges and sent to her boyfriend, with the perpetrators (falsely) claiming that Zoe had been sending the image around to men. Additionally, in a separate incident, a perpetrator posted an anonymous comment about Zoe on a greek life website (falsely) alleging that she had been flirting with fraternity members while in a relationship.

In the *Netizens* film, the forms of harassment differed from those experienced by our SCU student interviewees. Forms displayed in *Netizens* include the posting of revenge
porn, creation of defamatory websites, manipulation of search engine results, posting of fake sex ads on Craigslist, threatening violence or sexual assault, sending of unwanted explicit images, and the exposure of private and sensitive information (“doxxing”). One subject received constant death and rape threats from men after posting videos about how video games sexualize female characters. She showcased countless folders of screenshots of abusive and disturbing Tweets which she regularly recorded to forward to the FBI. The violence and explicitness of the Tweets was disturbing; some contained graphic threats of rape, murder, and even “disemboweling,” while others included images of male trolls’ bodily fluids.

Impact of Harassment

The impact of online sexual harassment on our interview subjects encompassed a wide range of psychological and social effects. Immediately following the incidents of harassment, many subjects felt embarrassment, disbelief, annoyance, fear, disappointment, and/or anger. One subject, Tierra, described how it felt to see an inappropriate Snapchat screenshot of herself projected on a slideshow at a fraternity event: “Honestly, it's kind of more like (..) seeing your face on a billboard or something like that. I'm watching the screen in disgust, and then later in the slideshow, I freaked out. It's me. On a massive projector. That an entire fraternity and their dates are watching.” The unique setting of this incident, particularly the large projector and audience, made Tierra feel hyper-visible. An additional subject, Zoe, who was sexually harassed by fraternity members using screenshots of her posts and a greek life website, felt “very unsafe” following these incidents. Zoe explained, “[I felt] like I was always being watched by people I didn't know or who were keeping tabs on me. Like I was being judged wherever I went and it made me feel like I did not belong here, that it was not my place to be, that I was intruding on other people's lives by being at this school and that I was an outsider who people felt the need to target.” Zoe’s feelings of hypervisibility, unbelonging, and scrutinization on and around campus were exacerbated by the fact that her harassers had acted anonymously and still remained unknown to her. She added that, “If I had known who had done those things, maybe I would have said something to them,” although this unfortunately never became a possibility.

Another subject, Maya, who was sexually harassed by a male athlete in his team’s GroupMe, noted the casualness with which men objectify women in their group chats: “They just put your name somewhere and think it’s so easy and you won’t hear about it, but you do, and then end up being this like sexualized... object. And you feel stupid, you know?” While Maya had done nothing wrong, the incident left her feeling naive and dejected. In response, she made the decision to “shift away from people with that kind of culture and mindset” and change her social circle. When discussing her use of GroupMe following the incident, Maya mentioned, “I feel like I was always really suspicious ...with boys involved in general.” Moving forward, she muted large GroupMe’s, like the one for her dorm hall's floor.

Each survivor from Netizens grappled with a combination of psychological, social, and career impacts from online sexual harassment. The film made it abundantly clear that online harassment has devastating, life-altering impacts on survivors. Impacts of
harassment included being unable to find a job, loss of their career, loss of their social and familial ties, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and more. Essentially, many important facets of each survivor’s life were (or are still) completely disrupted. Although years have passed for some survivors since their experiences with online sexual harassment, these women still deal with the fears of uncertainty, retaliation, being recognized, being judged and so much more. One of the main overarching themes we found within all three of these stories was the lack of accountability and action taken by law enforcement and the U.S. criminal justice system. One woman from the film mentioned she was unable to obtain an order of protection because police did not see any harm in the threats that were being made towards her. Due to the lack of experience police officers and attorneys have with online sexual harassment cases, survivors are often forced to endure re-traumatization, victim-blaming as well as minimization or delegitimization of their incident. Another survivor in the film spoke on how her incident of harassment altered her appearance, especially when it came to her taste in clothing. Although she portrayed her character and personality through fashion, her lawyer told her that in order for her to be taken seriously by the courtroom, jury and judge, she had to dress more conservatively. We see through this specific example that survivors of sexual harassment are forced to compromise their character in order to be believed and considered.

