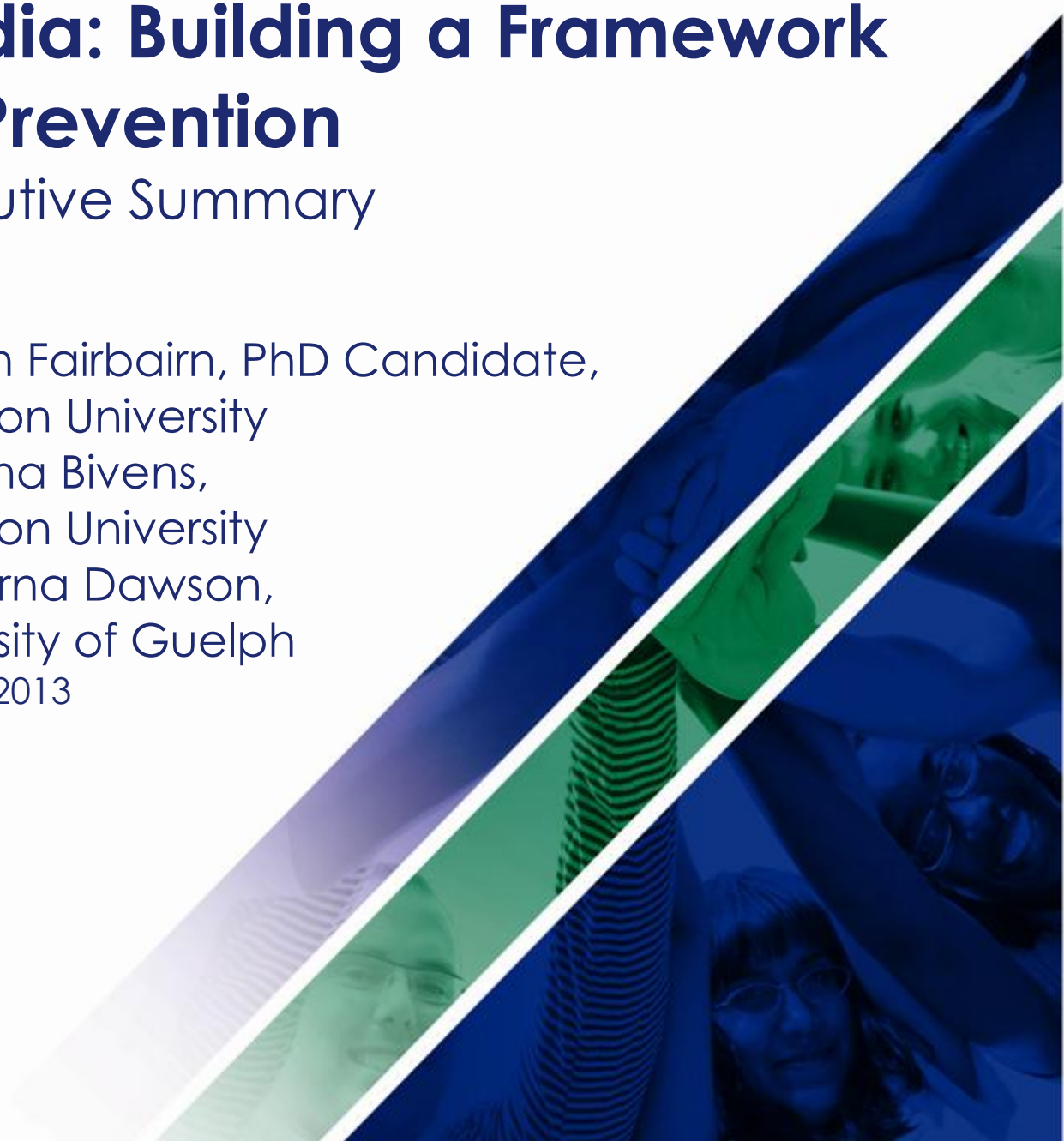# Sexual Violence and Social Media: Building a Framework for Prevention

Executive Summary

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August 2013

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Introduction

Sexual Violence and Social Media: Building a Framework for Prevention explores the relationship between sexual violence and social media with a focus on youth. This Ottawa-based project includes five parts:

1. A review of literature on sexual violence, social media, and youth;
2. A survey of Ontario stakeholders;
3. interviews with Ottawa-based participants;
4. A scan of social media sites; and
5. A summary of a community forum and breakout group discussions of preliminary research findings.

The research aims to investigate the relationship between sexual violence and social media among youth. It also offers recommendations to help stimulate discussions about prevention programming and evaluation in Ottawa.

Key Concepts and Literature Review

In this report, sexual violence is defined as "any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances, or acts to traffic, or otherwise directed, against a person's sexuality using coercion" (Sexual Violence Research Initiative, 2013). This violence can be perpetrated by any person regardless of their relationship to the survivors/victims, and in any setting (Sexual Violence Research Initiative, 2013). Although people of all ages and genders experience sexual violence, young women experience higher rates of sexual violence and young men are most often the perpetrators (Johnson & MacKay, 2011). Sexual violence involving social media goes beyond physical violence and includes emotional, psychological, and verbal abuse.

