Online Peer Support
For Survivors of Sexual Assault

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South Eastern Centre Against Sexual Assault

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Abstract

Aim: The primary aim of this research project is to develop a list of online peer support options for survivors of sexual assault. **Method:** A number of methods were used to collect information and data. Surveys and discussions with counsellor/advocates from South Eastern Centre Against Sexual Assault (SECASA) and the Victorian Centres Against Sexual Assault (CASA), online surveys administered through the SECASA website, scoping studies, Google Search Engine results, links found on websites and discussion forums and engagement with forum members and moderators. **Results:** There are a number of online discussion forums, chat rooms and online groups offering peer support that is available to survivors of sexual assault. **Discussion:** Peer support for survivors of sexual assault is highly utilised in the online world. The benefits of engaging online are numerous for survivors, secondary survivors and professionals.

Key Words: SECASA, survivor, sexual assault, online, peer support, forum, domestic, violence, discussion board, chat room, online group.

SECASA – South Eastern Centre Against Sexual Assault, Melbourne, VIC, Australia.

Table of Contents

1. SECASA

1.1 History & Practice

The Sexual Assault Centre was originally set up at the Queen Victoria Medical Centre, Lonsdale Street Melbourne, in 1977. This was the first Centre to provide services to victims/survivors of sexual assault in Melbourne.

Through a feminist lens, SECASA has built a solid foundation on which it practices, providing counselling to sexual assault survivors, running early prevention programs and influencing policy and law reform. Furthermore, SECASA has worked tirelessly alongside government departments and the community to create awareness and eliminate myths surrounding sexual assault. SECASA aims to provide a model of best practice and keep up with the evolving nature of the field. Therefore it regularly evaluates its programs and conducts research. This has seen the development of services for male survivors of sexual assault, family violence and children under the age of 18 exhibiting problematic sexual behaviour.

SECASA is continuously making advances in the field of sexual assault, being the first to employ a male counsellor/advocate, and an in-house Online Project Worker. Understanding that service delivery is changing in the face of the online world, SECASA has seized the opportunity and adapted their work practices accordingly.

SECASA provides services for the South Eastern region of Melbourne and operates from six locations; Moorabbin, Frankston, Rosebud, Cranbourne, Dandenong and St.Kilda. SECASA'S crisis service operates out of Monash Medical Centre Clayton, providing 24-hour access to crisis counselling and medical care. Additionally, SECASA also provides legal advice and advocates through its joint service with Springvale Monash Legal service.

1.2 Mission Statement

To reduce, and ultimately eliminate, sexual assault and family violence through individual and social change.

1.3 Philosophy

The Victorian CASA's are "committed to addressing all inequalities within society which results in the perpetration of sexual violence against women, children and men."

1.4 Feminist approach

The feminist approach argues that sexual assault is found in the complex interplay between existing patriarchal social structures, conventional attitudes and socialisation. Research has showed that sexual assault is an extension of the current legal, social, economic and political systems, which manifest and reinforce male dominance over women and children.

The emergence of the woman's movement in the 1960s and 1970s created a public space for survivors to speak out about their experience of sexual assault. Prior to this, in the mainstream, sexual assault was unmentionable and not identified as an issue.

The feminist approach is a sociological analysis that over the past 3 decades has focused on two important and previously largely ignored aspects of sexual assault. One is the unequal power relationship between men and women, and adults and children, and the other is the abusers responsibility for initiating and/or maintaining sexual assault.

The following research adopts a feminist framework, in empowering women to speak out about their experience through peer support, and promotes a women's right to feel safe. SECASA acknowledges that both men and women can be survivors of sexual assault, and that offenders can be male or female.

2. Introduction

For many survivors of sexual assault and family violence, there appears to be a need for ongoing support and a need to feel connected to others who have experienced similar trauma (Herman, 1992). Online peer support communities specifically addressing sexual assault and family violence such as Pandora's Aquarium (US) and OurPlace (AU) (OurPlace, 2011; Pandora's Aquarium) have been running for a number of years and are catering to this need.

There are a vast number of survivors accessing peer support online worldwide, and although it may not be a fitting option for everyone, it is important in this age where the internet is a vital commodity to daily living, that an online option is provided for those who may find it viable (Tate & Zabinski, 2004).

The following research was conducted to understand what peer support options are available to survivors of sexual assault online and which of these meet the selection criteria. With safety and privacy being of utmost importance it was vital that the options recommended reflected this. The recommended options have been complied into a database which will be accessible through the SECASA website in 2012.

The research also seeks to understand if online peer support it relatable to face-to-face peer support. Additionally the views and knowledge of counsellor/advocates are gathered to explore their familiarity with online peer support.

3. Literature Review

The Victorian CASA's define Sexual Assault as:

"*Sexual assault is any behaviour of a sexual nature that makes someone feel uncomfortable, frightened, intimidated or threatened. It is sexual behaviour that someone has not agreed to, where another person uses physical or emotional force against them. It can include anything from sexual harassment through to life threatening rape. Some of these acts are serious indictable crimes. Sexual assault is an abuse of power. Sexual assault is never the fault or responsibility of the victim/survivor*" (CASA, 2010).

Due to the disparities in law across States and Territories in Australia and the variations in measurement within research, the precise prevalence of sexual assault is unknown (Astbury, 2006; Filebourne, 2011; Lievore, 2003,). Recorded statistics show that within Australia in 2009 there were 18,807 victims of sexual assault recorded by police, with children between the ages of 0-14 being the most vulnerable (ABS, 2010, Australian Institute of Criminology, 2010).

Australia provides a number of avenues to aid in addressing the impact sexual assault can have on an individual and their family and friends. Crisis care, Counselling and support group options are available in every State/Territory for survivors of sexual assault (MyDoctor.Com.au, 2011). Specifically in Victoria, SECASA runs a number of face-to-face peer support groups and camps for survivors of sexual assault and their family members. These groups are diverse in nature and range from groups for women, men and children to creative/art therapy groups and cultural groups (SECASA, 2010).

Group environments present a safe place for individuals to talk about difficult experiences, however for many it may be uncomfortable to speak to someone about their sexual assault experience either face to face or within a group setting.

In today's technological climate, online communication through mailing lists, forums, chat sites and social networking sites are a regular and everyday activity for your average Australian (Stommel, 2009). Facebook, since its launch in the beginning of

2004 has gathered roughly 700 million users and is currently the number one social networking site used across the world (Wauters, 2011). The Y Generation dominates Facebook; those between the ages of 25-34 make up 29.3% of users, closely followed by 18-24 at 28.8% (Checkfacebook.com, 2011). Research also indicates that those in their 30's and the over 55's are two of the fastest growing demographics on Facebook (Gough, D & Whyte, 2010). This shows that people are communicating online and there is growing understanding across the majority of age groups in navigating around cyberspace and using online communication.

Websites are no longer seen as 'just' a promotional page highlighting the organisations information and contact details. The introduction of Web 2.0 encourages collaboration and facilitates information sharing (Webopedia, 2011). What used to be a fairly one-way 'consumer' type resource, now allows individuals to contribute, provide reviews and share their opinions online. Social Networking sites, Discussion Forums, Podcasts, and Wikis are all examples of Web 2.0.

Alongside social networks, online forums or message boards are also highly trafficked, with one third of Australians who use the internet contributing to forums, blogs and posting reviews (Howarth, 2008). With the diverse number of communication tools available online, it is important that counsellors expand their understanding in this rapidly evolving environment in an effort to better cater for their clients and colleagues.

Regardless of the numerous benefits that the online world offers, it was quite hard to find this stated in literature. The majority of the sources focus on the negative aspects of using social networking sites, chat rooms, blogs and discussion forums and tend to highlight the dangers of hackers, predators and issues of privacy. It has been noted by Papworth (2009) that individuals are using the Internet to access information and news, and that traditional forms of media are being pushed aside.

Various peer support groups exist online through Yahoo and Facebook for survivors of sexual assault as well as numerous forums/message boards such as Pandora's Aquarium (US) and OurPlace (AU) (OurPlace, 2011; Pandora's Aquarium, 2011).

For survivors of sexual assault, engaging in peer support online is firstly greatly beneficial due to its accessibility and ability to be used at the individual's convenience. Subsequently this cuts down travel barriers and has great advantages for those who have family/work commitments, individuals who have a disability and people in remote or rural areas who are unable to access face-to-face group therapy easily. The ability to engage in online groups opens doors for sexual assault survivors who may be hesitant to engage in the conventional mode of face-to-face group therapy (Finn & Lavitt, 1994). This mode of engagement would benefit individuals who have social phobias, anxiety or are unsure of what they are feeling or looking for (Blanchard, 2011; Gedge, 2002).

OurPlace, is an online Australian forum for individuals "*dealing with verbal, emotional, physical, sexual, spiritual or financial abuse*" (OurPlace, 2011a) The administrators who moderate this forum all have experienced abuse in some form. They state:

"*For each of us, the Internet was our lifeline when we were isolated, afraid, and uncertain whether our experience even had a name. We've each felt privileged to give back some of the comfort and validation we received when we needed it most." (OurPlace, 2011b)*

Other benefits of engaging in online peer support identified that it provided members with anonymity and privacy as members could use an alias, and were able to express their thoughts and feelings without being identified (Bell, 2007; Finn & Banach, 2000, Stommel, 2009). Taking part in an online group, chat room or discussion forum provided members with the choice to respond instantly, take their time to respond or not reply at all. The ability to choose what you write and whom you engage with offers the individual an aspect of control. Active members or members who 'lurk' online, are seen to benefit by having access to advice, information and narratives provided by others in similar circumstances, instilling the feeling that they are not alone (Stommel, 2009). Being able to see personal achievements or stories seem to have a powerful impact than what may be overlooked in real life (Blanchard, 2011; King, 1994 as cited in Stommel, 2009 pg.21).

Health related topics are one of the top rated searches online, with support groups being the principle source of information (Brann & Anderson, 2002 as cited in Stommel, 2009 pg. 21). There is growing research on the informative, supportive and therapeutic benefits of using online communications for social support (Finn & Banach, 2000; Stommel, 2009). Engaging online provides you with access to a diverse audience, the ability to express your views, hear the views of others and gain useful information (ScienceDaily, 2007). For sexual assault survivors, online peer support can be a great tool in understanding their experience and allowing them to ask sensitive questions that may be difficult to ask face to face. Furthermore it provides a support network and a space where their story can be heard and validated (Bell, 2007; Finn & Banach, 2000, Stommel, 2009).

There can be issues of confidentiality, security and privacy when engaging in online forums and chat rooms, however a good forum or chat room will have administrators and moderators that are vigilant and oversee the boards and chat room 24/7 (Bell, 2007, OurPlace, 2011). Sexual assault forums as well as other support forums can contain amazing narratives of survival. From looking at a few online forums you can see that members feel safe and supported enough to put up posts and share their stories. Although the posts are public and viewable to all members there seems to be a mutual understanding between members around privacy and confidentiality. MacFadden (2005) explains the phenomenon of 'swift trust' that takes place in online relationships, stating it is "*the willingness to suspend doubt about others to work on the collective task at hand and a positive expectation that the activity will be beneficial.*" For some survivors, when this trust is developed, forums and chat rooms may be the first place they choose to disclose or 'break the silence' about what they have experienced, and thus beginning a journey of healing (AfterSilence, 2011; Smith, 2010).

There are not too many differences between face-to-face support groups and support groups online in regards to issues of privacy, security and confidentiality. The main difference between the two is that, in one you're anonymous and your discussion or posts are public, and in the other people know you face-to-face and conversations are in a private space and between a counsellor and a few other group members (Gedge, 2002). Either separately or in combination, both can be beneficial for the user.

In a face-to-face group session, the counsellor will try to ensure there are minimal or no interruptions during the session, providing a private and contained environment. This setting differs from the online experience where privacy is much more in the hands of the client. Survivors may choose to engage from their personal computer at home or at a library or other public place where interruptions may be unavoidable (Gedge, 2002). Each person is different; for some, being in a familiar environment may suit them better, whereas others may like to be away and deal with their experience separately from their home environment. Both face-to-face and online give you the option to engage in the group, to listen to others in the group/view others comments, or join in the conversation.

In a face-to-face group setting, a counsellor usually facilitates the group session, providing leading questions and directing the group. In an online forum or chat room the conversation is more organic and creates a path of its own instructed by the members. In both settings however the space is made safe for all group members to engage. Online, guidelines are outlined when registration takes place and moderators are also on the look out for any inappropriate material. In a face-to-face setting the counsellor and the group create group rules at the beginning of the first session. In both situations, should an issue arise during the session where a group member feels uncomfortable, stressed or highly anxious, online – the individual can leave the forum/chat room and in a face-to-face environment the person can leave the room. In forums or chats rooms, members may post descriptive narratives of their experience, this can be traumatising or re-traumatising for new members, members still trying to understand their experience and for members who may have very similar stories. These comments on forums however are well moderated by the site moderators, and content that may be triggering is highlighted to notify members. For many using the forum/chat-room these stories of trauma and survival can be therapeutically beneficial both for the author and the reader (Stommel, 2009).