**Toxic Masculine Culture**

Each of our respondents detailed the presence of a dominant toxic masculine culture at SCU that encouraged and reinforced heteronormativity, gendered power dynamics, and the objectification of women students. Although referred to by different names, such as “white male culture,” “the frat boy vibe,” “male groupthink mentality,” or the “masculine environment of the school,” toxic masculine behavior was described by all subjects as influencing SCU culture and their experiences as women students. Oftentimes, subjects associated their perpetrators of sexual harassment directly with toxic masculine culture. When describing one of her harassers, a subject explained, “He’s very seemingly normal. But I don’t know. It just seems like he’s somehow superior to women in some way. You know the vibe— the like, frat boy vibe— where they think... that they’re better than women or like they view us a little bit more as objects for their pleasure.” She notes how the misogynistic outlook of these men implies their sexual expectations of women, specifically the objectification of women for their pleasure. In addition, she added, “I’ve definitely seen like frat GroupMe’s, where a PC [pledge class] or whole frat talks to each other. They basically just disrespect women in the group chats by posting photos of them hooking up with girls and … just bragging about their encounters of women, without the women knowing.” Notably, getting consent from women to post intimate photos or brag about sexual encounters was not a part of the equation. Hooking up with women is framed as a competition, accomplishment, and point of masculine pride within these groups. Even if an individual man thinks or feels differently, this is not openly expressed at SCU where “no one wants to be the weirdo or the weak one” because “our school is just so entrenched in gender roles as a whole and men just try so hard to meet that masculinity standard.” Thus, men at SCU continue to perform hypermasculine behavior in order to maintain social acceptance in dominant groups.
Another indication of toxic masculine culture at SCU was the treatment of women in relationships with men. One subject, Zoe, described that being in a relationship with a man can mean "all of a sudden you're like an extension of him, you're his property, you're not your own person, [and] whatever you do represents him." In both of Zoe's experiences with online harassment at SCU, her relationship status—specifically the questioning of her fidelity to her boyfriend—played a role. When screenshotting Zoe's selfie post and sending it to her boyfriend, perpetrators were attempting to upset him by alleging that Zoe had "been sending these pictures around to other men." Zoe later found out that the incident was "some frat pledging thing trying to get into my boyfriend's head"—likely the same motivation for a subsequent greek life website comment about Zoe which also falsely alleged infidelity. Fraternity members seemed to think that sexually harassing Zoe was an opportunity to put down her boyfriend, as he seemed to have been affiliated with a 'rival' fraternity. Thus, finding out that the incident was a part of "frat pledging" was quite unsurprising, as pledging often involves sexualizing or objectifying women in order to assert one's masculinity and 'brotherly' commitment. Reflecting on the fraternity culture at SCU, Zoe added, "The male group think mentality is really powerful and really dangerous. You see it in so many different environments and I think especially at a school with the dynamics and demographics of Santa Clara, they aren't thinking as individuals, they're thinking as a group." This was an interesting way of summarizing how the toxic masculine culture on campus is a shared mindset, as opposed to an individual mentality or thought process. It follows that we observed similar patterns throughout the SCU social scene, as the culture of toxic masculinity is present among fraternities and male sports teams alike.