Social media refers to "the wide range of Internet-based and mobile services that allow users to participate in online exchanges, contribute user-created content, or join online communities" (Dewing, 2012, pg. 1). This report focuses mainly on social networking sites such as Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter. This decision was guided by research in this area and recent high-profile cases.

Youth are defined as individuals between 12 and 24. Many youth use social media regularly; however, some do not (Cohen & Shade, 2008). According to Ipsos Reid (2012), the majority of Canadian teenagers now own or have regular access to a computer (83%) and mobile phone (67%). They spend an average of three hours online each day. The majority visits sites such as YouTube (79%)

and online social networks (69%). They communicate most often by texting (54%) or through online social networks (48%) (Ipsos Reid, 2012).

The literature review examines overlapping research areas, such as cyberbullying and cyberharassment, intimate partner violence and online dating violence, cyberstalking, sexting, child exploitation, and sex trafficking. In this report, we use the terms 'victim' and 'survivor'. In some cases, the use of both terms is necessary to drive home the point that survivors of sexual violence may be further victimized by sexual bullying and harassment. Not all go on to survive this abuse.

Recent Canadian cases such as the suicides of 17-year-old Rehteah Parsons and 15-year-old Amanda Todd[1] remind us of the enormous consequences of sexual violence and the harm and re-victimization that occur when social media is used for abuse and harassment.

Research into sexual violence and social media tells us that:

- We know little about the sexual nature of online abuse and harassment.
- A majority of sexual violence associated with social media goes unreported.
- Abusive relationship patterns may be facilitated or maintained through social media.
- While we have only preliminary information about victimization, young women and girls appear to experience higher rates of sexual violence associated with social media.

Existing research also identifies the following priorities for prevention of sexual violence associated with social media:

- We need to understand what is unique about social media while recognizing that it does not cause sexual violence.
- We must support and build media literacy among children, teenagers and their parents.
- We need to encourage youth and parents to define and develop healthy relationships in social media contexts.

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[1] http://metronews.ca/news/london/630617/rehtaeh-parsons-amanda-todd-deaths-share-shocking-similarities/
http://amandatoddlegacy.org/
http://www.thestar.com/opinion/editorials/2013/04/28/rehtaeh_parsons_and_other_bullied_teens_deserve_durable_legacy_editorial.html

- We should draw from programs that educate and engage bystanders to prevent sexual violence.
- We need to develop youth-driven programming that recognizes the different ways in which young people use and experience social media.

Survey

From February to March 2013, the research team collected 187 survey responses from Ontario-based community organizations, educators, violence prevention advocates, and frontline workers.

Awareness

A majority of respondents are aware of sexual violence associated with social media in their community:

- 79% were aware of social media being used to control, harass, or stalk a current or former intimate partner.
- 76% were aware of posting or sharing intimate photos or text messages without consent.
- 65% were aware of posting or sharing sexually harassing or violent texts or images.
- 52% were aware of social media being used for the sexual exploitation of minors.
- 10% were not aware of violence, abuse, or harassment in their community related to social media.

Identification and measurement

While responses highlight that sexual violence related to social media is linked to broader issues of violence and harassment in society, several unique themes also emerged. These include: location tracking and online harassment, unauthorized dissemination of sexual images and texts, bullying or harassment of sexual assault survivors, and the use of deception and anonymity.

Although awareness of violence and abuse associated with social media appears generally high, organizations and individuals surveyed are not keeping track of this abuse specifically. Much of what is known is therefore known informally or anecdotally. We also know very little about the different ways in which sexual violence associated with social media is experienced, not only based on a person's gender and age, but also according to ethnicity, sexual orientation, mental health, disability, social class, immigration status, and/or homelessness.

On the topic of cyberbullying and sexual violence, the survey found that:

- It is important to recognize the sexually violent nature of much cyberbullying.
- Social media does not cause bullying and sexual violence, but extends its reach and impacts the form that it takes.
- It is important to recognize that there is a high level of harm associated with cyberbullying and sexual violence.
- It is important to talk about intimidation, consent, power, and control in the context of cyberbullying.

Prevention

In Ontario, many sexual violence prevention campaigns are engaging in social media. Some of these address sexual violence associated with social media (e.g. Draw The Line). Overall, there is limited evidence-based work on sexual violence. There does not appear to be any formally-evaluated prevention initiatives addressing sexual violence and social media. Approximately one-third (35%) of respondents say a lack of funding and resources are key challenges to offering programming in this area. Other needs and challenges include:

- Rapidly changing media environments and the need for technology training and support for staff and volunteers;
- Lack of data and/or evaluation;
- Need for collaboration and parental engagement; and,
- Challenges getting the message out to a wider audience.

Some respondents also identified problems with some of the current safety strategies and prevention messaging surrounding social media and sexual violence.

Measurement and evaluation in social media and sexual violence prevention programming is an important and emerging area.