In both settings, online and face-to-face, information provided to the client can be outdated. If someone recommends something to you online, you can type it into a search engine and check it against a number of sources, search reviews and possibly get the most up to date information through their website, Facebook page or Twitter

account. Online, clients have the biggest encyclopaedia at their fingertips. Should a counsellor provide outdated information to a client in a face-to-face setting, the client may be less likely to question a counsellor; this however does not stop the client from going home and checking it out online, or calling the organisation. When gathering information from online groups, discussion forums and chat rooms the following issues have been raised. The validity of information provided to members can be questioned (Finn & Banach, 2000; Gedge, 2002), and the advice and information given on how to deal with situations could potentially be harmful (for example a member is advised to confront their perpetrator). Additionally members engaging on a more global peer support site may be provided with incorrect legal advice. Research in this area however has stated that when misinformation is conveyed, members usually correct them (Finn & Banach, 2000). Again, issues of misinformation can be avoided by simply double-checking the information on a reliable site.

Harassment/stalking can pose a danger in a real-world environment as well as online. In the real world and online the first thing to do if you experience any form of harassment or stalking that makes you feel unsafe is to notify the authorities, either the police or the moderator of the website. As you would take precautions when meeting someone new for the first time, the same thing can be applied online. There are a number of ways to minimise the risk of being harassed online or cyber stalked such as not providing any identifying information to members. Members also have the ability to block other users, report abusive or suspicious behaviour to site moderators, change their username and if necessary delete their accounts. Well-run support groups/forums will have guidelines around harassment/bullying and cyber stalking (Bell, 2007; OurPlace, 2011).

Previous studies state that engaging online can have an effect on everyday face-to-face communication, due to online engagement taking place in isolation and its lack of physical interaction (Finn & Lavitt, 1994). There are obvious differences in the online experiences compared to the face-to-face experience where members can observe social status cues such as age, dress, facial expressions, race and respond to body language (Finn & Banach, 2000). This however can be seen as a benefit for many members in keeping their anonymity, not having to be judged by their appearance and

feeling safe in a familiar/comfortable environment. Recent research however has indicated that engaging online does not pull people away from face-to-face or phone contact, instead individuals have larger social networks, and shows communicating online is a useful tool when making important life decisions (Bell, 2007; Boase, Horrigan, Wellman, Rainie, 2006).

Individuals, communities and businesses are seeing the benefits in engaging online. For survivors of sexual assault peer support groups/forums can be a fantastic resource that is informative, supportive and therapeutic (Finn & Banach, 2000).

SECASA's 2009-2010 Annual Report highlights that in the last year it had 244,886 unique visitors to its website browsing and downloading information on sexual assault, this is an increase of 59,933 from the previous year. This increase shows that there may be more public awareness around sexual assault, that the website is being more widely promoted or that more individuals are seeking support around issues of sexual assault online.

When key words such as 'sexual assault online peer support" are typed into the Google search engine, about 959, 000 results are retrieved, leaving individuals with a mass of options to filter through. For sexual assault survivors this process can be confronting, as there is bound to be many inappropriate and unrelated websites that also pop up. A database on the SECASA website that compiles a list of sites providing online peer support will be highly beneficial for those seeking information and peer support online. Furthermore, for survivors who do not have the resources to engage face-to-face or do not want to engage face-to-face, online peer support can provide a great space to explore their experience, break the silence and begin the healing process.

4. Online Legislation

4.1 Laws that may apply to Online Work

- Copyright

It is critical that online workers show respect for the laws governing copyrighted material owned by others, including SECASA's own copyrights and brands. Online workers should never quote more than short excerpts of someone else's work, and always attribute such work to the original author/source and include a linked URL if appropriate. It is good general practice to link to others work rather than reproduce it (SECASA, 2011).

- Fair Use

Although making copies of copyright material can infringe exclusive rights a certain amount of copying is permissible under the Fair Use provisions of the Legislation.

Fair Use means that you are using copyrighted materials in private (not-for-profit) home-centred situations, such as in literary and social criticism or parody, as well as news reporting or school reports. Note that this also includes an authors attribution rights which are:

- To be identified with their works (the Right of Attribution), with the corresponding right not to have authorship falsely attributed (the Right against False Attribution)
- Not to have their works subjected to derogatory treatment (the Right of Integrity) (SECASA, 2011)

- Intellectual property

Intellectual property represents the property of your mind or intellect. Web staff are not to discuss specific details of SECASA's bespoke software or current or future web strategies to a third party that is not an employee of SECASA without prior approval from the Manager (SECASA, 2011).

4.2 Online Stalking and Harassment Legislation

The following two Acts were recently updated to include online communication; these Acts could be applied for workers and users of online communication.

- Crimes Act 1958 – Section 21A (Victorian Legislation, 2011(a))

In this section it states that a person must not stalk another person. A person (the offender) stalks another person (the victim) if the offender engages in a course of conduct, which includes any of the following:

(a) Following the victim or any other person

(b) Contacting the victim or any other person by post, telephone, fax, text message, email or other electronic communication or by any other means whatsoever;

(ba) publishing on the internet or by an email or other electronic communication to any person a statement or other material.

- Stalking Intervention Orders Act 2008 (Victorian Legislation, 2011(b))

This act explains the meaning of stalking, a person (the first person) stalks another person (the second person) if the first person engages in a course of conduct

(a) With the intention of causing physical or mental harm to the second person or of arousing apprehension or fear in the second person for his or her own safety or that of any other person; and

(b) That includes any of the following –

(ii) contacting the second person or any other person by post, telephone, fax, text message, email or other electronic communication or by any other means whatsoever;

(iii) publishing on the internet or by an email or other electronic communication to any person a statement or other material

(v) tracing the second person's or any other person's use of the internet or of email or other electronic communication.

4.3 Other Relevant Legislation

There are jurisdictional issues when dealing with international resources. It is important that individuals who engage online read the guidelines developed by the organisation or peer group community. The following laws may also apply in an online

context (SECASA, 2011):

- Commonwealth Law
  - Racial Discrimination Act 1975
  - Sex Discrimination Act 1984
  - Disability Discrimination Act 1992
  - Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission Act 1986
  - Age Discrimination Act 2004

- Victorian Legislation
  - Crimes Act 1958 (Sections 32- 60)
  - Children, Youth and Families Act 2005
  - Family Violence Protection Act 2008
  - Victims of Crime Assistance Act 1996

5. Online Worker Protocols

5.1 Protocols

As a student researcher, it is expected that any form of communication or work online be carried out abiding by the online protocols set out by SECASA.

5.2 Supervisor Approval

As a student researcher, the placement supervisor must approve any questionnaires prior to them being put online. Questionnaires will need to have an appropriate disclaimer and only be used for the purpose of research.

5.3 Code of Conduct for Online Workers

As a student researcher working online, it is important that we maintain the integrity of the organisation. All communication must be professional, respectful and honest and reflect the values of SECASA. Researchers must not communicate personal opinions and political agendas that are not in line with SECASA's philosophy, aims or objectives (SECASA, 2011).

5.4 Duty of care

Online workers are expected to exercise a duty of care, that is, to exercise reasonable care, in giving written information or advice online. This means that they must ensure all measureable and practicable steps have been implemented to ensure the well-being, safety and protection of clients and members of staff during the course of their online duties. Online workers have a duty to exercise reasonable skill and diligence to ensure that information and advice provided, upon which the recipients are likely to rely, is accurate (SECASA, 2011).

5.5 Mandatory Reporting

In Victoria, mandatory reporting is a legal obligation and carries a penalty if you fail to

act. SECASA places a child or young person's best interest, safety, stability and development at the centre of all decision-making processes and service delivery. Any online worker that suspects, on reasonable grounds, that a verified child or young person they are interacting with online has been, or is currently being physically or sexually assaulted, mistreated or neglected, will report the incident to the Manager, a level 3 or their supervisor (SECASA, 2011).

5.6 Harmful Behaviour or Content

As a student researcher, if it is suspected on reasonable grounds that a person I am interacting with online, is suicidal or in a threatening situation, it must be reported to the placement supervisor or manager as well as the administrator/moderator or manager of the online group, discussion forum or chat room.

If the researcher comes across a site with questionable content this must be reported to the placement supervisor or manager. Whilst engaging in the online groups, discussion forums or chat rooms, if the researcher encounters an individual they suspect to be paedophilic or is engaging in grooming or stalking behaviours which appear to be breaking the law, it must be reported to the placement supervisor or manager as well as the administrator/moderator or manager of the online group, discussion forum or chat room (SECASA, 2011).

6. Online Considerations

6.1 Netiquette

Netiquette is a set of social conventions that facilitate interaction over networks, ranging from discussion boards, chat rooms, blogs and social networks, just to name a few. Netiquette rules will differ depending on the online environment, the people and the activity. The following highlights the golden rules of communication online (Shea, 1994).

1. *Remember the Human* – firstly, it is important to remember that there is another person on the other side of the screen, although you are unable to see the other persons body language, expression or hear their tone of voice, this can be conveyed in your text. Ensure that what you want to say is conveyed properly to avoid misinterpretation. The use of emotions can come in handy in this area. This is especially important on sensitive discussion forums, such as ones set up for survivors. Secondly, what you wouldn't say face-to-face don't say online. Text has permanence, what you write online can be stored, copied and searched, so try to ensure your communications online are appropriate to avoid any problems in the future.

2. *Adhere to the same standards online as you would in real life* – Be ethical when online, use your sense of judgement to determine what you would do if this was a real life situation. What is illegal in real life, is also illegal online. Although cyberspace appears to be a free and open public space, laws are in place to protect you and protect others. On discussion forums set up for survivors of sexual assault, safety is vital; hence strict guidelines are put in place.

3. *Know where you are* – What may be acceptable in a chat room may not be acceptable in a discussion forum or social networking site. Lurk before you leap, have a look around the site; read comments from other members and familiarise yourself with the site's guidelines and the FAQ section. For example, on a survivor discussion forum, you would not go into detail about your sexual

assault experience within the *Introduce Yourself* Thread.

4. *Respect other peoples time and bandwidth* – When you write something online that asks for comments, don't expect a reply instantly, people may take a little while to respond. Like in real life, everyone online has a personality, likes and dislikes, don't assume that people have to agree with or be passionate about the same things as you. Ensure that you also direct your response or comment to the people who are interested in that area.

5. *Make yourself look good online* – Although you may not be judged on your appearance, people can judge you on the quality of your writing. When you communicate online, ensure that what you write makes sense by constructing your sentences properly and making sure your spelling and grammar are correct. Also be aware of the rules around use of profanity. Many sexual assault discussion forums automatically are able to 'bleep out' or change profane language to ***** or a different word altogether.

6. *Share Expert Knowledge* – Cyberspace provides a great opportunity to generate and acquire knowledge, simply though the exchange of information. Don't be afraid to share your knowledge or experience online. For example on survivor forums knowledge is shared about coping strategies and well-being.

7. *Help keep flaming wars under control* – 'flaming' is stating a strong emotionally written opinion that instigates people to respond. Although it can be fun to watch and engage in, it is not looked upon favourably in online communication. Flaming can cause tension between relationships online and destroy the environment for all members involved.

8. *Respect other peoples privacy* – In real life, you wouldn't go through someone's handbag or purse, in the same way the online environment should be treated the same. Respect other people's privacy by not going through their e-mails and logging off their account if it hasn't already been logged off. Privacy and safety is essential for survivors, and it is important that survivors log out of their

accounts and clear their history should they be using a shared computer.

9. *Don't abuse you power* – Some people are more 'net savvy' than others, able to navigate the internet easily, and for this reason can gain access to peoples information or become administrators or moderators in discussion forums. People in this category are given these roles because they understand how the system works; however this authority should not be used inappropriately. Administrators and moderators on survivor discussion forums have a duty of care towards their members to ensure that their information will not be used for the wrong purposes.

10. *Be forgiving of other peoples mistakes* – Most of the rules that apply in real life apply in the online world, however some are new territory for people who are not very familiar with environments like chat rooms, discussion forums and social networking sites. People may make mistakes and it may take them a while to understand how things work. For someone new it may be appropriate to politely show them in the right direction, by providing them with a link to the guidelines and netiquette expected in that particular online environment.

