Article

A Cognitive Map of Sexual Violence Victims' Decision-Making: Understanding the Preference for Social Media over Formal Legal Avenues—Insights from Media Consultants

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Abstract: This study delves into the complex decision-making processes of sexual violence survivors regarding public disclosure of their experiences. By constructing a cognitive map from interviews with ten media consultants, this research highlights that survivors often prefer seeking justice through social media rather than legal channels. This study was conducted in Israel, and it underscores the importance survivors place on the disclosure process itself, valuing voice and respect over the outcome. This research, part of a larger project that includes interviews with victims, focuses on the choice between social media and institutional channels, analyzing cognitive processes through the lens of media consultants. While the constructed cognitive map provides a clear framework for understanding the decisions made by survivors of sexual violence, it simplifies complex emotional and psychological factors. Future research may enhance this map by incorporating a deeper analysis of survivors' internal conflicts and the interplay between emotional coping mechanisms and external pressures to disclose their experiences. From background conversations with survivors, it was understood that two main factors influence their decision: the process versus the outcome and whether to turn to social media or institutional channels. This nuanced approach provides valuable insights into the specific choices made by survivors when determining where to disclose their assaults. By designing this cognitive map, this study helps understand the needs and priorities of the survivors, such as the importance of voice, respect, and the nature of the disclosure process, and aims to aid future research and decision makers in better understanding and supporting the decision-making processes of sexual violence survivor.

Keywords: gender; sexual violence; new media; communication; procedural justice; cognitive map

1. Introduction

This study delves into the complex decision-making processes of sexual violence survivors regarding public disclosure of their experiences. This research, part of a larger project that includes interviews with victims, focuses on the choice between media and institutional channels, analyzing cognitive processes through the lens of media consultants.

From background conversations with survivors, it was understood that two main factors influence their decision: the process versus the outcome and whether to turn to social media or institutional channels. Interviews were conducted with a diverse range of media consultants, including both male and female consultants from various socio-economic backgrounds, different sectors, and across different regions of the country. The consultants and survivors also varied in their degrees of religious adherence and media literacy and represented a wide range of ethnic and religious backgrounds. It is important to note that this study was conducted in Israel, and the participants reflected the geographical and cultural diversity of the country, enhancing the breadth of perspectives examined.

This comprehensive and diverse sampling ensured that the constructed cognitive map accurately reflected the wide range of considerations influencing survivors' decisions.

Despite this diversity, there was no observed difference in the cognitive considerations reflected in the map.

The increasing recognition of the epidemic of sexual violence, particularly against women, parallels the advancement of women's status in society. Discussions on this topic are prevalent in both media circles and academic research. In October 2017, actress Alyssa Milano catalyzed a significant movement by encouraging victims of sexual violence to share their experiences online using the hashtag "#MeToo", initiated in 2006 as a social movement against sexual violence, particularly against Black women, which gained widespread attention in 2017 after the hashtag #MeToo went viral (Mendes et al. 2018). Milano's post, revitalizing the #MeToo hashtag, sparked a global phenomenon that garnered widespread attention, prompting legislative and political actions (Castle et al. 2020; Evans 2018). The #MeToo movement precipitated a shift in public opinion, emphasizing the accountability of perpetrators and reinforcing the acknowledgment of sexual assault as a pervasive problem, necessitating coordinated efforts for prevention and mitigation (Airey 2018).

In the wake of the #MeToo movement and other initiatives spotlighting the prevalence of sexual harassment and assault, an increasing number of victims are turning to institutionalized and online mass media as a means of coping (Lowenstein-Barkai 2020), in addition to alternative strategies such as pursuing justice through the legal system or opting not to report at all. While various studies have delved into the coping mechanisms adopted by victims of sexual crimes from their standpoint, there exists a discernible gap in the literature concerning the involvement of counselors in decision-making processes and the choice of coping strategies.

Hence, this study explores the phenomenon through the lens of media consultants who provide support to victims of sexual offenses opting to utilize media platforms, especially social networks, as a coping mechanism. By examining this perspective, this study aims to comprehend the factors driving victims to embrace a media-centric approach. It evaluates the efficacy of social networks as platforms for seeking justice and assesses whether they effectively deliver the justice sought by victims.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO 2002), sexual violence encompasses any form of sexual activity or attempted sexual activity, whether physical or verbal, perpetrated through violence or coercion without explicit consent or against the will of the victim. It also includes instances where consent is obtained through threats, the use of force, or exploitation of vulnerabilities, such as those involving children, individuals with disabilities, or other vulnerable groups. Additionally, denying individuals the right to use birth control, preventing access to sexually transmitted disease prevention, and forcing abortions constitute further forms of sexual violence (Borumandnia et al. 2020).

'Harassment' fundamentally denotes a lack of mutual consent between the parties (Idås et al. 2020). Specifically, sexual harassment, falling under the comprehensive umbrella of sexual violence, predominantly manifests in verbal forms and encompasses various unwelcome behaviors such as sexual innuendos, threats, and sexually charged jokes. Sexual harassment can be understood as unwelcome sexual attention perceived as offensive, exceeding the recipient's coping mechanisms, or threatening their well-being (Fitzgerald et al. 1997).

Israeli law covers a broad spectrum of harassment cases, including instances such as extortion through threats involving sexual acts, as well as degrading treatment targeted at individuals based on their gender or sexual orientation. The legal framework also addresses sexual harassment cases in digital spaces, as outlined in the Sexual Harassment Prevention Law 1998.

Data from the Association of Sex Victim Assistance Centers in Israel (Association of Sex Victim Assistance Centers in Israel 2018) further reveal that out of approximately 51,000 applications to aid centers for victims of sexual violence, about 89% involved women. Among adult women aged 18 and above, this rate increases to approximately 93%.

According to estimates by the Ministry of Public Security (2014), one in three women will be sexually assaulted in her lifetime, with 84,000 women affected each year. This

translates to approximately 230 sexual assaults occurring daily in Israel. The National Violence Index, published by the Ministry of Public Security in 2014, indicates that the rate of sexual violence offenses in Israel is 10% higher than the average rate in OECD member countries.