**Normalization**

The normalization of sexual harassment at SCU arose frequently in our interviews, with a culture of toxic masculinity being identified as one of many driving forces behind it. The process of normalizing sexual violence was clearly described by most interviewees, who shared how SCU students (sometimes including themselves) had initially laughed in response to their experiences of sexual harassment. Each subject had determined that "brushing it off" or "moving on" was their best or only option. Reflecting on her experience being sexually harassed with inappropriate screenshots at a fraternity formal, Tierra described, "I guess I didn't really think further than, 'That's just what the frat guys do,' instead of saying, 'What they do is wrong.' I didn't make the further connection." Tierra points to one of the central tenets of normalization at SCU—acceptance or trivialization of sexual violence because, essentially, 'boys will be boys' and this is simply just how they behave. The pressure to tolerate toxic masculine behavior is also heightened when considering how male-dominated the social scene at SCU is. As noted by two interview subjects, the vast majority of parties are hosted by men. One subject explained, "If you want to go on a Friday night, you're going to mostly likely going to go to a house that's owned by a frat or a sports team or like a group of men and so... there's just like this inherent power dynamic in terms of how you can go out and 'have fun' in the normal college sense." The centralization of social events at all-male houses, which is in part due to the fact that "sororities aren't able to host
parties, even though we have kick ass houses,” makes women especially dependent on male hosts. Interestingly, SCU’s heteronormative, male-dominated party culture resembles that of certain influential Instagram accounts. Dominant SCU culture is reportedly epitomized by Instagram accounts such as Total Frat Move, Barstool, and Old Row which glorify toxic masculinity and sexualize college women. As put by one subject, when these accounts post women, “It’s really just about like their attractiveness. But then it’s always about what the men are doing, not about what the women are doing. If it is what the women are doing, it’s because they’re doing something wrong. Like messing up shotgunning a beer. Whereas, like the dudes are doing something perfectly.” By only portraying women for their attractiveness or as a joke, while praising and celebrating men for their masculine partying abilities, Instagram accounts like Total Frat Move, Barstool and Old Row— which have a substantial following of SCU men— serve as normalizing agents of toxic masculine culture and its misogynistic implications on campus.

Our subjects also highlighted additional normalizing agents present in society, like movies and TV shows which reinforced traditional, heteronormative gender roles and depicted sexual harassment and male domination as romantic (e.g., Fifty Shades of Grey). The Violence Prevention Program (VPP) event ethnography also provided insight into the more macro-level forces of normalization. When debriefing the 2020 Presidential Election at this event, many women students discussed the misogyny and objectification directed at female politicians. Many women discussed the differential treatment of Hillary Clinton and Kamala Harris who were constantly critiqued for facial expressions (like smiling), “attitude” and appearance, while President Trump’s unprofessional debate conduct was excused, accepted or even celebrated. In addition, neither President-Elect Biden nor President Trump were questioned about the many allegations of sexual assault against them, which upset women SCU students who had sexual violence on the forefront of their minds during the election. At the highest level in our country, the objectification of women and policing of women’s “attitudes” is clearly still rampant, while men can behave in extremely unprofessional ways, and even commit sexual assault, yet can still be elected President. The normalization of these dynamics in the highest office of our country has a measurable effect on SCU culture— evident through the expressions of anger, sadness, anxiety, disappointment and fear expressed by many women SCU students at the VPP event.

Suggestions for Improvement

Each interviewee described different aspects of how sexual harassment online was an institutional issue at SCU which would require accountability from administration, educating students, prevention, awareness, bystander intervention, and serious change. More specifically, subjects wanted to see more comprehensive education from the administration on sexual harassment, beyond just the first-year training videos which are never repeated. The importance of encouraging discussions about sexual harassment and sexual violence also emerged several times, indicating a strong desire for the University to help shift the present culture of silence on campus. This also entailed supporting violence prevention, bystander intervention efforts, and investing in
resources like CAPS. In addition, subjects urgently wanted to see more accountability from the administration. They felt that school emails about difficult or controversial topics were inauthentic and insincere. Put well by one subject, "I think with that, they [SCU administration] just need to reevaluate their own accountability like financially, morally, ethically, and then be more transparent. I know that they're trying to with all the forums and campus climate dialogs and whatever but ultimately, forming another task force is just a way to direct people away from staring at the real systemic issue." The need for real, systemic change at SCU was emphasized throughout our interviews and also during our ethnographies, which suggested more macro-level changes.

The Netizens film provided additional insight into the governmental and legal conceptions of sexual harassment online, and how they contribute to the normalization of sexual violence online and offline. All four subjects provided many suggestions for improvement online. They each underscored the need for significant legal reform and for the creation of laws which protect safety and penalize sexual harassment online. Currently, many harassers are shielded by interpretations of the First Amendment right to free speech. Most of the Netizens subjects struggled (or failed entirely) to gain police orders of protection against their harassers and abusers, and one woman was even subjected to her harasser filing false police reports against her. They had to advocate for themselves for 3, 4 and 5 years before any significant state intervention, which subsequently helped to alleviate some of the harassment or provide protection. About revenge porn in her state, one subject said, "It is a crime, but there just isn’t a law yet." Every Netizen’s survivor also underscored the need for accountability from web services and social media companies, like Google, YouTube and Twitter, who essentially gaslight most people reporting sexual harassment and don’t attempt to make their platforms safer.