7. Aim & Research Question

7.1 Primary Aim

The primary aim of this research project is to develop a database for the SECASA website listing appropriate online peer support options for survivors of sexual assault. To gather this information the following questions will be explored:

1. What peer support options are available to sexual assault survivors online?
2. Which of these options meet the selection criteria?

7.2 Secondary Aim

The secondary aims of this research project are to develop an understanding of the experience of online peer support and to gain the views of counsellor/advocates in the sexual assault field in relation to online peer support. To gather this information the following questions will be explored:

3. Are the experiences of survivors engaged in online peer support relatable with the experiences of those engaged in face-to-face peer support?
4. Are counsellor/advocates familiar with online peer support options available to sexual assault survivors and do they recommend them?

8. Research Design & Methodology

8.1 Rationale for Methodology & Study Design

The following research takes on a constructivist approach in which knowledge is generated through understanding the experiences of survivors of sexual assault engaged in online peer support. The research employs a mixed model design in which it utilizes both qualitative and quantitative measures.

Due to the nature of this research being relatively new in the sexual assault field, the research design allows exploration of the topic and provides a degree of flexibility when faced with unforseen situations (Borkan, 2004; Creswell, 2003; Traynor, 2006).

Additionally the research design promotes gathering knowledge, experience and opinions from a range of individuals (counsellor/advocates, forum members, moderators) in an effort to gain a more grounded understanding of the research topic (Johnson & Christensen, 2010).

A mixed model design was chosen as it provides the opportunity to gain a deeper and richer understanding of the research questions as the experiences and opinions of participants are taken into consideration (Creswell, 2003; Traynor, 2006).

Employing a mixed model design is practically more complex to design, collect and analyse, and requires time and commitment from the participants (Traynor, 2006). Therefore all methods of research were given boundaries and time frames, and conducted in a very simple manner to ensure the project was completed on time.

The study was carried out in four stages and adopted a diverse range of data collection methods to answer the research questions:

2

8.2 Stage 1: What Peer Support options are available to Sexual Assault Survivors Online?

Method

In order to understand what peer support was available online to survivors of sexual assault a scoping study (Arksey & O'Malley 2005) was carried out. This involved compiling a list of recommendations provided through discussions and surveys completed by sexual assault counsellor/advocates, surveys completed online via the SECASA website, entering key words into Google search, searching through forum 'resource pages' and through Yahoo and Facebook Groups. The scoping study was primarily done in the first few weeks of the research project; but continued throughout the development of the project when other options were found or recommended. It was expected that online peer support for survivors of sexual assault that were popular would rate high in search engines, and show up consistently across the different scoping methods.

- Discussions

Discussions with SECASA's Online Project Worker (placement supervisor) and a few net savvy SECASA counsellor/advocates highlighted several online peer support options to explore. It was expected that professionals within the field might have clients who engage online and therefore would be able to recommend online peer support options that their clients were currently using.

- Surveys (completed online)

Surveys were designed in consultation with another RMIT fourth year Social Work student, Online Project Worker (placement supervisor) and counsellor/advocates. The survey was developed for Professionals and accessible through the SECASA website, there were four responses to the survey. The online survey specifically asked the professional about online resources they may know of or have used in relation to sexual assault. This allowed us to document sites that had been recommended specifically by those who have had interactions online in this area or have an interest in the sexual assault field. It was expected that professionals

visiting the SECASA website may provide recommendations of online support options for survivors of sexual assault. (Please see Appendix 17.3.)

- Google Search Engine

The popular search engine Google was used. Key words such as 'sexual assault,' 'peer group/s,' 'rape,' 'sexual abuse.' 'incest,' 'support,' 'victim, 'domestic,' 'family,' 'violence,' 'survivor,' 'safe, 'discussion,' 'forum,' were used in combination to source online peer support available to survivors of sexual assault. The intention for using Google search was to note down popular and regularly used sites.

- Discussion Forums

Sexual Assault forums that had been recommended were used as a tool to source more options for online peer support. Many forums had a 'resources' link or thread, in which there were links to other forums, chat rooms or other forms of online peer support. It was expected Forum members, site administrators and moderators and post recommendations would provide good resources for online peer supports specific to sexual assault.

- Yahoo! Groups

Yahoo! Groups is a large collection of discussion boards created by individuals or groups for the purpose of communicating and was reported to have 10 million groups in 2010 (Preimesberger, 2010). To find Yahoo! Groups specific to sexual assault, key works such as 'peer,' 'rape,' 'sexual abuse,' 'incest,' 'support,' 'victim, 'domestic,' 'family,' 'violence,' 'survivor,' and 'safe' were used and relevant categories were searched. It was expected that using these key words in combination with each other would produce a tailored set of search results, and show groups that may have been created for the purpose of peer support.

- Facebook Groups

Facebook is a social networking site that has a diverse membership of over 700 million users worldwide (Wauters, 2011). Alongside personal profiles, Facebook has a variety of self run, community run or organisational 'group pages'. Filtering through 'group pages' using keys words such as 'peer,' 'rape,' 'sexual abuse,' 'incest,'

'support,' 'victim, 'survivor,' and 'safe' allowed us to see what groups existed on Facebook that may be useful to survivors of sexual assault.

Analysis

Stage 1 was measured quantitatively, only by noting down the number of online peer support resources that were found and from which method they were sourced. Many of the peer support options that were recommended did not meet the criteria highlighted in Stage 2. This research acknowledges that online peer support options that do not appear in Stage 2 still may be a great source of support for survivors, for this reason the list of Stage 1 resources will not be disclosed.

8.3 Stage 2: Which of these options meet the Selection Criteria?

Method

To develop a list of online peer support options for survivors of sexual assault, popular results found in stage one were then looked at individually using various assessment tools developed by the researcher. The first assessment tool (Appendix 17.6. 17.7 and 17.8) noted the observations and engagement with the different online peer support options. The second tool was a selection criterion (8.3 Analysis). It was expected that adopting an ethnographic research method (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999) would provide us with a good understanding of the sexual assault survivor community online. Engagement and observation were carried out after the initial scoping study and ceased four weeks short of the projects completion.

- Observation

Observation was a main part of assessing the quality and suitability of online peer support options. This process involved examining the interactions between members and the contents of discussion forums, chat rooms and groups. Immersing oneself into the online survivor community allowed us to observe participants in their environment and gather a better understanding of the culture and relationships. (Please see Appendix 17.6, 17.7, and 17.8.)

- Engagement through online Interviews/Questions

Online interviews were conducted in a conversation like manner with moderators

and administrators from online discussion forums and groups. Questions were based mainly around their experience of being a moderator/administrator, the operations of the forums and groups, safety and privacy, and demographics. Engaging with moderators and administrators provided us with a 'behind the scenes' understanding of how online peer support for sexual assault survivors is monitored. Engagement with moderators and administrators were carried out through e-mail and private messaging.

Analysis

Various tools were developed to qualitatively analyse the different forms of online peer support for survivors of sexual assault. The following selection criterion was used.

Discussion Forums were analysed looking at:

Privacy & Safety	- Is a moderator available 24/7?
	- Does it have comprehensive guidelines and rules that are easy to access and easy to understand?
	- Does it provide Crisis Line Phone Numbers for Australia?
	- Does it have a report/block feature?
Registration	- Is there E-mail verification and validation?
	- Is there a Spam filter?
	- Does it require Administration approval?
	- Can you create a personal profile?
	Can you register as a non-survivor?
Access	- Is it a public forum?
	- Is membership required to make posts? (Username and password?)
	- Are there 'Member Only' forums?
	- Is there 'Password Protected' forums or forums that require Moderator authorisation?
	- Who has access?
Environment	- Is the discussion forum welcoming and supportive?
	- Are sensitive and triggering posts or threads 'marked'?
	- Are responses from members and Moderators supportive, sensitive and appropriate?

Response Rate	- What is the response rate from Administrators and Moderators? - What is the response rate from members?
Navigation	- Is the layout of the discussion board clear and easy to understand? - Are links that are regularly used easy to access?

Chat Rooms were analysed looking at:

Privacy & Safety	- Is the chat moderated? - Does it have comprehensive guidelines and rules which are easy to access and easy to understand? - Does it have a report/block feature?
Registration	- Is there E-mail verification and validation? - Is there a Spam filter? - Does it require Administration approval? - Can you register as a non-survivor?
Access	- Is it a public chat room? - Is membership required to chat? - Is the chat 'Password Protected' require Moderator authorisation? - Who has access?
Environment	- Is the chat room welcoming? (Do individuals acknowledge you have joined/involve or inform you of the conversation?) - Are responses from members and moderators supportive, sensitive and appropriate?
Response Rate	- Do individuals respond instantly on chat? - How many individuals are in a chat at one time?
Navigation	- Is the layout of the chat room clear and easy to understand? - Are links that are regularly used easy to access from the chat room?

Online Groups (Facebook & Yahoo! Groups)

Privacy & Safety	- Is the group moderated? - Does it have comprehensive guidelines and rules which are easy to access and easy to understand?

	- Does it provide Crisis Line Phone Numbers for Australia?
	- Does it have a report/block feature?
Registration	- Is there E-mail verification and validation?
	- Is there a Spam filter?
	- Does it require Administration approval?
	- Can you create a personal profile?
	- Can you register as a non-survivor?
Access	- Is it a public group or a private group?
	- Is membership required to engage in the group? (Username and password?)
	- Who has access?
Environment	- Is the group welcoming? (Sends you a welcome message?)
	- Is the content of the group appropriate?
	- Are responses from members and Moderators supportive, sensitive and appropriate?
Response Rate	- What is the response rate from Administrators and Moderators?
	- What is the response rate from members?
Navigation	- Is the layout of the group clear and easy to understand?
	- Are links that are regularly used easy to access?

8.4 Stage 3: Are the experiences of survivors engaged in online peer support relatable with the experiences of those engaged in face-to-face peer support?

Method:

To identify if the experiences of online peer support are relatable to the experiences of face-to-face peer support, a short literature study was carried out on the effects of sexual assault peer support and on recovery phases. Additionally, surveys were carried out with SECASA counsellor/advocates regarding group participation and processes. Methods of observation and engagement were also undertaken. This was done looking specifically at the environment of discussion forums. The findings were then assessed to understand if there was a relation between online peer support and face-to-face peer support. Using these various methods provided us with qualitative information that highlighted the commonalities between face-to-face peer support and online peer

support. This stage of the research was ongoing, beginning at the end of stage 2, and ceasing whilst compiling the final report.

- Literature Study

A short literature study was undertaken exploring the effects of peer support on survivors of sexual assault and the sexual assault recovery phases. It was expected that the effects experienced by survivors in face-to-face peer support would be relatable with the effects experienced in online peer support. It was also expected that there were a few key 'recovery models' which counsellor/advocates were familiar with, and that these models, or phases within the models would be reflected in the online peer support environment.

- Discussions

Ongoing informal discussions were held with SECASA counsellor/advocates about the experiences of face-to-face peer group support. It was expected that professionals within the field, especially those who have been involved in running peer support groups could provide practical knowledge about group processes and experiences.

- Surveys

Surveys were delivered to SECASA counsellor/advocates via e-mail, three surveys were returned. Survey questions revolved around participation and processes of face-to-face peer support group. It was expected that SECASA counsellor/advocates who facilitated peer support groups would be able to provide practical knowledge about group participation and processes. (Please see Appendix 17.1 and 17.2.)

- Observation

The method of observation was used to examine various threads and posts put up by forum members. To do this discussion forums compiled in Stage 2 were explored. It was expected that the content of the threads and posts would reflect the effects experienced in face-to-face support groups as well as reflect phases of recovery.

- Engagement through online Interviews/Questions (Moderators & Administrators)

Online interviews were conducted in a conversation like manner with Moderators and Administrators from online discussion forums. Questions enquired about the benefits for survivors of online peer support forums and their opinion on the experience of face-to-face peer support being relatable to online peer support. As most Moderators and Administrators are survivors themselves, and have a good knowledge of the forum, their opinion would provide sound qualitative data. Engagement with Moderators and Administrators were carried out through e-mail and private messaging.

- Engagement through online Questions (Survivors of Sexual Assault)

A thread was posted in one discussion forum, under the heading of "Online Peer Support -Looking for your views" and asked "As members, what are your experiences/the benefits of being part of an online community such as [forum name]?" The content of the opening post also stated information about SECASA and the research project. It was expected that engaging with survivors of sexual assault within the online peer support environment would provide qualitative information of how online peer support has impacted their life. It was expected that their responses would reflect an understanding of the benefits and phases that also may be experienced in a face-to-face environment. Engagement with forum members was carried out using the public discussion board. (Please see Appendix 17.9)

Analysis

Stage 3 will be analysed qualitatively, looking at the effects of sexual assault peer support and recovery phases. Concentrating on one professional's model of sexual assault recovery, and through observation and engagement within the forums, parallels will be drawn on how the effects of peer support and recovery stages are experienced online and in the real world. This area will be explored in detail within section 11; however the results will simply provide a brief summary.