A study conducted by Dr. Abigail Mor in 2009 (Mor 2009) on a sample of Israeli women and girls aged 16 to 28 found that 33% of the respondents had experienced physical sexual assault in their lifetime. Additionally, one in five women are raped. According to Mor's research on Israeli participants, approximately 21% of girls and women in Israel have been raped.

A report by the World Health Organization indicates that one in three women is expected to experience sexual violence during her lifetime (WHO 2021). Consistent data from various sources suggest that approximately 35.6% of women worldwide have encountered sexual violence (Borumandnia et al. 2020). Various studies worldwide (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2011; WHO 2002) report that between 20% and 25% of women experience rape or attempted rape during their lifetime. These figures suggest that the prevalence of rape in Israel is comparable to the global average. These figures suggest that the prevalence of rape in Israel is comparable to the global average.

1.1. Victims' Coping Mechanism through Formal and Informal Channels of Justice

As part of their coping process, victims seek a sense of justice, considering it a crucial aspect of their journey towards recovery and resilience. Feminist criminologists outline the justice needs of victims, which encompass four key elements: (1) participation, where the formal justice system adapts the process to fit the specifics of the victim's case; (2) voice, allowing victims to articulate their experiences in their own words; (3) verification, wherein the victim's narrative finds validation from others; and (4) justice/recognition, acknowledging that the perpetrator's actions were wrongful and holding them accountable, whether through condemnation or admission of guilt (Clark 2015).

However, formal avenues of justice often struggle to fulfill victims' genuine sense of justice, frequently providing limited support. For example, issues frequently arise within police procedures, including the suppression of victims' voices. Constrained resources faced by many police investigators have led to biased perceptual classifications, where a 'good' victim is one perceived as capable of enduring the legal process. Investigators prioritize victims deemed likely to perform well in court, allocating their resources accordingly (Morabito et al. 2019). Such victim categorization renders the criminal justice system inaccessible to certain individuals, leaving their 'justice needs' unmet within this framework (Fileborn 2017).

The idea is that victims must be "worthy" to receive police services (Long 2021). According to the "ideal victim" theory, victims must meet specific criteria before being taken seriously. This can lead to skepticism, unconscious biases, and a lack of serious consideration. Police investigators view someone as a 'real' victim if they fit a specific mold: they are perceived as weak or vulnerable, they are engaged in a respectable activity when the crime occurs, they are in a place where they have every right to be, and a big, evil stranger attacks them (Christie 1986).

The "ideal victim" classification inadvertently excludes entire populations of victims. This is particularly troubling when we consider data from the Association of Rape Crisis Centers in Israel, which indicate that only about 8% of sexual assaults are committed by strangers (Association of Sex Victim Assistance Centers in Israel 2018).

The classification of the ideal victim is also influenced by racism, making Black women the antithesis of the ideal rape victim due to centuries of racist and sexist ideology aimed at protecting white supremacy. Consequently, the ideal rape victim is constructed as a white, heterosexual, gender-normative, and attractive (but not overly attractive) virgin. This construction sets the standard against which Black women who have survived rape are measured (Wooten 2017).

Law enforcement's exclusion of victims is also evident in their acceptance of the myth that women often lie about being raped. Despite evidence showing that the percentage of false reports for rape is similar to that of other crimes (around 5%), this myth affects how rape cases are perceived, leading to doubt about the occurrence of the crime and the support women receive during the legal process. Feminist legal scholar Catherine McKinnon has observed that in the context of campus sexual assault cases over the years, it typically required the testimony of three or four women who had reported being violated by a specific man before they would even begin to be believed (Stabile et al. 2019). Despite the low percentage of false complaints, they influence public opinion regarding the credibility of the victims. False accusations harm not only the accused but also women who are true victims of assault, as they create public skepticism towards all allegations. This distrust makes it harder for genuine victims to come forward and seek justice.

Another notable challenge within the legal system stems from the disparity between victims' needs and desires and the demands imposed by the formal legal process (Herman 2005). Victims often find themselves compelled to narrate their experiences in line with the constraints of the criminal justice system (Clark 2015). The court's investigative procedures can further exacerbate distress due to rigid rules and bureaucratic protocols, leading some victims to abandon the pursuit of justice (Powell 2015). A significant contributing factor to this challenge is the approach of criminal law to cases of sexual abuse (Madden and Alt 2021). Many judges tend to focus on the harm to rather than the impact on the victims, subjecting them to renewed trauma throughout the legal process. Consequently, victims may find engaging with formal channels of justice challenging. A study exploring the concept of justice for victims of sexual violence revealed a notable gap between the public narrative, which suggests that justice is only achieved through the criminal procedure, and victims' perceptions of justice, which may not necessarily align with the criminal justice system's interpretation of justice (Brooks-Hay 2020).

Due to the lack of a judicial system to address victims' needs, many victims turn to informal methods in light of the challenges of seeking justice through formal channels (Fanslow and Robinson 2010). A study among victims of sexual violence revealed that over 75% confided in informal sources of support about their experiences, highlighting the value and enduring nature of non-formal support channels (Goodman et al. 2005). Informal consultation also offers victims a responsive environment (O'Neill 2018). Although informal support may not always perfectly align with victims' needs (Fanslow and Robinson 2010), it often yields benefits such as reduced levels of depression and anxiety, increased self-esteem, and a heightened sense of safety and well-being (Aubert and Flecha 2021).

Interviews with victims and survivors of sexual harassment underscore the pivotal role of support services within or outside aid centers in their journey. Essential aspects of experts' roles include consultation, advocacy, education, guidance, support, research, listening, and communication (Hester and Lilley 2018). These professionals offer emotional and practical support throughout victims' journeys, irrespective of their choice to engage with the criminal justice system.

Social media often becomes a platform for healing for victims of sexual violence (Dworkin et al. 2016; Fisher et al. 2003). Utilizing platforms like Twitter, victims seek personalized social support or aim to influence policy. Online communication provides a space for support and exposure, allowing individuals to articulate their voices while retaining control over their presentation (Fileborn 2014). The primary motivation for sharing stories online often stems from a lack of trust in formal support providers or a search for help from sources with more accessible avenues (Bogen et al. 2021). However, online exposure can evoke various reactions, both supportive and opposing, significantly impacting victims' ongoing help-seeking process and their ability to cope with harassment (Dworkin et al. 2016).