Interviews

The research team conducted nine follow-up interviews with Ottawa stakeholders from March to May 2013. The interviews gave participants an opportunity to elaborate on their survey responses. The research team also gathered further input on how to approach the prevention of sexual violence for Ottawa youth.

The interviews pointed to the following key directions:

- We must foster awareness of sexual violence related to social media among youth and communities more broadly.
- We need to address the challenges related to online anonymity and cruelty.
- We must stimulate discussion about consent and explore the tensions between self-protection and victim-blaming.
- We must engage parents and bystanders.
- We need to prioritize training and resource development to explore sexual violence and social media.

Social Media Scan

When sexual violence prevention efforts incorporate public education within social media spaces, they can potentially reach a broader and more diverse audience. Most campaigns focus on raising awareness by spreading information, offering resources, or debunking myths with the goal of encouraging larger conversations about sexual violence and changing behaviours over time. The results of this social media scan (Appendices A and B) offer different types of prevention or awareness-raising efforts by a variety of organizations and individuals engaged in sexual violence work, with a focus on Ontario-based programs.

Community Forum on Sexual Violence, Social Media, and Youth

On Tuesday, May 28th, 2013 over 130 community members gathered at City Hall in Ottawa, Ontario for a community forum on sexual violence, social media, and youth. The purpose of this event was to present preliminary research findings to community stakeholders and to obtain feedback and further direction on developing a framework for prevention of sexual violence in the context of social media. Participants included parents, teachers and school board officials, youth mentors, anti-violence advocates, social workers, psychologists, nurses and health care practitioners, shelter workers, police and criminal justice officials, and researchers.

Participants identified and discussed numerous areas requiring further attention in working to prevent sexual violence related to social media:

- Unique challenges posed by social media (e.g. anonymity, rapidly emerging sites);
- Intersections of sexual violence related to social media with other factors (e.g. racism, substance use, mental health);
- Problems associated with the use of the term bullying/cyberbullying;

- Awareness of shaming (particularly 'slut shaming' of girls and young women);
- Talking about coercion and consent;
- The need for research and evaluation;
- The importance of youth-driven initiatives;
- Learning from and connecting with existing campaigns, organizations, and resources;
- The role of parents;
- The role of schools;
- Social norms around violence and abuse;
- Healthy relationships and sex education;
- Critical media skills and bystander intervention; and
- The role of social media as a prevention tool.

Research findings and the feedback from this community consultation have been integrated to present the following twelve recommendations for approaching prevention of sexual violence related to social media.

Recommendations
Defining and understanding sexual violence related to social media:

1. **Build a research and evaluation base surrounding sexual violence and social media.** Take care to define and differentiate sexual violence from concepts such as cyberbullying and sexting. Identify outcome measures related to sexual violence and social media and develop program evaluation strategies.

2. **Explore how social media and sexual violence intersect with other issues.** (e.g. mental health, racism, alcohol use).

3. **Identify unique challenges in preventing sexual violence related to social media.** Avoid becoming wrapped up in specific technological features or details. Think about social media as a tool that facilitates or is associated with sexual violence rather than a direct cause.

4. **Avoid victim-blaming and shaming** surrounding youth and sexuality/sexual exploration. Consider online safety advice a tip for protection, not a road to prevention.

Preventing sexual violence involving social media:

5. **Focus on ground-up approaches that engage youth in all aspects of prevention programming.** In doing so, recognize that youth are not a homogenous group and that their experiences with both sexual violence and social media are affected by many factors, including but not limited to gender identity, experiences of racism and colonization, sexual orientation, ability, family situation, and peer groups.

6. **Promote healthy relationships and sex education.** Encourage youth and parents to define and develop healthy relationships generally as well as in social media contexts. Emphasize conversations about consent, coercion, intimidation, boundaries, and respect.

7. **Learn from and connect with existing campaigns, organizations, and resources, including bystander intervention programs.** Foster knowledge-sharing and collaboration among those working to prevent technology-related harassment and abuse and sexual violence prevention.

8. **Challenge social norms promoting violence and abuse.** Focus beyond the individual and challenge social norms promoting violence and abuse. Why do homophobic bullying, victim-blaming, and sexual shaming occur both in and outside of social media? How can we work to end these practices?

9. **Engage parents.** Encourage parents, guardians, and mentors to have conversations with youth about issues related to sexual violence and social media and provide them with accessible, multilingual, and community-based information, supports, and resources. Remember that not all youth have parents and that, like youth, parents are not a homogenous group.

10. **Partner with schools.** Identify ways to integrate sexual violence prevention into curriculum activities and to engage youth leaders and community role models, while remembering that not all youth can be reached through school systems.

11. **Pursue critical media skills and bystander intervention.** Support and build youth and parental digital media literacy and encourage critical media consumption. Engage youth as teachers of social media as part of developing critical media skills. Provide opportunities and resources to educators and front-line workers for social media training and programming.

12. **Look to social media as a prevention tool.** Move beyond repurposing of offline strategies online to provide interactive, multi-site programming when possible, drawing on and employing youth perspective and expertise.

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