8.5 Stage 4. Are counsellor/advocates familiar with online peer support options available to sexual assault survivors and do they recommend them?

Method:

To answer the following question a survey was designed in consultation with another RMIT fourth year Social Work student, Online Project Worker (placement supervisor) and counsellor/advocates. One initial survey was developed (first round), and then another with a few adjustments (second round). The surveys were distributed to counsellor/advocates during CASA and SECASA team meetings. In all, 32 surveys were returned. This stage of the research was completed whist compiling the final report.

- Surveys (first round)

The first round of surveys were delivered to CASA counsellor/advocates and managers; 11 surveys were returned. Survey questions explored counsellor/advocates familiarity with online resources and specifically online peer support. It was expected that the surveys would highlight that counsellor/advocates believed online peer support was a therapeutic option. However due to unfamiliarity with what options are available to sexual assault survivors they would not recommend online peer support as an option. (Please see Appendix 17.4.)

- Surveys (second round)

The second round of surveys were delivered to SECASA counsellor/advocates and managers; 21 surveys were returned. The questions in the second round of surveys were quite different to the first round. Due to an oversight; the second round of surveys asked about 'online support' and was not specific to 'online peer support' as were the first surveys. An extra question was added asking counsellor/advocates about their personal engagement online. It was expected that counsellor/advocates believed online support would be a viable option, but due to unfamiliarity with what options were available to sexual assault survivors they would not recommend online support. It was also expected that there would be a correlation between familiarity of online resources and personal engagement online. (Please see Appendix 17.5)

Analysis

Both surveys were analysed qualitatively and quantitatively. Round one surveys enquired about the counsellor/advocates familiarity with online support or online peer support, if they thought online peer support was a therapeutic option and if they had referred a client to seek peer support online. Round two surveys enquired about their familiarity with online support, if they saw online support as a viable option, and if they had referred a client to seek support online. Second round survey also enquired about the counsellor/advocates personal engagement online, and what online tools they used.

9. Ethical Considerations

9.1 For the Researcher

To separate the researchers personal communications from the research communications as well as ensure the researchers privacy it was important that a separate e-mail account was set up for communication with the various online groups, discussion forums and chat rooms.

In order to carry out the research, the researcher had to register on various online groups, discussion forums and chat rooms. When signing up, an individual is able to register as a 'survivor,' 'secondary survivor,' or 'researcher.' Posing and signing up as a survivor would have provided a deeper insight into survivor experiences as it permitted access to 'survivor only' areas; signing up as a researcher permitted limited access. However, due to the sensitive nature of the content in online groups, discussion forums, and chat rooms, it was ethical not to deceive members, and therefore register as a 'researcher.'

As a student researcher and due to the sensitive nature of the research it was important that the student received appropriate and weekly supervision.

9.2 For the Participants

For the online participants (Moderators, Administrators, forum members and individuals surveyed through the SECASA website) who contributed their experiences and opinions to the research, it was important that they remained anonymous and their privacy protected. For this reason, participant usernames as well as the forums they were registered to, are not document within this report.

Surveys completed by SECASA Counsellor/advocates and managers were anonymous.

All participants were informed about the purposes of the research, were asked for permission for the use of their responses, and advised that their responses would only

be used for the purposes of research. No responses were received from individuals under the age of 18.

9.3 For the Online Providers

The online providers have a duty of care towards the members registered with them; therefore members are informed of the rules and guidelines when they first register. Additionally, the online provider needs to ensure that the group, forum or chat room is safe and the content appropriate.

All requests for research had to go though to a Moderator for approval before they were posted on the forums. This was to ensure the research request was valid, appropriate and would not harm the participants/members.

Online groups, forums and chat rooms are seen as a 'safe place' for survivors, and it was important that the members were not treated like research subjects. To gather information for this research project, information was obtained through conversations with Moderators and Administrators. One Moderator-approved question was posted on one of the forums, to which survivors could reply if they wanted to.

10. Results

10.1 Stage 1: What peer support options are available to sexual assault survivors online?

The results below show online peer support options found for sexual assault survivors and through which method they were retrieved.

Method	Result
Discussions with SECASA Online Project Worker & Counsellor/advocates	5 Discussion Forums were recommended 2 Facebook Groups recommended 1 Chat Room
Surveys completed Online by Professionals via SECASA Website	0 recommendations from surveys
Key words typed into Google Search Engine	1 Discussion Forum appeared numerous times (using different key words) Other results were sexual assault websites, or website which had links to online support groups.
Recommended online peer support through Discussion Forums 'resource' pages	87 Discussion Forums and Chat rooms recommended
Yahoo! Groups	588 groups under 'Health Wellness' - 'Support' - 'Abuse Survivors' 191 groups under 'Health Wellness' - 'Support' - 'Rape'
Facebook Groups	Only 4 open public 'groups' that appear relevant Numerous 'pages' (unknown number)
Online Peer Support that showed up consistently	There were approximately 8-9 options that were consistently appearing over the various search methods

10.2 Stage 2: Which of these options meet the Selection Criteria?

Having explored a number of online peer support options for survivors of sexual assault, two specific peer support options stood out, discussion forums and chat rooms.

Facebook Groups and Yahoo Groups have not been included in the results, as they were not seen as fitting options for online peer support. Facebook groups and Yahoo Groups appeared to be primarily for the provision of information and social networking.

Discussion forums were assessed looking at 6 main areas; Privacy & Safety, Registration, Access, Environment, Response Rate and Navigation.

Privacy & Safety	- Has a moderator (or similar) on 24/7 - Comprehensive guidelines and rules which are easy to access and easy to understand - It provides Crisis Line phone numbers for Australian residents. (Excluding MaleSurvivor) - Report/block feature available
Registration	- E-mail verification and validation, - Spam filter - Requires Administration approval - Can create a personal profile - Register as a Survivor, secondary survivor/supporter and researcher (excluding OurPlace (researchers))
Access	- Forums which are open for public viewing - Membership which is required to make posts (username and password) - 'Member Only' forums (excluding ReachOut.Com) - 'Password Protected' forums or forums that require Moderator authorisation (excluding Reachout.Com)
Environment	- The discussion forum is welcoming and supportive - Sensitive or triggering posts or threads are 'marked' - Responses from members and Moderators are supportive, sensitive and appropriate
Response Rate	- Response rate from Administrators and Moderators is within a couple of days - Responses from members are continuous and updates every

	few minutes
Navigation	- The layout of the discussion board is clear and easy to understand (php BB (Bulletin Board)) - Links that are used regularly are easy to access

The following discussion forums have been recommended as options for survivors of sexual assault as they meet the selection criteria.

Forum: Pandora's Aquarium

URL: http://pandys.org/forums/

Description: Pandora's Aquarium is a US based discussion forum 'run by survivors for survivors.' The forum was set up in 1999, and since then has gathered 33,708 members worldwide (at the time of assessment 3.10.11). Pandora's Aquarium has password protected/moderator approved forums specifically for survivors such as the 'My Story Forum,' 'Body/Fitness Forum' and the 'Male Survivor Forum' which are not viewable or accessible to secondary survivors, researchers or the public. Pandora's also provides forums for the purposes of activism, research and a space for creativity.

Forum: AfterSilence

URL: http://www.aftersilence.org/forum/

Description: AfterSilence is a US based discussion forum, specifically run for survivors of sexual abuse. The administration and moderators who run the site have all been affected by sexual violence, and aim to provide support for other survivors. The Forum currently has 27,319 members (at the time of assessment 3.10.11) and provides a number of password protected/ moderator approved forums specifically for survivors. AfterSilence also provides a number of resources for survivors, secondary survivors, and professionals, and has an area for activism and research.

Forum: ReachOut.Com

URL: http://forums.reachout.com/forum.php

Description: ReachOut.Com is an Australian based website with an attached forum run for young people between the ages of 14-25. ReachOut.Com discussion forum started in 2005 and has 3, 706 members (at the time of assessment 3.10.11). It is not sexual assault specific but aims to 'improve the mental health and wellbeing of Australian

young people by providing information, resources and peer support' (ReachOut.Com, 2011). Statistics provided by ReachOut.Com stated in the period of May – October 2011, pages specifically related to Sexual Assault ('I was sexually assaulted,' 'sexual assault' and 'helping a friend who is in a sexually abusive relationship' were accessed 4,650 times from the ReachOut.Com Website. The ReachOut.Com Forum has been mentioned a number of times as being excluded in certain criteria. My engagement with members on the forum and with Moderators has shown that ReachOut.Com is quite a free flowing and open space, where there is a communal understanding between forum members that this is a safe place. The Moderator from ReachOut.Com stated "we actually don't have to do that much moderating because of the proactive work of the Community Builders in setting the tone and maintaining the culture of the forums." Community Builders play the main role in maintaining the community by being active on the forum, ensuring members feel safe and supported, responding to posts and running 'Getting Real' a live discussion on Monday nights 8.00pm AEST.

Forum: OurPlace

URL: http://forums.our-place-online.net/

Description: OurPlace is an Australian based discussion forum which started up in 2008 and has 763 members (as the time of assessment 3.10.11) OurPlace discussion forum is specific to domestic violence and provides a safe place 'for anyone who is dealing with, or thinks they may be dealing with, verbal, emotional, physical, sexual, spiritual or financial abuse' (OurPlace, 2011a) The forum is run by individuals who have experienced domestic violence and provides peer support to those who have previously experienced violence or are still experiencing violence. The administration and moderation team on OurPlace have password protected/ member only forums, very strict guidelines with membership which is only available to survivors and have just introduced a new blog option. OurPlace also has a forum specifically for creative writing.

Forum: MaleSurvivor

URL: http://www.malesurvivor.org/board/

Description: MaleSurvivor is a US based discussion board for male survivors of sexual assault. "It is a place where people can take risks to explore issues that require the

understanding and support of other brother survivors" (MaleSurvivor.Org, 2009). The board currently has 9,245 members (at the time of assessment 3.10.11) and is open to survivors, secondary survivors and researchers. MaleSurvivor is not just a forum for men, but provides support for women and transgender survivors. Three levels of access are available, public (limited access to forums), registered members (access to member only forums and password protected forums) and paid member registration (very strict access to survivors only.)

10.2.2 Chat Rooms

The chat rooms that have been chosen are a feature of and connected with the Discussion Forums recommended above. To access the chat room, membership was mandatory to the discussion forum. 'Wild'/Independent chat rooms were not seen as an option due to the lack of guidelines, how easy they were to access and complex content of the chat. Chat rooms were assessed looking at 6 main areas; Privacy & Safety, Registration, Access, Environment, Response Rate and Navigation.

Privacy & Safety	- The chat room is moderated or the chat 'log' is reviewed - Chat room has specific guidelines and rules which are easy to access and easy to understand - It has a report/block feature available
Registration	- E-mail verification and validation - Spam filter - Administration or Moderator approval - Chat is only accessed by survivors
Access	- Private – with only those who have access to chat - Membership is required - Chat 'Password Protected' requires Moderator authorisation - Survivors only
Environment*	- Welcoming (Individuals acknowledge you have joined/involve or inform you of the conversation) - Responses from members and Moderators are supportive, sensitive and appropriate
Response	- Individuals respond instantly

rate*	- Number of people in chat ranges throughout the day
Navigation*	- The layout of the chat room is clear and easy to understand -Java Chat Application - Links that are regularly used are easy to access from the chat room

(*) Selection criteria highlighted with a * was not assessed by the researcher, but was assessed using information provided by Administrators and Moderators.

The following chat rooms have been recommended as options for survivors of sexual assault as they meet the selection criteria. Due to the strict rules around access to researchers, the environment of the chat room could not be accessed for assessment. However due to the positive experience of the forum environment I suspect that the chat room will reflect the same atmosphere.

Pandora's Aquarium

http://pandys.org/forums/

Pandora's Aquarium chat room is open 24/7 to members only and also has regular scheduled topic chats. For members to engage on chat, a number of criteria need to be met, for example a certain number of posts. Pandora's Aquarium has two 'Chatterators' who are in charge of the operations of the chat room, additionally a group of chat Moderators regularly participate in the chat room discussions.

AfterSilence

http://www.aftersilence.org/forum/

AfterSilence chat room is open 24/7 to members only and has regular scheduled topic chats set up for members to engage in. AfterSIlence chat room is moderated by chat Moderators, Administrators and forum Moderators. When Moderators are not present in the chat room, the chat room logs are checked to ensure safety.