In this context, examining the support offered to victims by informal networks is crucial for ensuring appropriate assistance (Aubert and Flecha 2021), thus contributing to the healing process. The pursuit of justice by victims of sexual violence can be seen as an

evolving and continuous process devoid of a singular 'ideal' form of justice. Justice needs are individual and variable, but they are typically fulfilled when victims have a platform to voice their experiences and find someone who listens and believes them (Fileborn 2017). Online spaces are crucial in victims' coping and recovery (Fileborn 2017).

Innovative non-formal channels of justice are increasingly imperative, acknowledging that the formal justice system may be incapable or unwilling to meet specific justice needs (Clark 2015). Justice attained within online spaces is emerging as an innovative informal mechanism (Daly 2015).

1.2. Campaigns Protesting against Sexual Violence in Social Media

#MeToo emerged as a pioneering movement that facilitated the open and anonymous sharing of experiences of sexual violence on social media. The viral use of the #MeToo hashtag on Twitter in 2017, building on the original 2006 movement by Tarana Burke, facilitated positive emotional support responses towards victims of sexual violence who shared their experiences on social media (Alaggia and Wang 2020). Tweets bearing the #MeToo hashtag on Twitter elicited positive emotional support responses toward victims, encouraging more survivors to share their stories and find solidarity in the digital realm (Schneider and Carpenter 2020). Consequently, #MeToo evolved into a significant movement advocating for women's equality, liberation, and freedom from sexual violence, with a clear objective to instigate meaningful political change.

Hashtags on social media, such as #MeToo, #YesAllWomen, and #NotOkay, have effectively reframed the crisis of violence against women by increasing awareness of its widespread nature and bolstering the trend in online reports within the platform (Gallagher et al. 2019). They have also heightened the potential for understanding the complexity of gender inequality prevalent in Western society, resonating significantly within social media platforms.

For example, Kelly Oxford's #NotOkay hashtag on Twitter provided a platform for women to share posts addressing inequality and incidents of sexual violence they had encountered (Jenkins and Mazer 2018). Another illustration can be seen in hashtags like #BeenRapedNeverReported and #GrowingUpGirl, which brought online attention to sexism and sexual harassment on the streets. These posts documented daily experiences of harassment, highlighting resistance against rape culture by exposing silenced experiences and making them visible. Through the sharing of stories related to rape culture, many women connected to a broad online feminist community, fostering solidarity and engaging in feminist activism (Bogen et al. 2021; Keller et al. 2018).

Jenkins and Mazer (2018) asserted that rape and sexual assault are the crimes reported at the lowest rates among women. From their perspective, women's fear of the possible consequences of reporting the attacker is the reason for the low reporting rate, leading them often to stay silent. However, these rates have changed on social media platforms, which have become powerful tools for encouraging women to speak up and share their experiences.

Social media platforms have emerged as influential forces that empower and motivate women to share their stories and raise their voices. The widespread sharing on these platforms has demonstrated the strength of the belief, "I am not alone", fostering women to overcome the fear associated with their attackers. This sharing is a testament to the influential role of social movements that enable the freedom to speak the truth online collectively.

Social media has proven to be effective against rape culture, providing a platform for education and critical engagement regarding sexual violence against women (Bogen et al. 2021; Sills et al. 2016; Gundersen and Zaleski 2021) assert that through the sharing of their trauma stories, women play a role in altering perceptions of sexual violence. Their objective appears twofold: influencing the incidence of sexual violence cases and exposing reality to instigate cultural change. Victims of sexual violence who share their stories serve

as ambassadors for raising awareness, providing education, and amplifying the voices of victims trapped in the spiral of silence (Gundersen and Zaleski 2021).

The utilization of online platforms is evident in various forms. For instance, some victims interact with their attacker on social media sites like Facebook, offering incentives for them to openly admit to the incident in a post in exchange for the promise that no legal action will be taken, thereby opening up new possibilities for the delivery of justice. This unconventional quest for justice challenges social and legal norms and presents new opportunities for justice delivery. For individuals who do not trust the criminal justice processes or lack access, an "Internet trial" could provide a pathway to obtain justice (Sills et al. 2016). Given the legal system's failure to comprehend and acknowledge the suffering of sexual assault victims, many turn to informal justice mechanisms within social networks (Fileborn 2017). Online justice empowers victims to respond to injustice by exposing the assault and advocating for changes in the legal system to ensure more effective penalties (Marganski and Melander 2021).

An Israeli study highlights that social media, particularly Facebook, have evolved into vital media platforms that serve as hubs for social movements (Roth-Cohen 2022). Feminist Facebook groups, for instance, provide women with a voice and drive change through their posts, comments, and engagements. Moreover, Israeli victims of sexual violence have utilized social media as a platform to draw attention to the issue, often overshadowed in public discourse by more pressing concerns such as national security driven by gender-based discrimination (Gueta et al. 2020). Victims of sexual violence in Israel share their stories on social networks to restore social order and provide an alternative platform to amplify their voices in the public sphere. Despite the physical distance between victims and those responding on social networks, victims in Israel perceive these platforms as spaces for online justice and, at times, as a means of seeking retribution against offenders (Lowenstein-Barkai 2020).

Victims have discovered a tool in social media that enables them to address emotional needs, regain control, and emerge stronger while inspiring others. Through this process, they find motivation for recovery and transform traumatic events into opportunities for personal growth (Dancig-Rosenberg et al. 2023).

Many victims express frustration with the institutional justice system, perceiving it falls short in addressing even the most fundamental needs required of a criminal justice system. In contrast, they believe platforms like Facebook can fulfill most of their justice needs. Consequently, there are tangible lessons that the institutional justice system must integrate to modify its procedures and enhance accessibility for victims (Dancig-Rosenberg et al. 2023).