**DISCUSSION**

**Conclusions**

Our research demonstrates that women students at Santa Clara University experience a broad range of sexual harassment online, particularly on social media platforms, and that this harassment is largely normalized within SCU culture and beyond. Although incidents occurred on online platforms such as GroupMe, Snapchat, Tinder, VSCO, and greek life websites, there were tangible psychological and social offline impacts of the harassment. Notably, this online-offline connection remained present throughout our study, as we found that online sexual harassment was inherently linked to offline culture. Most incidents of sexual harassment were perpetrated by fellow male students, particularly in fraternities and on sports teams. These perpetrators were enabled by a dominant toxic masculine culture offline which encouraged the sexualization, objectification, trivialization and overall sexist treatment of women. The culture of toxic masculinity at SCU has reproduced rigid heteronormativity and gendered power imbalances, especially in the student social scene which is almost entirely male-run and male-dominated. This culture is further epitomized and celebrated by Instagram
accounts such as Total Frat Move, Barstool, and Old Row which celebrate toxic masculine college culture and objectify college women. Toxic masculine culture influences the behavior of male SCU students where “no one wants to be the weirdo or the weak one” because “our school is just so entrenched in gender roles as a whole and men just try so hard to meet that masculinity standard.” Ultimately, these factors aid in the process of normalizing sexual violence, which was clearly described by most interviewees. Subjects recounted how other SCU students—and sometimes themselves—had laughed about their experience of sexual harassment, and subjects ultimately decided that “brushing it off” or “moving on” was their best or only option. Subjects suggested a variety of institutional reforms to combat sexual harassment online at SCU, beginning with real accountability and transparency from administration on the subject, providing consistent information and trainings on sexual violence and bystander intervention, and supporting student discussions in order to raise awareness.

**Implications**

Our ethnographies revealed that the link between online sexual harassment and broader normalization in culture is not exclusive to Santa Clara University. In particular, the documentary *Netizens* depicted survivors of online sexual harassment who were primarily middle-aged women with a range of professions and backgrounds—a very different population from women SCU students, which nevertheless indicated an eerily similar pattern. While our SCU interviewees described how the culture of the University environment normalized sexual harassment, the *Netizens* subjects described how law enforcement and judiciary institutions acted similarly. Each survivor had experienced police departments and/or courts of law not listening to, not believing, and not following up with their allegations of sexual harassment and online abuse, even when provided concrete evidence. In addition, web services and social media companies were similarly unhelpful to *Netizens* survivors and largely refused to take accountability for creating safe platforms, although they are also not forcibly held accountable by government agencies. It seems that this larger systemic failure to prevent and address sexual harassment online may also influence the micro-level of Santa Clara University.

**Recommendations**

When assessing the overall campus culture at SCU, we find that issues considered to be controversial, like sexual harassment, are not openly discussed. This study is intended to raise more awareness about this issue within the SCU community, providing an opportunity to move forward in a positive direction. If revisiting our study in the future, we could expand our target population and select a more representative sample, so that the results are more generalizable to the larger population of internet users. We could also replicate our study and interview women who represent another specific population, like women who work in large corporations or in politics. Alternatively, we could undertake an intersectional approach and ethnographically study a different population of marginalized women, such as women migrant workers, queer women, or Black women who may experience online sexual harassment differently. We can also
expand our knowledge on the topic even further by interviewing men who are survivors of online sexual harassment. Since men generally hold more dominant roles within our society, it would be interesting to compare how male survivors' lives were affected to how women survivors' lives were affected by sexual harassment online in this particular study. Future prospects for research on online sexual harassment have the potential to disrupt and transform our present understanding of this issue.

AUTHORS’ CONTRIBUTIONS

A.R. and E.G. both conceived of the presented idea, developed the theory and performed the analysis.

A.R. and E.G. jointly developed the methodology (preliminary survey, interviews, ethnographies, coding process) and contributed to the preparation, creation and presentation of the visual/data presentation

A.R. and E.G. both contributed to the preparation, creation and editing of the final draft of the research study.

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