OurPlace

http://forums.our-place-online.net/

OurPlace chat room is open 24/7 and to members only, for relevant discussion. Chat access is only granted to members with whom the Moderators and Administrators are

familiar and that have contributed to the forum for a certain amount of time. The chat room is not used regularly by members, but is available should members want to discuss a particular topic.

MaleSurvivor

http://www.malesurvivor.org/board/

MaleSurvivor chat room is open 24/7 to members for relevant discussion and is primarily for survivors. Chat room guidelines are posted in every forum, to ensure members are familiar with them. The chat room is moderated regularly, and all communications on the board are subject to review and filtered by the website to ensure no inappropriate content is posted.

10.3 Stage 3. Are the experiences of individuals engaged in online peer support relatable with the experiences of those engaged in face-to-face peer support?

In both environments safety was seen as vital, individuals felt a sense of belonging and connectedness to their peers. Through stories, and/or the voicing of their own, feelings of isolation, guilt, shame and blame diminished and a sense of empowerment and control was restored. Both environments were seen to provide ongoing support; whilst online provided a door for support 24/7, face-to-face groups were found to exchange contact details so participants could keep in touch and provide each other with support after the group ceased.

From observation and engagement with the various discussion forums, it was evident that the stages of recovery described by Herman (1992) were in some form visible in the online peer support environment. It appeared that online peer support was used in conjunction with face-to-face counselling to further support the recovery process. This is discussed further in Section 11.

Conversations and surveys carried out with counsellor/advocates from SECASA recognised that there are some physical barriers when it comes to clients attending their appointments such as travel/distance issues and family/work commitments. To

cater to growth areas and increase access to face-to-face counselling and peer support groups, SECASA have seven service locations across the South Eastern region of Melbourne, including a Crisis Care Unit. Improvements can always be made to better support and cater for survivors of sexual assault; and it is possible that online service delivery options, such as online peer support can be a viable option for survivors who are interested.

(Please also see Appendix 17.9)

10.4 Stage 4. Are counsellor/advocates familiar with online peer support options available to sexual assault survivors and do they recommend them?

Counsellor/Advocates and managers from the Victorian CASA's and SECASA were asked about their familiarity with online support options for sexual assault survivors. Out of 32 responses, 1 Counsellor/Advocate or manager was able to name a peer support option, that being Pandora's Aquarium.

Counsellor/Advocates and managers from the Victorian CASA's were asked if they see online peer support as a therapeutic option for survivors of sexual assault. Out of 11 responses, 10 answered 'yes,' with the exception stating that they were not against it, but just unaware of what was available.

Counsellor/Advocates and managers from the Victorian CASA's were asked if they had referred their clients to seek support online (information, counselling or peer support). Out of 11 responses, 7 stated they had referred their client to Information (websites), 4 stated they referred their client to both Information (websites) and Counselling (e-mail counselling, chat counselling and video conferencing). No Counsellor/Advocates or managers stated they had referred their client to online peer support.

Counsellor/Advocates from SECASA were asked if they saw online support as a viable option for survivors of sexual assault. Out of 21 responses, 16 stated 'yes,' 1 stated 'no,' and 4 stated both yes and no, stating reasons for why and why not.

Counsellor/Advocates from SECASA were asked if they had referred clients to seek

support online. Out of 21 responses, 12 stated 'yes,' with the main support resource being the SECASA website, 8 stated 'no,' and 1 did not provide an answer.

Counsellor/Advocates from SECASA were asked what online tools they used personally. The most common online tool used was e-mail (19 identified), with the least common tool being chat rooms (0 identified).

E-mail	19
Discussion Forums	3
Chat Rooms	0
Instant Messenger	2
Skype	4
SocialNetworks	8
Podcasts & Phone Apps	8
YouTube	5
Other	(iview) 1

Note: Victorian CASA's – Ballarat CASA, Barwon CASA, CASA House, Eastern CASA, Gatehouse Centre, Gippsland CASA, Goulburn Valley CASA, Loddon Campaspe CASA, Mallee Sexual Assault Unit, Northern CASA, Sexual Assault Crisis Line (SACL), South Eastern CASA, Upper Murray CASA & West CASA.

11. Discussion

11.1 What Peer Support options are available to Sexual Assault Survivors Online?

The research discovered, through various methods of collecting information, that there are various forms of peer support available to survivors of sexual assault online. Discussion Forums, Chat Rooms, Yahoo Groups and Facebook groups were seen as options that may be beneficial to survivors of sexual assault.

In an effort to understand how survivors may go about finding peer support options online, the research tries to replicate the methods a survivor may use. Google search engine was used, as it is the top search engine used within Australia (SEO Consultants, 2010). It was unclear as to whether key words entered would bring up search results that would present inappropriate material such as pornography or sex related sites. For some survivors, undertaking similar searches could trigger or be detrimental to their recovery, and consequently push them away from finding help and resources online.

When first approached about the research project, there was a lack of awareness around online peer support options for survivors of sexual assault. Due to the limited research conducted in this area, much time was spent looking up relevant literature, understanding the needs of survivors and the benefits of online peer support.

Recommendations for peer support came from various sources; this posed an issue as it was unclear which of these sources were valid and could be trusted. To gather a better understanding of the various options and their validity, each option needed to be looked at individually.

Several survivor discussion boards, chat rooms, Yahoo groups and Facebook groups were registered to. It was important that each of these were explored carefully over a period of time to understand how the environment operated and assess if they were suitable referral options for CASA Counsellor/Advocates. Observations of the various

peer support environments were documented and comparisons were made.

Within the first month of observation, it became quite clear that Facebook groups and Yahoo Groups were not appropriate peer support options for survivors of sexual assault; these were eliminated from the list of recommendations.

When searching Yahoo Groups, there was an overwhelming response with more than 700 groups available to rape and sexual assault survivors. Although a majority of Yahoo groups required registration, and provided anonymity for the members, there seemed to be a lack of safety measures in place. Unfortunately engagement with Yahoo groups was not favourable as messages were not returned and membership for many of the groups not confirmed. Alongside this, many of the Yahoo groups appeared to be outdated, with irrelevant content and sent out multiple spam messages.

Facebook was only found to have a limited number of 'groups' that seemed relevant. However, there appeared to be numerous 'pages' dedicated to sexual assault and family violence, but mainly used for the purposes of sharing information, updates and events. Facebook groups/pages, unlike Yahoo groups, are not anonymous and present a personal profile of the individual. Depending on your privacy setting, friends and the public may be able to view your information and the groups/pages you belong too. For survivors of sexual assault, this may not be an area of their life they want to share with everyone. Messages sent out to sexual assault Facebook groups and pages were not returned.

'Wild' /independent chat rooms that were not connected to discussion forums were not seen as a viable option, due to the lack of safety measures, the easy accessibility and the complex content of the chat. Engaging on the chat rooms outside of the forums presented an interesting observation. A few members during the chat appeared to change their username and age. This then also changed the way they typed, their language and the way they interacted with other chat members. Discussion with one of the chat members highlighted that what was being observed, was DID (Dissociative Identity Disorder) (Spring & Spring, 2010).

From this conclusion, the options left to explore were the discussion forums and their attached chat rooms. Discussion forums and their attached chat rooms appeared to be the most utilised form of peer support for survivors of sexual assault due the multiple number of safety measures put in place.

Due to the various discussion forums that were available to survivors of sexual assault online, it was important to come to some sort of consensus around what a viable discussion forum and chat room should look like.

11.2 Which of these options meet the Selection Criteria?

The most popular discussion forums and their attached chat rooms were explored to gain an understanding of why they were so popular (these were forums that came up a number of times across the various search methods). For survivors this option allows them to be anonymous and explore/discuss their experience in a safe and understanding environment. A survivor and moderator stated "*The anonymous nature of on-line is something that is very attractive to many survivors, especially those who aren't willing to let [others] know about there past experiences*" (sic).

After observing and engaging with various discussion forums a selection criterion was designed looking at the areas of Safety & Privacy, Registration, Access, Environment, Response Rate and Navigation (please see section 8.3). Discussion forums that did not meet these criteria were eliminated.

The number of members and the number of posts that a forum had were not seen as a significant factor when choosing a discussion forum. The discussion forums in the recommendation range in size of members and posts. A forum may have thousands of members, but only a few hundred that are active, therefore analysis was around response rate, and in assessing how active the forum was.

11.2.1 Safety & Privacy

Wether it is online or in the real world, establishing safety is of the utmost importance

for survivors of sexual assault (ACSA, 2008; Dass-Brailsford, 2007; Herman, 1992). From what has been observed, the online peer support environment of discussion forums and the attached chat room reflects this by putting in place a number of strategies to ensure the safety of its members.

When registering, potential members must agree to the guidelines upheld by the discussion forum and chat room (additional guidelines are provided for the chat rooms). The guidelines highlight a number of rules that aim to protect the safety and privacy of the registering member as well as the other forum members. The IP addresses of members/non-members are monitored to ensure that members are not being stalked and problem users are blocked. Alongside this Forum Moderators (or similar) are available 24/7 and block/report features are available for members to use should inappropriate or questionable comments/ behaviour be observed.

Finally discussion forums state that the forum is not a substitute for professional help, and that it should not be used in times of crisis; encouraging individuals to contact a crisis hotline and seek professional counselling. Crisis phone numbers for Australia are present on the recommended discussion forums (except for MaleSurvivor).

11.2.2 Registration

Each of the recommended forums has a registration process that involves members having a username and password, and a verified e-mail address. Once these have been checked, an Administrator or Moderator will process the membership request. Registration to a forum allows a member to post comments, create a profile and gain access to member areas.

Seeing that the research project was centred on online peer support for 'survivors' of sexual assault, at first it seemed appropriate that I registered as a 'survivor,' and enter the forum with a survivor mind-set. Registering as a survivor would have provided me with access to 'survivor only' forums, providing me with a deeper understanding of the environment. After a number of discussions however, it was deemed ethical that I register as a 'researcher.' Although this limited my access, it opened another door in

which communication with Moderators and Administrators was free flowing and forthcoming about the peer support environment for survivors of sexual assault.

11.2.3 Access

'Access' in the discussion forums/chat rooms was assessed by looking at the various levels of access different registrations types had. Each discussion forum presented in the results had forums that were open to the public, forums that were 'member only' and forums that were password protected or required Moderator authorisation. Membership was mandatory prior to posting or sending private messages to other forum members.

Survivors had access to 'survivor only' forums and chat, which were hidden and inaccessible to guests, secondary survivors and researchers. Researchers had limited access; this was to ensure members were not treated as research subjects and to respect their privacy. There were research guidelines drawn out in every forum that highlighted again the concern for their member's safety and privacy. Registering as 'researcher' prohibited access to the chat room and consequently an assessment of the environment, response rate and navigation could not take place. To get an idea of how the chat rooms operated, the Moderators and Administrators provided information.

In each discussion forum, an area was dedicated to research and/or activism. It was within this area that researchers were able to place their questions and research studies. All research questions had to be approved by a Moderator prior to being posted publicly in the research area.

It is assumed that most members who engage on the discussion forums access it from home. The Internet is low cost and memberships to the majority of discussion forums available online are free. To increase access to individuals who may have low bandwidth, many discussion forums do not allow videos (mp4, AVI or WMA) to be uploaded or large pictures (JPEG, PGN or GIF) to be posted.

The environment of the discussion forums presented in the results was assessed as to whether it was welcoming and supportive, if responses from members and Moderators were supportive, sensitive and appropriate, and if sensitive/ triggering comments/posts were marked. Once granted membership, a welcome message is usually posted out to members providing them with an introduction to the discussion forums, and links to the guidelines, FAQ's and site map.

From the observations made it was clear that comments reflected a very welcoming and supportive environment. As one survivor and member stated *"Quite often forums act as a place of the first disclosure. It is a safer place to open up and they will see how we react, as a group, to other people's stories before they open up."* Through the sequence of various comments it was also observable that many survivors on the discussion forum had developed supportive friendships.

To respect the survivor's environment, posting on the forums was kept to a minimum. As a researcher and non-survivor, lack of commenting in forums bought about a sense of exclusion, and the experience of 'peer support' was slightly dampened. Peer support was encountered in a different way however; through conversations with Moderators and Administrators from each of the recommended sites, and over time professional relationships developed as there was a common goal. As the majority of the Moderators and Administrators are survivors themselves and had a good understanding of the online peer environment, their insight and opinions were vital to the research.

The success of a discussion forum and chat lies in the staff /volunteers who run it. The nature of the discussion forum is such that there may be few Administrators and Moderators that stick to the forum throughout its lifespan. If the Moderators/ Administrators lose interest, are not active or are not vigilant about what is happening on the forum, the discussion forum can become disorderly, and subsequently drive members away. Each discussion forum has a lifecycle and the recommendations provided in this research have a good history of peer support provision. However, should the level of commitment drop, these recommendations may not be relevant in another 6 months. Therefore regular reviews/evaluations need to be undertaken to

ensure organisations are providing relevant online peer support resources.