While exposure to social networks offers advantages, it also comes with inherent disadvantages, primarily the loss of control over exposure and audience. Sills and colleagues (Sills et al. 2016) argue that when a woman shares an experience of sexual abuse, she may face accusations from the offender's relatives. Consequently, despite the potential for seeking justice through social media, its efficacy may be fragile as victims encounter blame and shaming related to female sexuality and sexism (Gueta et al. 2020). Additionally, many lawyers representing attackers conduct online research on victims (Powell 2015), seeking online evidence against them to undermine their credibility in criminal and civil proceedings (Gjika and Marganski 2020). This misuse of online content can further exacerbate the challenges faced by victims.

The high-profile defamation case involving Amber Heard and Johnny Depp has sparked concerns about potential backlash against women who come forward with allegations of abuse. The trial has sparked internet responses that highlight social biases against women who come forward with stories of sexual assault. Although the Me Too campaign has altered public conversation, women who come forward still encounter hostility. The case highlights the ongoing fight within the Me Too campaign, demonstrating that women who voice their opinions frequently face hostility and a lack of support.

The trial could impact future legal proceedings, leading to more thorough scrutiny of women's testimonies and placing a greater burden of proof on them. These potential outcomes might undermine the progress achieved by the Me Too movement and influence societal attitudes toward women (Jabbar and Al-Aadili 2022).

A common negative aspect shared by both the court system and social media is their potential to impact emotional pain and shape post-injury trauma. Engaging with the court within the criminal procedure often elicits negative feelings. Similarly, social networks can sometimes induce a sense of loss of control and rejection (Dancig-Rosenberg and Peleg 2023) The negative emotions and frustration experienced by victims in various procedures underscore the significance of how the process is conducted.

Conforming to the Principles of Procedural Justice. The academic literature indicates that people tend to feel they receive justice when they perceive the process was fair. The fairness of the process is called procedural justice (Thibaut et al. 1973; Lind and Tyler 1988). The four principles of procedural justice are respect, neutrality, trust, and voice. Respect entails interpersonal treatment that avoids denigration or humiliation. Neutrality involves decision making based on rules, free from personal opinions and biases, with transparency and openness about the decision-making process. Trustworthiness emphasizes the need for authorities to be honest and transparent in their communications and actions. Voice entails listening and allowing victims to explain their situation and position before making any decisions (Lind and Tyler 1988; Tyler 1990). Law enforcement agencies receive cooperation from the public when they are perceived as fair (Tyler 1990, 2003). Crime victims attribute equal significance to both the processes and outcomes of legal procedures, with the administration of the procedure sometimes holding greater importance than the legal outcome itself. Procedural justice focuses on the fairness of the process rather than solely on the legal result of the case (Murphy and Barkworth 2014).

The principle of expressing one's voice holds significant importance for victims, facilitating healing and fostering hope to counter the rape culture (Gundersen and Zaleski 2021).

Studies investigating procedural justice reveal a direct correlation between citizens' trust in the police and their propensity to report crimes. Adherence to procedural justice principles has been identified as a catalyst for increasing trust in law enforcement and encouraging crime reporting (Murphy and Barkworth 2014). The extent of victims' cooperation with the police often depends on the degree of respect afforded to them throughout the procedural process (Greeson et al. 2016).

Studies highlighting the significance of procedural justice, particularly in cases of sexual violence, underscore its therapeutic importance for victims. Interestingly, this holds even when the outcome of the prosecutor's decision is not favorable to the victims (Wemmers 2008). Consequently, it is critical to emphasize procedural fairness's vital role in law enforcement authorities' investigations into sexual offenses (Hohl et al. 2022).

1.3. Exploring the Role of Media Consultants in Assisting Victims of Sexual Violence

In recent years, the involvement of media and public relations advisors in legal proceedings has witnessed significant growth. Lawyers and clients enlist these advisors to help manage media communications surrounding legal cases. A 2017 study on lawyer-media consultant collaboration found that social networks have heightened lawyers' reliance on media consultants as equal partners (Toledano et al. 2017). This signals a shift in legal proceedings towards new media, effectively transferring legal decisions to reporters and the public (Peleg and Bogush 2010). Indeed, social media has necessitated frequent communication counsel for clients, compelling attorneys to advise on appropriate social media behavior (Cooper 2014).

Defense attorneys engage media consultants to safeguard the reputations of suspects and defendants or, at the client's behest, to influence the outcomes of ensuing legal proceedings. Media outlets often focus on the individuals involved in legal proceedings, amplifying drama and sensationalism in their coverage to advance their narrative.

Victims of sex crimes are increasingly turning to media consultants, who assist them in identifying media platforms to voice their allegations against suspects and navigate the media strategies employed by the accused. The absence of regulation in this online sphere underscores its democratic nature (Dancig-Rosenberg et al. 2023).

Despite their significant role in the legal process, media consultants' perspectives have been overlooked in previous research, yet they are critical to understanding victims' decisions to seek justice.

1.4. Contribution of This Study

This article introduces innovation on two fronts: Firstly, it delves into in-depth interviews with prominent media consultants specializing in sex crimes—a demographic previously overlooked in this context. As such, their insights offer a fresh and unique perspective to the existing literature. Secondly, it presents an original cognitive model outlining the deliberations, cognitive processes, and decision making of survivors of sexual violence as they weigh whether to engage with the justice system or social media. This pioneering model stands as a substantial theoretical contribution, shedding light on the motivations and actions of victims in disclosing instances of abuse.

2. Method

This study adopted a qualitative research approach, employing thematic content analysis to delve into the perspectives of media consultants regarding the justice perceptions of victims of sexual violence. Specifically, it investigated the relative significance of procedural elements versus legal outcomes in the eyes of these consultants.

To achieve this objective, we conducted interviews with ten media consultants specializing in assisting victims of sexual violence. These professionals were chosen based on their extensive experience advising clients involved in such cases.

Given the limited number of media consultants in Israel specializing in sexual violence, we employed two sampling methods. Initially, we utilized a targeted sampling approach, selecting media consultants based on personal acquaintance. Subsequently, we employed a "snowball" sampling method, whereby the researcher initially reaches out to individuals within their immediate network (such as family and acquaintances), who then facilitate connections with additional subjects.