As access to chat was denied, observation of the environment could not take place. Information regarding the environment of the chat room was gathered from Moderators and Administrators. The environment experienced on the discussion forum is also reflected in the chat room, supportive, sensitive and appropriate.

11.2.5 Response Rate

The forums that are presented in the results all have a high response rate from forum members and from Moderators and Administrators. As the majority of the sites have a large and international membership, members are online at different times of the day and responses are sent in within minutes.

To gain an idea of the response rate and to gather some qualitative information, a question regarding the experience of online peer support was posted up in the research area of one of the discussion forums. Inside the duration of a month (Oct 3 – Nov 3 2011) the research question received 3 detailed responses and 80 views. The response rate to my research question post was small in comparison to the average number of responses to posts by survivors. Response rate in other areas of the forum, received more comments, more views and the responses took on a more 'conversation' like flow.

As a registered member of the discussion forum, members do not receive e-newsletters or updates to their message inbox. Sexual assault discussion forums understand that many members are on there to look for support and understand their experiences, and that bombarding them with material could be harmful or push them away from much needed support. 'Lurking' around the forum is not unusual, if a member chooses not to actively engage on the forum, they are not approached by anyone or asked to make a comment until they themselves are ready to do so. This is a particularly important element of sexual assault discussion forums, allowing the member to have control of when and if they choose to actively engage and whom they choose to engage with.

As the response rate could not be monitored on chat due to access being denied to the

researcher, information was provided by Moderators and Administrators as well as having the experience of previously engaging in chat rooms. Unlike the discussion forums where the survivor has more control over the pace, chat rooms allow for a more spontaneous and free flowing dialogue which can be fast paced and more intense. Chat rooms provide a 'real-time' instant exchange of messages. For some survivors this option may preferable as it can provide the feeling of a real world conversation, with others being able to share in the experience as it happens (Tate & Zabinski, 2004).

11.2.6 Navigation

Each of the recommended discussion board layouts are clear and easy to understand, and links that are regularly used are easy to access. All of the recommended discussion forums boards followed a similar style/layout as they all used the same software (phpBB (Bulletin Board)). This made navigating through numerous forums quite easy.

Forum boards were also set out in a very structured manner, with links that were important and regularly used (Home, Guidelines, Help and Links) placed in the same position on every page. Headings and important links were easily distinguishable by use of bolded, different coloured or larger text. The bulletin boards use a 'hierarchical structure,' which places important threads high up on the discussion boards, so it is easy to see. For example 'new guidelines to the chat room' or 'how to use this forum.' These types of threads are referred to as 'sticky notes.'

In terms of aesthetics, the forum boards use colours that are not heavy on the eyes and text that is easy to read. As some members, Moderators and Administrators may spend hours looking at the same screen, it was important that discussion forums were clearly laid out and do not place strain on the eyes.

At the commencement of this research project, the use of discussion boards was a foreign activity to the researcher. However, within the first few days of being introduced to the discussion forum environment, navigating around and checking the inbox, was as simple as navigating and checking an e-mail account.

Again, although access was denied to the chat room within the forums, it was noted that the majority of the sites used the Java chat application to run their chat rooms. 'Wild'/independent chat rooms that were engaged on during the research process used the Java application. The Java chat application was very easy to navigate and use, and was available for free download.

11.3 Are the experiences of survivors engaged in online peer support relatable with the experiences of those engaged in face-to-face peer support?

In order to gain an understanding if online peer support was relatable with the experiences of face-to-face peer support, information was gathered from various sources. Due to restrictions of time and the privacy of survivors, attending face-to-face groups to observe their engagement and journey did not appear to be an option. The experience of face-to-face groups was taken from sexual assault and group work literature, surveys completed by SECASA Counsellor/Advocates, and informal and ongoing discussions with SECASA Counsellor/Advocates and Moderators and Administrators.

From observations on the discussion forums, online peer support appeared to be very much relatable to the experiences of face-to face peer support.

Whilst in face-to-face peer support, a Counsellor/Advocate facilitates the group, online, Moderators and Administrators were seen as the facilitators. Although Counsellor/Advocates had relevant qualifications, many of the volunteer Moderators and Administrators underwent various training to be in the role and had survivor journeys of their own.

Both in discussion forums and in face-to-face peer support survivors experienced a sense of connectedness, validation, and a sense of empowerment and control was restored. Negative feelings of shame, guilt and isolation were decreased or eliminated all together. A Survivor and Moderator stated "*It was a huge sense of relief to discover that I wasn't alone, and that there were people out there who not only understood what I was going through, but who actually had a positive outlook on life and healing. I think I*

found a hope that I didn't know existed. Eventually I felt comfortable enough to share bits and pieces of my own story. The support and compassion that complete strangers were able to offer has made an immeasurable difference to my own healing. Things that once felt unspeakable are not… Things that were once shameful are not."

From what was observed, the recovery stages experienced by survivors (Safety, Remembering and Mourning, and Reconnection) illustrated by Herman (1992) seemed to be evident in the discussion forums. It appeared that survivors who engaged in the discussion forums, used online peer support in conjunction with real world support (seeing a counsellor) to better aid their recovery. A recent survey conducted by Pandora's Aquarium found that 63% of 433 survivors who responded were currently in therapy (Pandora's Aquarium, 2009). Blanchard (2011 pg81) states that " [individuals] may find online discussion groups a source of significant social support, and these groups may open doors for discussion with treatment providers that would not occur without such support." As one survivor stated "*I found that it was easier to seek outside support once I had been given the opportunity to talk about what happened online. It helped me build up the courage to speak about what happened in real life*" *(Pandora's Project, 2009).*

Some survivors appeared to use the discussion forums as an independent source of support mainly when exploring and understanding their experience. It was also used in this way when wanting to reconnect with other survivors through sharing their experience or engaging in activities of research or activism. Whilst it appeared that remembering traumatic memories and processing them were done primarily in a real world setting, survivor's experiences of this process were visible on the discussion forums. "*For me personally, I found it beneficial to work one-to-one with a therapist, and also seek additional support on the message board. Sometimes that was to work on a deeper level on things that had been discussed in therapy, and other times it was just to talk to someone who understood how hard it was to be working through those memories*." Survivor and Moderator.

As stated previously, safety is of the utmost importance, both environments implement various guidelines and strategies to ensure members felt safe to contribute and come

back to the discussion forum or consecutive meetings. In a face-to-face environment if a participant is in a state or crisis, or in danger, a Counsellor/Advocate will put in place a plan to ensure the participants' safety. In the same way, in discussion forums, members are provided with resources and crisis numbers, should they be in a state of crisis or feel they are in harms way.

The healing journey is not a linear process, and is experienced differently by each person, using different mechanisms (Herman, 1992). In regards to the therapeutic environment, some survivors may feel safer to participate in peer support online from the familiar and safe environment of their own home. This can allow them to take a break when they feel overwhelmed and access the discussion forum whenever they feel the need to. For others, face-to-face may be a more preferable option, being in a different environment which is contained, and which (for some) may be physically safer than their home environment. This allows them to set aside a particular time to engage with other survivors in a different space.

Whilst discussion forums may provide ongoing and 24/7 access to online peer support, ongoing support can also be experienced in a face-to-face environment. Through conversations with SECASA Counsellor/Advocates it was noted that participants usually swapped contact details, and remained in contact with each other for support long after the group ceased. A great example of this is the 'Victims No Longer' peer group, where survivors have been managing an e-mail tree for many years post their 'Victims No Longer' Weekend.

Different challenges are encountered for face-to-face peer support and online peer support for survivors of sexual assault and there will always be physical differences between the two. SECASA Counsellor/Advocates have shown a high interest in the therapeutic setting of online peer support; however, Counsellor/Advocates also illustrate strong views about the intensity of face-to-face peer support. Wether it be one or the other, or done in combination, peer support in general is seen as an integral healing stage (Herman, 1992)

(Please also see Appendix 17.9)

11.4 Are counsellor/advocates familiar with online peer support options available to sexual assault survivors and do they recommend them?

In general there is an overwhelming acceptance by SECASA Counsellor/Advocates that online support and online peer support are viable options for survivors of sexual assault.

However, although Counsellor/Advocates and managers from the Vicotrian CASA's and from SECASA believe online peer support and other forms of online support are viable options for sexual assault survivors, none have recommended peer support options to clients. A number of survey participants highlighted that they were unsure/unaware of peer support options for survivors of sexual assault, and therefore were unable to recommend them (Blanchard, 2011).

Responses from the surveys showed that SECASA Counsellor/Advocates believed that for some, online support and peer support had a number of advantages. This included increased access to support for survivors with access and mobility issues, the ability to be anonymous and have a control over the setting and accessing support in their own time and place. Additionally it was noted that it was an option for survivors who may not be ready to access face-to-face support, and for survivors already in counselling it can serve as additional support.

SECASA Counsellor/Advocates also had various concerns about online support and peer support. Main concerns were centred on the safety, security, legitimacy and confidentiality of online support. A few stated having unease about offenders who could pose as survivors. SECASA Counsellor/Advocates also expressed that for survivors, online support can be overwhelming and that it does not tailor to the survivor's specific needs. One raised the issue of a client's ability to discern the good from bad when online.

When answering the question of familiarity with online support options for sexual assault survivors the SECASA Counsellor/Advocates who used 3 or more online tools personally, provided detailed answers, whereas c Counsellor/Advocates who used 2 or less online tools personally, provided less detailed answers.

From the results, one could assume that Counsellor/Advocates acceptance or anxiety towards the online world was related to their own familiarity with online tools.

12. Limitations, Challenges & Opportunities

12.1 Limitations

12.1.1 Surveys

The first survey that was developed looked at peer support in a face-to-face environment. These surveys were administered through e-mail to SECASA Counsellor/Advocates. Three responses were received. Although the content of these surveys were helpful, more responses were needed to strengthen the results. Distributing the survey through e-mail was not seen as an effective method, it removed the immediacy and allowed the individual to put the survey on the bottom of the 'to do list,' subsequently being forgotten. Being the first of many surveys developed, as well as it being developed very early on in the research project it was unsure what information would really be beneficial to the research project. The surveys went for a page and a half, and contained mainly open questions. The length and open nature of the survey may have deterred individuals filling out the survey. Lastly the method of returning surveys could have also deterred individuals as they had to 1: type their responses into the survey document, save, attach and send back, or 2: print the survey, fill it out and fax it through. (Please see Appendix 17.1 and 17.2)

Surveys administered online through the SECASA website were aimed at professionals who utilised the site. Four responses were received. Again, more responses were needed to strengthen the results. The survey was fairly straight forward, and could be completed within minutes; however it is possible that where the survey was placed on the website received less traffic, hence the limited responses. (Please see Appendix 17.3)

The last set of surveys looked at Counsellor/Advocate views on online support and peer support. These were administered face-to-face, and 32 responses were received. The surveys were distributed in two rounds, the first round to Victorian CASA Counsellor/Advocates and managers, and the second round to SECASA Counsellor/Advocates. Due to an oversight and a few other changes, the first round

specifically highlighted 'peer support,' whereas for the second round, the term was generalised as 'online support.' Had the second round of surveys, specified 'peer support,' it is believed that the results would have further strengthened the view that CASA Counsellor/Advocates thought that online peer support might be a viable and therapeutic option for survivors of sexual assault. (Please see Appendix 17.4 and 17.5)

Face-to-face surveys were distributed during the team meeting and time was set aside within the meeting agenda to complete the surveys. This allowed the participants to reflect on their responses and note more detailed answers.

Gathering survey data through online methods was not seen as a productive way for gaining information for this research project. It was found that surveys completed face-to-face were a far more effective method. Gathering responses face-to-face provided a greater depth in responses, with sections to comment being filled out with valuable information.

Ongoing informal discussion with SECASA Counsellor/Advocates and observation and engagement with the different online peer support discussion forums appeared to be the best method of gathering information.

12.1.2 Access

As a researcher, it appeared to be unethical to enter into an online peer support group and pose as a survivor, therefore all groups were registered to as a 'researcher.' Administrators and Moderators were made aware of the research question and the purpose for interacting within the group. Access to chat and survivor forums (which researchers did not have) would have provided a wealth of knowledge and enhanced the content of the research project.

One forum in particular was very strict regarding researchers in the discussion forum. Information regarding this forum was mainly collected through observation and engagement with Administrators and Moderators. As a researcher, this limited access to engaging with survivors on the forum. It was however also seen as a positive quality of the forum.