This study involved ten media consultants who are actively involved in handling cases of sexual violence as part of their routine work. This group consisted of seven men and three women, all of whom possess extensive experience in the field and have played significant roles in some of Israel's most notable and widely publicized sexual violence cases. Their contributions have frequently influenced the shaping of the public discourse on sexual violence.

The participants were selected to represent diverse perspectives within the field. They included private media consultants, spokespersons from prominent organizations dealing with sexual violence cases, representatives from aid centers for victims of sexual violence, and individuals associated with social organizations established on various social networks. This diverse selection ensured the inclusion of a broad spectrum of voices within the field, enriching this study's findings.

The interviews were semi-structured and designed to explore the perception system of victims from the perspective of media consultants. Specifically, the focus was on understanding the justice needs of victims as perceived by these consultants.

The interview questions delved into victims' decision-making process when choosing between social networks and institutional justice systems to address their cases. Media consultants were asked to elaborate on the factors influencing victims' decisions, the effectiveness of media and social networks compared to courtroom proceedings, and the potential of social networks to deliver justice. Additionally, they were queried about victims' perceptions of the four principles of procedural justice and the relative importance of procedural justice compared to legal or media outcomes.

Seven face-to-face interviews were conducted at the premises of communication consultants, while three additional interviews were held online via Zoom to accommodate the constraints imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Each interview lasted an average of forty minutes to an hour. Following each session, meticulous transcription was carried out. The application of the thematic content analysis method facilitated an in-depth examination of the interviews, enabling the identification and mapping of themes encapsulating the intricate system of perceptions and considerations of victims of sexual violence as perceived by media consultants.

3. Findings

The constructed cognitive map is a vital tool for understanding the various paths that victims of sexual violence might choose in their pursuit of justice. This map illustrates the decision-making process using cognitive junctions that represent the choice between media channels and institutional channels, and from there to further choices between process versus outcome and the four elements of procedural justice. The map enables the comprehension of why victims prefer the process occurring in the media, where they feel their voices are heard and they are treated respectfully, unlike in the legal system, where they often feel unheard or disrespected. The map also highlights the difficulties and limitations imposed by the legal system on victims and demonstrates why many choose the media route as an alternative to achieving justice. Additionally, the map reflects the increased appreciation for the supportive procedure provided by social media, which profoundly influences victims' decisions and involvement in their rights advocacy and psychological recovery.

Figure 1 shows the stages of the designed cognitive map:

1. **Victims contemplate where to report/disclose the attacks.**
2. **They weigh the importance of achieving a favorable outcome vs. having a supportive process.**
3. **They consider which procedural justice principles, like voice, respect, neutrality, and trustworthiness, are the most meaningful to them.**
4. **The findings reveal that victims prefer social media channels over institutions. They value the process offered by media, especially in terms of prioritizing the ability to voice their story and being treated respectfully.**
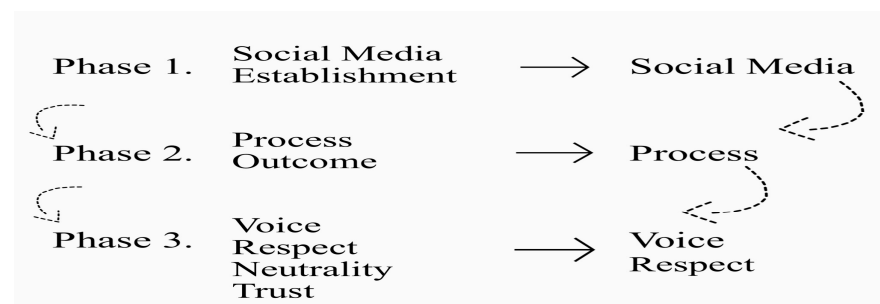

Figure 1. Stages of the designed cognitive map.

While this cognitive map effectively illustrates the decision-making junctions between social media and institutional channels, its current form may oversimplify the multi-layered considerations survivors face. Future iterations of this map could integrate additional factors, such as cultural and emotional variables, to enrich the understanding of survivor decision making.

Theme 1. Justice in Social Media

The "Justice in Social Media" theme encompasses the concept of justice within media channels, which operates alongside the traditional institutional justice system. Across all interviews, media consultants affirmed the existence of this concept when questioned

about media justice. They described media justice as distinct from legal justice, noting that institutional media and social networks serve as additional arenas for pursuing justice alongside or as alternatives to legal proceedings. Some consultants pointed out that despite the absence of formal inquiry by judicial or law enforcement systems, victims of sexual assault perceive social media justice as a form of justice in itself, leading some to forego further legal action.

According to interviewee #2, the owner of a PR office, the media process is viewed as a parallel avenue of justice alongside the legal process: "These are two parallel processes. In other words, the legal process often requires media support, and sometimes, that support or refinement suffices".

Interviewee #3, the spokesperson of an organization aiding victims of sexual violence within the ultra-Orthodox community, agreed that justice can be pursued through social networks: "The social network is inherently risky, but it also provides an avenue through which justice can be sought".

Interviewee #7, the spokesperson of an aid center for victims of sexual violence, highlights that individuals reaching out to the center are cognizant of the alternative provided by social media: "So, there is an alternative. The media provides a distinct alternative altogether. Moreover, this alternative has seen a notable rise since the #MeToo movement in the past four years".

Interviewee #5, the owner of a crisis management office, emphasizes the independent operation of the communication system: "At the very least, there are three distinct systems: communication, networks, and the judicial system...The choices available to crime victims are significantly more diverse than 15 years ago...and that is excellent".

3.1. Social Media Plays a Crucial Role as a Platform for Seeking Justice, Often Surpassing the Institutional Arena

This sub-theme examines the potential for victims of sexual violence to attain justice through social media, surpassing their ability to achieve justice through established channels, focusing on two distinct levels: procedural justice and outcome.

The majority of interviewees emphasized that social media can effectively meet the diverse justice needs of victims of sexual violence. Regarding the role of the media in procedural justice compared to the legal system, most interviewees reached a consensus that social media facilitate procedural justice to a greater extent than the legal system.