Access to Yahoo Groups and Facebook Groups was extremely limited, as all communications sent out, did not receive a reply. This could be due to the content of the message, as it asked a number of questions about the group that may have taken time to respond to. It could also be attributed to the fact that the group may be inactive or because it is set up specifically for survivors, research is not seen as a high priority.

12.1.3 Participants

Overall, there was a good variation of participants who contributed to the research; Survivors of sexual assault who engaged online, Administrators and Moderators of the discussion forums and SECASA Counsellor/Advocates. The information provided created a rounded understanding of sexual assault and online peer support. It is believed however, that the research could have benefited from the opinions of Counsellor/Advocates outside of SECASA/CASA who may/may not have more engagement online (for example, rural Counsellor/Advocates). Furthermore understanding if online peer support related to face-to-face peer support may have been better supported had there been observation of a face-to-face peer support group. Had there been more time available to complete the research, these areas would have been taken into consideration.

12.2 Challenges

12.2.1 Time

Time was a great challenge whilst completing this research project. Approximately 10 weeks were spent gathering information and writing up the report. As a student researcher, a number of things had to be taken into consideration. Firstly, as the SECASA environment was new, there was much to learn and understand about the organisation before the research project was started. Recognizing the constraints of gathering data, getting familiar with the online setup and understanding the research process took up a large amount of time, which was not really anticipated. As the project progressed, limits and boundaries had to be set according to what was achievable in the time available.

12.2.2 Options

The main challenge of this research was filtering through the large amount of options that were available. Although Yahoo Groups, Facebook groups and 'wild'/independent chat rooms were eliminated quite early on in the process, there was still a vast amount of discussion forums to analyse. Due to the time restriction, a selection criterion was created quite soon after a few promising options were found. Discussion forms that did not meet the criteria were removed.

What was especially noticeable was the lack of options for male peer support online. Whilst the majority of the discussion forums included a specific area within the forum for men, and men were welcome to join, there appeared to be no real forum that was exclusive to male survivors of sexual assault. Due to male survivors being the minority, it felt important that online peer support should be tailored accordingly, as done in a face-to-face setting.

12.2.3 The Online World

The only thing constant about the online world is change. This will be a challenge as new ways of communicating online may emerge and old options fade into the background. Due to the ever-changing nature of the online world, options provided in this research are relevant to this point in time. In order for the database to be maintained and relevant, regular reviews will need to be carried out to ensure the options are still viable, as well as to investigate other options that may have developed.

There is a move to include interactive features on websites such as videos, discussion forums and whiteboards; this is a challenge for organisations as interactive features on a website require constant attention and monitoring. Communications with LivingWell, a male sexual assault service based in Queensland (Australia), highlighted the difficulty they were having in running a discussion forum through their website. For the moment, LivingWell's discussion forum is unavailable, until it can be resourced sufficiently. The online world needs continuous attention and resources, and for sexual assault services wanting to deliver services or support online, full time attention is needed to keep it up to date. LivingWell is currently looking at ways to develop and

improve the discussion forum in an effort for it to remain sustainable, and be seen as an option for peer support for survivors of sexual assault.

12.3 Opportunities

12.3.1 SECASA Counsellor/Advocates

One of the greatest opportunities provided was completing the research project within the SECASA environment. Ongoing informal discussions with Counsellor/Advocates supplied us with a wealth of knowledge, which would have otherwise be very hard to gather had the project been conducted offsite or by an external party. Counsellor/Advocates not only provided insight into their practice but showed support and encouragement throughout the duration of the research project.

12.3.2 Administrators, Moderators & Survivors

As a researcher, it was important that the recommendations stated in this report were not only recommended through observation. Regular communication was achieved with either an Administrator or Moderator of every discussion forum recommended. All communications were extremely forthcoming, and provided information not only about the forum, but their own personal experiences.

Whilst the majority of the communication was done online through e-mail and the discussion forum message system, SECASA provided opportunities to meet various individuals who were Administrators or managers of the recommended discussion forums.

Kathy, an administrator from the OurPlace discussion forum presented at a SECASA team meeting. Michelle from the [Inspire Foundation](), (Inspire Foundation is responsible for running ReachOut.Com) presented at a Cyber Safety Professional Development Workshop. Phone conversations were also held with Gary and Hugo from LivingWell. All provided the opportunity to speak informally about peer support, the online environment and online peer support options available for survivors of sexual assault.

13. Recommendations

- Online peer support options (discussion forums/chat rooms highlighted in the results) are recommended and presented as the options that met all our selection criteria for survivors of sexual assault.

- Counsellor/Advocates are made aware of online peer support options and their benefits for survivors of sexual assault.

- Counsellor/Advocates are provided with education and support around how to use the Internet effectively, in an effort to decrease anxiety and enhance their online communication skills.

- The online database provides a rating system and comments area for individuals to rate and comment on their experience of using the discussion forums and chat rooms.

- The discussion forums and chat rooms highlighted in the database be assessed every 6-12 months to ensure they are still meet the selection criteria. This will also involve assessing new options.

- The need for the introduction of a male survivor forum, that is tailored to the needs of male survivors of sexual assault.

- Further research carried out within the area of online peer support for survivors of sexual assault.
- That further research be done into how relatable online peer support groups are to face to face groups.

14. Conclusion

The Internet has changed the way organisations deliver services and there appears to be a drive now, more than ever to provide individuals with online service delivery options. This report identifies that online peer support is highly utilized by survivors of sexual assault.

Discussion forums were seen as the most fitting option for peer support. Chat Rooms that are a feature of these discussion boards are also deemed as options. Both the discussion forums and chat rooms that have been recommended in this research have been analysed and chosen according to specific selection criteria, addressing Safety & Privacy, Registration, Access, Environment, Response Rate and Navigation.

The research highlights, that regardless of the physical aspects, there are commonalities between online peer support and face-to-face peer support. Many survivors who engage on the forums experience a sense of connectedness, and a decreased sense of isolation, shame and guilt.

SECASA Counsellor/Advocates note that online peer support for survivors of sexual assault is a viable and therapeutic option. However, due to a lack of knowledge around what peer support options are available, they are unable to recommend them to clients.

Discussion Forums hold a wealth of information that can be beneficial for survivors, and although online peer support may not be an option for all (Tate & Zabinski, 2004), it is important that an option be provided for those who may find it a viable option. The recommendations of the research will be complied into a database that will sit on the SECASA website in early 2012.

In order for the database to remain relevant, recommendations must be reviewed every 6-12 months, using the same assessment tool. Further research needs to be done in this area, to better understand the role of online peer support and the options available to sexual assault survivors.

15. Glossary

The following definitions have been primarily sourced from Webopedia (2011) unless otherwise stated.

Administrator (forum)	An administrator is the main overseer that looks after various aspects of the forum. Admin keeps the forum up to date. Admin decides what forums and categories should be created. Admin decides what features should be added. Admin decides the rules. Moderators enforce them. Admin is a contact point when users have something to complain about. Admins responsibility is to look after the well being of the forum. Admin must see the bigger picture and guide the forum to its own direction. It is also the admins responsibility to make sure the mods and global mods don't get too personal in their judgment when situations that require action arises. (http://www.phpbb.com/)
Blog	Short for *Web log*, a blog is a Web page that serves as a publicly accessible personal journal for an individual. Typically updated daily, blogs often reflect the personality of the author.
Chat	Real-time communication between two users via computer. Once a chat has been initiated, either user can enter text by typing on the keyboard and the entered text will appear on the other user's monitor. Most networks and online services offer a chat feature.
Discussion Forum	Also known as a discussion board , bulletin board or message board. An online discussion group. Online services and bulletin board services (BBS's) provide a variety of forums, in which

	participants with common interests can exchange open messages.
Facebook Groups	Facebook 'Groups' provide a closed space for small groups of people to communicate about shared interests. Groups can be created by anyone (Facebook Help Centre, 2011).
Facebook Pages	Facebook 'Pages' allow real organizations, businesses, celebrities and brands to communicate broadly with people who like them. Pages may only be created and managed by official representatives (Facebook Help Centre, 2011).
Flame	A searing e-mail or newsgroup message in which the writer attacks another participant in overly harsh, and often personal, terms. Flames are an unfortunate, but inevitable, element of unmoderated conferences.
Instant Messaging	Abbreviated *IM*, a type of communications service that enables you to create a kind of private chat room with another individual in order to communicate in real time over the Internet, analogous to a telephone conversation but using text-based, not voice-based, communication. Typically, the instant messaging system alerts you whenever somebody on your private list is online. You can then initiate a chat session with that particular individual.
Link	In hypertext systems, such as the World Wide Web, a link is a reference to another document. Such links are sometimes called *hot links* because they take you to another document when you click on them.
Lurk	To eavesdrop on a chat room or conference. In most online areas, lurking is perfectly acceptable behavior and is, in fact, encouraged so that you get the feel of the area before posting your own comments.

Mailing List	A list of e-mail addresses identified by a single name, such as *mail-list@sandybay.com.* When an e-mail message is sent to the mailing list name, it is automatically forwarded to all the addresses in the list. Most e-mail clients support mailing lists, which enables you to broadcast e-mail messages to groups that you define. In addition, there are *mailing list servers* that manage centralized mailing lists for groups of users.
Moderator	In online forums and other online discussion spaces the moderator has the authority to block messages deemed inappropriate or break the rules of that discussion space. Moderators generally try to keep users on topic and keep the discussion thread or chat room free of personal insults and derogatory comments.
Post	(1) *(v.)* To publish a message in an online forum or newsgroup. *(n.)* A message published in an online forum or newsgroup.
Thread	In online discussions, a series of messages that have been posted as replies to each other. A single forum or conference typically contains many threads covering different subjects. By reading each message in a thread, one after the other, you can see how the discussion has evolved. You can start a new thread by posting a message that is not a reply to an earlier message.
Web 2.0	Web 2.0 is the term given to describe a second generation of the World Wide Web that is focused on the ability for people to collaborate and share information online. Web 2.0 basically refers to the transition from static HTML Web pages to a more dynamic Web that is more organized and is based on serving Web applications to users. Other improved functionality of Web 2.0 includes open communication with an emphasis on Web-based communities of users, and more open sharing of information. Over time Web 2.0 has been used more as a marketing term than a computer-science-based term. Blogs,

	wikis, and [Web services](#) are all seen as components of Web 2.0.
Yahoo groups	Yahoo! Group's is a large collection of discussion boards created by individuals or groups for the purpose of communicating (Preimesberger, 2010). It's where people with a shared interests meet, get to know each other, and stay informed. Your group gives you instant access to: -Shared message archives -Photos and photo albums -Group event calendars -Member polls and shared links (Yahoo7 Groups, 2011).

16. References

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17. Appendix

SECASA
South Eastern Centre Against Sexual Assault

SECASA are currently undertaking a project looking specifically at online resources/services available for those who have been sexually assaulted. The aim of this survey is to gather an understanding of who is more likely to use online resources/services, how beneficial they are to the user, and locate credible online resources/services that can be provided to clients as a viable therapy option.

Please Note: The following survey is for research purposes, no identifying information will used, however your responses may be included in our research paper. Please inform us if you do not wish for your responses to be used.

INDIVIDUAL FOCUSED

1. What is the demographic of your clients? (Tick where appropriate)

☐ Predominantly Female ☐ Predominantly Male ☐ Mix

☐ 0 – 15 years ☐ 16 – 25 years ☐ 26 – 35 years

36 – 45 years ☐ 46 – 55 years ☐ 56+ years

Do you know of any other commonalities in this group : for example literacy skills and relationship status _____

2. How does your service meet the needs of those with special needs?
_____
_____

3. How long do individual counselling sessions run for? (Timeframe eg: 12 sessions)
_____
_____

4. Are there waiting lists? (Referral to first contact)

☐ YES, how long (approx)? ☐ NO
_____

5. What are the goals or desired outcomes for the session?

_____
_____

6. How important is a clients' body language and behaviours to the worker-client relationship?

_____
_____

7. In your opinion what are the main reasons that clients give when they are unable to attend appointments? Does this occur often?

_____
_____
_____

8. Do you think any of the following online resources/services could help clients? (Please tick)

☐ Skype   ☐ YouTube   ☐ Chat rooms

☐ Online Forums   ☐ Online Counselling   ☐ Blogs

☐ Social Networks   ☐ Other

If, OTHER please state: _____

Thank You for your participation.

Please leave your details should we need to contact you.

Name : _____

Agency:_____

Contact No:_____

E.mail:_____

Contact SECASA:
PO BOX 72
East Bentleigh

SECASA
South Eastern Centre Against Sexual Assault

SECASA are currently undertaking a project looking specifically at online resources/services available for those who have been sexually assaulted. The aim of this survey is to gather an understanding of who is more likely to use online resources/services, how beneficial they are to the user, and locate credible online resources/services that can be provided to clients as a viable therapy option.