Some interviewees elaborated that in the contemporary era, social media serves as a surrogate for seeking justice in a court of law, particularly for individuals who prefer to avoid the bureaucracy and stringent procedures associated with institutional and enforcement systems. Interviewee #10, the manager of a strategy department in a prominent office, suggests, "For someone who may not want to navigate through the entire legal process, they may find contentment with this alternative. I perceive it as a distinct procedure with its rules".

3.2. The Media Outcome

A prevailing perspective among most media consultants was the belief that media outcomes can be achieved; in contrast to the legal system, obtaining results is frequently perceived as difficult or impossible.

For interviewee number 3, the impact of remedies achieved through social media justice is perceived to be more far-reaching than that of institutional remedies. As the interviewee reflects, "[...] I tried to lift the veil of silence. I could not do that just by reporting to the police. Complaints to the police are geared towards legal justice, but to break the bond of silence, I needed the media. Media justice becomes essential... During my childhood, I had some pedophilic neighbors in the area. However, their code of silence was upheld to spare their wives and children from harm... The feelings of the victims were disregarded. I aimed to destroy the quiet culture...".

Interviewee number 1, employed in an organization aiding victims of sexual violence in ultra-Orthodox society and media, contends that media justice in institutional media and social media can have a broader impact in specific cases than legal justice. To substantiate her assertion, she presented two cases that stirred the ultra-Orthodox community: the writer Haim Walder, and Yehuda Meshi Zahav, the chairman of the Zaka organization. Yehuda Meshi-Zahav was a prominent ultra-Orthodox public figure and social activist in Israel, known for founding ZAKA, an emergency response organization. He was involved in efforts to integrate ultra-Orthodox Jews into the Israeli military and workforce. In 2021, allegations of sexual assault and harassment against him emerged, leading to a major scandal. Meshi-Zahav attempted suicide and later died in a coma. Chaim Walder was a well-known ultra-Orthodox author, columnist, and child welfare advocate in Israel. He received the Prime Minister's Child Protector Award and was influential in the ultra-Orthodox community. In 2021, allegations of sexual abuse surfaced against him, leading to a police investigation. Walder died by suicide following the accusations. Both individuals attempted to take their own lives after accusations of sexual assault against them were publicized. As the interviewee articulates, "When people believe someone exposed in the media, take Walder, yes? Walder is a case that exploded in the media . . .. Justice has done more justice than the police and all the systems could give. . .".

Regarding the public outcomes, all interviewees believed various results could be achieved through the different media channels. Based on the insights gathered from interviews, media channels, including social media, can have various impacts on victims of sexual violence. For instance, interviewee number 4, a senior media consultant in Israel, contends that the justice rendered by the media takes on a poetic quality, manifesting in the widespread acknowledgment of the offense: "This is your poetic justice. It is not national justice because you do not have a court stamp. You have the right to say: here I exposed him; now the entire country knows he is a rapist; the entire country knows he harassed me; here the entire country knows he is a dark, disgusting, and repulsive man. . .".

According to interviewee number 9, the proprietor of a prominent public relations office, the publications can generate various outcomes rather than a singular result: "It can yield public exposure, it can prompt condemnation. . . it can lead to cancellation".

When queried about the feasibility of achieving results through publications, certain interviewees asserted that the outcomes offered by the publications were substantial and fit the resolutions of the victim. In the words of interviewee number 3, "The result is also much more impactful, but I also addressed the problem. The issue was not just that he harmed the child. The problem lay in the fact that the neighborhood's rabbi and elders were aware of him causing harm to dozens of children and kept it concealed, and I would not have been able to address that if I had approached the police".

Interviewee number 1 posits that the paramount outcome resides in shaping public opinion: "Sometimes an individual may be incarcerated, yet a significant number still believe in their innocence. In such cases, what have we truly accomplished? The most crucial result a victim seeks is widespread acknowledgment that harm has been inflicted".

The prevailing sentiment among most interviewees is that justice can be achieved through publication, which is distinct from legal outcomes. As articulated by interviewee number 2, who recounted a recent case involving a medical student sexually assaulted by a senior doctor, "She did not go to the police. . . She only sought people to know who this man was and what he did. That was her sole concern. She had no interest in financial compensation, legal proceedings, or anything else. By the way, there was a substantial article about it. . . An investigation was initiated against him without her filing a formal complaint, and he was suspended. So, it is a form of closure."

In this study, the interviewees emphasized the critical role of social networks in accessing justice. They highlighted that within the digital landscape, a sense of equality is fostered by the universal nature of platforms such as the Internet, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and others. As interviewee number 4 stated, "In the human fabric, everyone is

equal thanks to the Internet, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and all these sites because the moment you upload a post to the Internet, everyone relates".

This observation aligns with the broader theme of "Justice in Social Media", where the immediacy and accessibility of these platforms empower victims of sexual violence to voice their experiences and seek justice outside traditional legal frameworks. Interviewees noted the distinct advantages of social media, particularly in facilitating a supportive process that respects the victim's narrative. One poignant example was provided by interviewee number 7, who said, "especially on the social network, you do not even need a journalist's favor to highlight a headline or omit a very significant sentence of yours. You are the one telling your story, so there is a sense of healing as you feel control returning to your hands".

Furthermore, the efficiency of social networks in saving valuable time compared to traditional media and legal processes was emphasized. Interviewee number 3 highlighted, "The effectiveness of the social network in obtaining quick justice for victims was noted. Imagine if, five years ago, one of the victims who came to us had turned to the social network and written about Yehuda Meshi Zahav. . . then Yehuda Meshi Zahav would have been caught much earlier. . . we worked on it for five years".

These insights underscore the transformative role of social media in the landscape of justice for victims of sexual violence, providing a platform where their voices are heard and respected, thereby facilitating their healing.

3.3. Procedural Justice in Social Media

Half of the interviewees contend that procedural justice is absent within institutional frameworks. At the same time, the majority believe that the challenges faced by the institutional procedure in meeting the justice needs of victims stem from inherent deficiencies within the institutional process.

According to interviewee number 8, the spokesperson for a feminist organization advocating against gender injustices on the Facebook social network, the voices of victims are not adequately represented in the institutional process. "I believe there is no correlation between the establishment and justice. Primarily because the legal system is not fundamentally designed to dispense justice. [. . .] I think many women have realized that the process itself only reinforces a sense of silencing. Consequently, I believe that most women either refrain from filing a complaint altogether or avoid reaching out to the establishment due to the pervasive feeling that their voices will not truly be heard. . .".

Interviewee number 2 also contends that the voice of the victims is not adequately considered in the institutional process. "Anyone who has ever sat with someone from the prosecutor's office can hear how the voice of the victim is either silenced or threatened for various reasons".

The principle of voice is not the only principle of procedural justice absent in the institutional procedure, as highlighted by interviewee number 8: "Firstly, there is a lack of neutrality because. . . when we examine the police and police investigators, a majority of them are men who lack expertise in sexual crimes. They are ill-equipped to appropriately interrogate or question victims of sexual crimes, leading to a scenario where investigations are frequently flawed or compromise the process of filing complaints".

Theme 2. In terms of justice carried out in media channels, procedure is critically more significant than outcome

This theme explores the significance of procedural justice in media channels for victims of sexual violence, comprising both the process and the result. When asked about the relative importance of procedural justice versus the media result, the majority of media consultants emphasized that, for victims of sexual violence, the process carries greater weight than the outcome. Thus, they assert that procedural justice holds more significance than the media result. While media consultants acknowledge the potential for achieving results in the media justice process, unlike the challenges associated with obtaining results in the legal system, and despite some asserting that the media outcome surpasses what can

be attained in the institutional legal system, the prevailing belief is that victims seek the media for the procedural journey rather than solely for the media result.

Several interviewees articulated that the process itself is instrumental in yielding a result, underscoring the high importance of procedural justice for victims of sexual violence. For instance, interviewee number 2 remarked, "Yes, but it works simultaneously. If I have some kind of voice, receive respect, and know that the process is reliable, that is the result. The process itself is the definition of the result".

Moreover, certain interviewees emphasized their objective of guiding and facilitating justice processes within media channels. For them, justice in the legal system holds less importance, as the emphasis lies on the support provided to victims of sexual violence, a facet reflected in the media process in different media and social media channels. As expressed by interviewee number 2, "Only the process. The result is less interesting. By the way, also in fundraising. I mean, what interests us or them is the number of supporters, not the amount of support".

Several interviewees underscored that the process is integral to the healing of sexual violence victims. In other words, procedural justice in media channels serves as an avenue for victims, creating a supportive community for those who have already come forward and those who have not yet filed a complaint: "Primarily psychological. It is about psychology for a human being, and psychology for a complainant, psychology" (interviewee number 4); "A process in which the victim feels that she received a corrective journey…the process inspires more individuals to come forward and file complaints. It is a cyclical, magic circle" (interviewee number 10).

Theme 3. Voice and respect as leading principles in procedural justice

This theme delves into the significance of procedural justice principles, encompassing four key elements: voice, respect, trustworthiness, and neutrality. When interviewees were asked to prioritize these principles based on their importance to the victims, voice and respect emerged as the most crucial principles in the eyes of the media consultants. Consequently, it can be assumed that media channels sphere is highly significant, particularly for offering victims a platform to express their "voice" and garner "respect".

Among the four principles of procedural justice, "voice" and "respect" were consistently ranked first or second place and deemed paramount by most interviewees. According to their perspective, it is crucial for victims to have their voices heard and for the truth to be brought to light, emphasizing a respectful process throughout.

"First of all, it is voice, then respect and trustworthiness". (interviewee number 2)

"Maybe it is voice, respect, trustworthiness, and neutrality". (interviewee number 8)

The prevailing view among interviewees is that the principles of voice and respect are notable expressions of justice carried out by media channels. Here, victims can articulate their voices directly, without intermediaries, unlike in the institutional arena, where these principles are often not expressed.

"I think that in the media process, they have more room to express their authentic voice". (interviewee number 7)

"Whether it is an item in the Gedera local newspaper or a weekend magazine, it is less relevant. They do not do it to seek fame but share their story". (interviewee number 2)

3.4. Discussion and Conclusion: The Cognitive Map as a Tool for Understanding Victims' Decisions

For years, victims of sexual violence seeking justice turned to the institutional justice system, only to find it lacking due to its dependence on judicial discretion and law enforcement practices (Keller et al. 2018). The emergence of the #MeToo movement marked a significant shift from private protests to public demand for justice, catalyzing one of the most impactful global movements led by women against sexual harassment and assault

(Alaggia and Wang 2020). This study delves into the role of social media as a pathway to justice following the #MeToo movement.

As part of this study, we conducted interviews with ten crisis counseling media consultants deeply involved in some of Israel's most notable cases of sexual assault victims. This study aimed to elucidate their perspectives on media justice, especially in social versus institutional justice, the significance of procedural justice versus outcomes, and the effectiveness of social media in addressing victims' diverse justice needs.

The first theme explored in this study delves into the coexistence of media justice alongside institutional justice. The introduction lays the groundwork by highlighting the challenges victims of sexual violence often encounter within the court and police systems, including mental distress, retraumatization, institutional insensitivity, and bureaucratic hurdles that often lead to a sense of resignation (Powell 2015). Faced with dwindling confidence in the criminal justice system, victims increasingly seek justice online through social networks, providing an alternative avenue for recourse (Sills et al. 2016). According to media consultants, the research findings suggest that victims perceive social media justice as running parallel to institutional justice, functioning as an independent justice system. Interviewees underscore how victims weigh the options of pursuing media justice, especially in social media, institutional justice, or both, as part of their decision making and coping strategies. Some interviewees highlighted the potency of networks and social movements to achieve justice. In contrast, others emphasized the significance of social media for those who have lost confidence in the criminal justice system due to its rigid procedures or inherent failures. Moreover, certain interviewees stressed that, for victims of sexual violence, social media justice is perceived as equivalent to legal justice, even in cases where there is no formal procedure within the law enforcement and judicial system.

Whether functioning alongside the legal process or as an alternative, interviewees emphasized social media's importance as a distinct arena for achieving justice, detached from institutional processes. Subsequently, this study delved into whether victims of sexual assault can secure justice through social media at both the procedural and outcome levels, surpassing their ability to attain justice through the established legal system. As introduced earlier, the formal procedures of the legal process often fail to meet victims' justice needs and desires (Herman 2005). Victims frequently find their needs unmet within the legal system (Clark 2015). Media consultants asserted that social media justice more comprehensively fulfills victims' justice needs than the established legal system, addressing both the procedure and the outcome.

The second theme focused on the significance of procedural justice in social media. The existing literature suggests that crime victims sometimes attribute greater importance to procedural justice than the result. Moreover, the attitude and procedural justice offered by the establishment play a pivotal role in influencing a victim's decision-making process regarding reporting (Murphy and Barkworth 2014).

In our study, the majority of the interviewees perceived procedural justice in social media as being of greater importance for victims of sexual violence, serving as a primary motivator for victims to turn to social media. Additionally, interviewees highlighted the crucial role of procedural justice in fostering a healing and relief effect for the victims.

The third theme delved into the significance of the four procedural justice principles in the interviewees' perception. The existing literature indicates that procedural justice holds therapeutic meaning for victims, providing them with a sense of fairness in the process, even when the prosecutor's decision is not in their favor (Wemmers 2008). As the needs for justice vary among victims, they are often met when victims have a platform to make their voices heard (Fileborn 2017). Our research revealed that most media consultants believed procedural justice principles are not equally important for victims. The principles of voice and respect were consistently ranked first or second place and, most crucially, essentially serving as guiding principles that dictated their satisfaction with a procedure.

This study illustrates that, for victims, the media encompassing both traditional establishments and social networks can influence justice independently from the institutional

framework. This alternative system can effectively address victims' varied justice needs and expectations, occasionally exceeding the effectiveness of established institutional procedures.

Many victims of sexual violence prefer seeking justice through social media platforms rather than formal legal channels. They feel the legal system does not truly serve their justice needs, while social media and online spaces offer a more supportive process. Victims value the process in the media more than the outcome and especially consider the ability to have their voices heard and experiences respected throughout the process as the essential principles of the process. Social media is seen as an alternative avenue for achieving justice, even without going through formal legal proceedings. Social media offers victims who prioritize voice and respect an empathetic disclosure process; victims find healing and a sense of justice often lacking within institutional and legal channels. The findings reveal a preference for media-based justice pathways that prioritize victims' narratives and provide a supportive journey over the constraints and perceived shortcomings of the criminal justice system.

In our analysis of the cognitive map used in this study, we can see how it serves as a crucial tool for understanding the intricate decision-making processes of sexual violence victims. This map illustrates the choices between seeking justice through media or institutional channels and emphasizes the preference for procedural justice over outcomes within the media landscape.

In our analysis of the cognitive map used in this study, we can see how it serves as a crucial tool for understanding the intricate decision-making processes of sexual violence victims. This map illustrates the choices between seeking justice through media or institutional channels and emphasizes the preference for procedural justice over outcomes within the media landscape. Despite the diversity among interviewees regarding socio-economic background, religious adherence, media literacy, and ethnic and religious backgrounds, no significant differences were observed in the cognitive considerations reflected in the map. This consistent cognitive pattern underscores the map's reliability in capturing the essential decision-making factors for sexual violence survivors.

Furthermore, this paper is part of a larger research project that includes interviews with victims and preliminary research involving attorneys. This comprehensive study provides a nuanced understanding of the decision-making processes and offers insights into how future research and decision makers can better support the needs of sexual violence survivors.

3.5. Limitations of This Study and Suggestions for Further Research

Most existing studies in Israel regarding the coping strategies of sexual assault victims have primarily centered on the viewpoints of the victims themselves or their support networks. A notable gap exists in the literature concerning the factors that influence decision making and provide guidance to victims regarding whether to engage with the institutional or media spheres. Moreover, the role of the media, both broadly and specifically on social networks, remains understudied as an independent avenue for justice, standing apart from the institutional justice system. This study addresses this void by examining the social media realm as a platform for achieving justice for victims of sexual violence. This inquiry is critical as it sheds light on the innovative and alternative role of social media in delivering justice to victims of sexual violence in Israel.

However, this study has limitations concerning data collection and content analysis. The reliance on interviews as the primary data collection method introduces the possibility of reactivity, wherein the interviewer may inadvertently influence the interviewees' responses. Additionally, the extraction of themes and the subsequent content analysis may be subject to subjective bias based on the content selected by the researchers for reference during the analysis of responses. Therefore, future research endeavors may benefit from employing supplementary methodologies.

Another limitation of this study is the lack of consideration of race, particularly the perpetrator's race. While the historical role of race, such as white women accusing Black men of crimes they did not commit to gain social power in the US, is significant, our preliminary research did not raise the question of the race of the perpetrator. Although this historical bias is highly relevant in the US, it was not a focus of this study conducted in Israel, where racial dynamics differ. Consequently, we did not address the issue of race in the context of perpetrators. However, this is an important aspect that needs to be considered in future research, especially in countries where racial dynamics play a crucial role. Future studies should explore how different social and cultural contexts, including race, impact the perception and role of social media as a justice avenue for sexual violence survivors. We included references to the victims' race in the literature review, highlighting the need for further research in this area.

A limitation of this study is the constructed cognitive map's relative simplicity. Though it clarifies mapping decision points, it may fail to fully account for the complexity of survivors' psychological and emotional processes. Future research should aim to expand this map by incorporating diverse perspectives and variables such as individual trauma responses and societal pressures.

This pioneering study delves deeply into the perspectives of media consultants actively engaged in supporting and covering the personal stories of sexual violence victims, each with unique needs. The findings of this study lay the groundwork for future research endeavors, which could explore additional dimensions such as the institutional viewpoint (e.g., police, attorney's office, court). A follow-up study could also undertake a comparative analysis across different countries worldwide, considering cultural and social factors, to assess variations in social media perception as an alternative arena of justice to the institutional framework in diverse contexts.

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