Please Note: The following survey is for research purposes, no identifying information will used, however your responses may be included in our research paper. Please inform us if you do not wish for your responses to be used.

GROUP FOCUSED

1. What Groups do you run? (include demographics)
    _____
    _____

2. How many participants are active in a group at one time?(Please tick)

    ☐ Less than 5   ☐ 5 -10   ☐ 11 - 15   ☐ More than 15

3. ☐ of the group influence   Do you think the size outcomes? (Please Tick)

    ☐ YES   NO   ☐

    Comment:
    _____
    _____

4. Do all group members participate in the session? (eg: what happens when a client talks excessively or not at all?)
    _____
    _____

5. How do the relationships within the group evolve over the duration of the workshop/sessions?
    _____
    _____

6. Do you think having online groups would be a viable therapeutic option?
    ☐ YES   ☐ NO   ☐ NOT SURE

    Comments:

_____

_____

_____

Thank You for your participation.

Please leave your details should we need to contact you.

Name : _____

Agency:_____

Contact No:_____

E.mail:_____

Contact SECASA:
PO BOX 72
East Bentleigh, 3165
ph: 9928 8741
fax: 9928 8749

17.3 Online Surveys for Professionals

Online use survey for Professionals

The aim of this survey is to gather an understanding of who is most likely to use online resources/services, how beneficial they are to the user, and locate credible online resources/services that may be provided to clients as viable therapy options.

The following survey is for research purposes, no identifying information will used.

1. What industry do you work in?

    Education

    Health

    Hospitality

    Science and technology

    Advertising, Arts and Media

    Trades and services

    Government department

    Legal

    Retail

Other - specify

2. How often do you access SECASA's website?

   Weekly   Monthly   Several times a year   First time

3. Do you work with people who have experienced sexual abuse?

   Yes   No

4. Do you go online to find resources that could help your clients?

   Yes   No

5. Would you consider referring your clients to an online resource for therapy? (e.g. chat room, forums, discussion boards, email/online counselling)

   Yes   No

6. Have you come across any useful online resources that are specific to sexual abuse?

17.4 Face-to-Face Surveys for CASA Counsellor/Advocates & Managers – Round 1

1. Are you familiar with websites, online counselling support or online peer support available to survivors of sexual assault? (eg: discussion forums, chat rooms, online groups, chat counselling, e-mail counselling, video conferencing. Please list)

_____

_____

2. Have you referred clients to seek support online? (Please state Y or N)

☐ Information (Websites)

☐ Counselling (e-mail counselling, chat counselling, video conferencing)

☐ Peer Support (discussion boards, chat rooms, online groups)

3. Do you see online peer support as a therapeutic option?   YES ☐   NO ☐

   Why? _____

4. Would you consider counselling clients using online tools? (Please state Y or N)

☐ Chat counselling (instant messages)

Why? _____

☐ E-mail Counselling

Why? _____

☐ Video Conferencing (Skype)

Why?_____

5. Other comments:

_____

_____

_____

17.5 Face-to-Face Surveys for SECASA Counsellor/Advocates - Round 2

1. Are you familiar with online support options available to survivors of sexual assault?

(Forums, chat rooms, online counselling, groups, other - Please list)

_____

2. Do you see online support as a viable option for survivors of sexual assault?

☐ Yes, because_____

☐ No, because_____

3. Have you referred clients to seek support online?

☐ Yes, which ones? _____

☐ No, Why? _____

4. Would you consider counselling clients using online tools? (Please tick)

☐ Chat counselling (instant message)

☐ E-mail Counselling

☐ Video Conferencing (Skype)

5. Personally what are the online tools you use?

☐ E-mail   ☐ Discussion Forums   ☐ Chat rooms

☐ Instant Messenger (chat) ☐ Skype   ☐ YouTube

☐ Social Networks: ☐ Podcasts & Phone Apps   ☐ Other:_____

6. Comments _____

_____

17.6 Observation Template/Tool for Discussion Forums

Name	URL	Country
The name of the Discussion Forum	*Place URL here*	*Country is which the service is based*
Date Started	No. of Members	No. of Posts
When did the Forum begin running?	*The Number of Members on the Discussion Forum*	*The number of posts on the Discussion Forum*
Navigation	Registration Process	Last Post
How easy is it to find your way around the site?	*What is the registration process?*	*When did the last person post a comment?*
Who uses it?	Feel of Environment	Engagement with Mod/Admin
Demographics	*How does it feel when observing/engaging*	*What is the engagement like with mods and admins?*
Safety/Privacy Guidelines	*Link to the Guidelines*	
Research Guidelines	*Link to the research Guidelines*	
Mod/Admin Comments	*Communication with administrators or moderators*	
Member Comments	*Communication with survivors and forum members*	
Assessor Comments	*Thoughts and conclusions about the Discussion Forum*	
Overall Rating	*1 – 5 (1 being not so good and 5 being fantastic)*	

17.7 Observation Template/Tool for Chat Rooms

Name	URL	Country
The name of the Chat Room	*Place URL here*	*Country is which the service is based*
Date Started	How many Online?	Response Rate
When did the chat room begin running?	*The Number of Members on chat at one time*	*Is there continuous chatting?*
Navigation	Registration Process	Is it Independent?
How easy is it to find your way around the chat room?	*What is the registration process?*	*IS it linked with an organisation or is it 'wild'/independent*
Who uses it?	Feel of Environment	Engagement with Mod/Admin
Demographics	*How does it feel when observing/engaging*	*What is the engagement like with mods and admins?*
Safety/Privacy Guidelines	*Link to the Guidelines*	
Research Guidelines	*Link to the research Guidelines*	
Mod/Admin Comments	*Communication with administrators or moderators*	
Member Comments	*Communication with survivors and forum members*	
Assessor Comments	*Thoughts and conclusions about the chat room*	
Overall Rating	*1 – 5 (1 being not so good and 5 being fantastic)*	

17.8 Observation Template/Tool for Yahoo Groups & Facebook Groups

Name/Date	No. of members	Started	URL
Name of Group and date of assessment	*How many members*	*When did it begin*	*Place URL here*
Latest Activity	Membership	Moderated	Yahoo or Facebook?
When was the last post or e-mail	*Is membership needed*	*Is it moderated*	*Yahoo or Facebook?*
Comments/Issues?	*Any comments? What issues were encountered?*		
Environment/ Content?	*What is the environment like? What is on the main page?*		
Communication with mods/admins?	*Communications with moderators and admins*		
Overall Rating	*1 – 5 (1 being not so good and 5 being fantastic)*		

17.9 Comments from Survivors

For privacy reasons the name of the Discussion Forum has been removed and is replaced with [forum name].

17.9.1 Comment 1

"Firstly my opinion, isn't a clinical one at all, I not a psychologist or counsellor, so can't really give a "professional opinion" in that sense, in saying that I have had alot of experiences here on [forum name], and have been a member for a long time. (Over 20% of my life) and am myself, as are all the moderators and staff here, survivors ourselves.

I feel that on-line degree of support to that of a face to face support environment, the reality is, there is only so much support one can give or receive for that matter, over the internet, however on-line I feel does have, and will continue to have, an effect of support survivors of abuse when face to face isn't always possible. The anonymous nature of on-line is something that is very attractive to many survivors, especially those who aren't willing to let those to there everyday lives know about there past experiences.

Every survivor of any traumatic event, has stages in their healing, it could be a car crash, terrorist attack, witnessing an act of violence, natural disaster, or in the case of those here, sexual violence, and each person travels a different but similar journey to be able to heal (overcome, cope with, or even just comprehend) the trauma they've endured.

Often the journey can be different in that, nobodies experience is exactly the same, a survivor of CSA for example may have to deal with things such as DID, where the survivor of an acquittance rape would have to deal with different things, such as social phobia's or the fear of getting pregnant, so the way in which they heal is always going to be different between different people, but quiet often there are vast similarities between survivors of even completely different types of abuse. (Or between survivors of other trauma's for that matter) the reason I believe for this being so is that the brain deals with trauma in a similar way regardless of it's type - obviously there are

extremities to this (e.g. DID etc), but obviously individual experiences will also shape how a person deals with, and overcomes there specific experiences as a survivor, and I can't see this being vastly different online to offline. Obviously the method of interaction and support maybe different, however I feel a healing journey isn't defined by if it is online or offline, but rather the intrinsic obstacles the survivor overcomes during that journey.

I hope this helps with your research."
Survivor & Moderator

17.9.2 Comment 2

"I first joined the message board over ten years ago. I had been searching online for information about trauma, and was very sceptical about online communities. Initially, I lurked around and read what other people were sharing about their own experiences and feelings. I was only 18 and had very little real-life support at the time. It was a huge sense of relief to discover that I wasn't alone, and that there were people out there who not only understood what I was going through, but who actually had a positive outlook on life and healing. I think I found a hope that I didn't know existed. Eventually I felt comfortable enough to share bits and pieces of my own story. The support and compassion that complete strangers were able to offer has made an immeasurable difference to my own healing. Things that once felt unspeakable are not... Things that were once shameful are not. It sounds really corny, but I feel really privileged to have discovered such an amazing support system at such a young age – I honestly wouldn't be where I am today.

For me personally, I found it beneficial to work one-to-one with a therapist, and also seek additional support on the message board. Sometimes that was to work on a deeper level on things that had been discussed in therapy, and other times it was just to talk to someone who understood how hard it was to be working through those memories.

I think the peer-support that is offered via the message board has similar benefits to a real-life support group. There are obvious differences, such as not being able to have a

therapist mediating the support group or guiding the direction that discussions take. I think online communities can offer those who would otherwise not join a support group (due to physical isolation/lack of support groups in their area/feelings of shame & not being ready to "face" others) an opportunity to participate in healing discussions, and seek the support that they deserve."

<p style="text-align:center">Survivor & Moderator</p>

17.9.3 Comment 3

"I think the single most important benefit of a forum like [forum name] is the feeling of finally being understood.

I think one of the first things that a survivor looks for is a sense of connection. Rape/sexual abuse makes us feel so disconnected from life and other people that this is the thing we need before any real healing can occur. Unfortunately, more often than not, in the "real world" people do not always react very well to rape survivors. They are judgemental because they do not understand about rape myths or how survivors heal - the time it takes, the complexity of it. Simply telling a survivor they are not at fault does not dispel the feelings of shame and self-blame.

One of the single most repeated statements on [forum name] is: me too. There is no denying that survivors just want to feel like they belong again. There is also such a limited public knowledge on how to cope with rape that survivors often need reassuring they are not a "freak" or weak because of how they are coping.

Quite often forums act as a place of the first disclosure. It is a safer place to open up and they will see how we react, as a group, to other people's stories before they open up.

I think forums like this one give survivors a voice in a way that was never possible before. They come here, learn they are not a freak etc and this slowly empowers them to stand up for themselves/champion for themselves offline all without having to leave the safety of their home/school etc. They learn here that they deserve love and that rape hasn't forever ruined them. [Forum name] gives hope where hope was hard to find."

17.9.4 Comment 4

"Online forums such as [forum name] have provided me with a lot of security and understanding people. I have been able to process my emotions and slowly, talking about things and become more comfortable taking my issues to a therapist, (and I have been to my share). I don't want to say that [forum name] saved my life but I do think I would not have been the same person without a place like this. It has all been about baby steps, a little peice at a time. I think first and foremost [forum name] has taught me that no matter the issue, no matter how crazy I feel I am on the inside there is always, if nothing else a small hand being raised here, sometimes there are many hands either way it is so nice to feel you will never be alone again. What all survivors have been through make the world seem like a very lonely place. In my personal childhood I had no voice what so ever and [forum name] has helped me find my voice, its not always loud and confident but I do have a voice. I have found I have the power to choose, which was a huge revelation, I was so used to having everything decided for me and pre decidied desicions forced upon me. Realizing there is a big world just waiting for me to conquer is an awesome feeling.

Good Luck with your project, I would love to read the finished product if possible!"
Survivor & Forum Member

17.9.5 Comment 5

"The great thing about a site like [forum name] is that you can join pretty much in whatever stage of processing you're in. When I first applied for membership in 2008, I was still not certain that I wanted to call what happened to me "rape." I saw this as a bit of an experiment and told myself *I'll join, I'll see what's there, and if it's awful I won't come back.* Initially, I joined as a secondary survivor because I had spent most of my time in high school supporting my then-best friend through her date rape. My own issues were constantly on the back-burner, which made it difficult for me to accept that I was a survivor even after I left for college and this friendship ended. Once I became a part of the [forum name] community, I started to realize that I had been hiding behind my friend's problems. She was in crisis after crisis and her lifestyle often left little room

for anyone else to be hurt or confused. I learned, fairly early on, that simply because I was not as self-destructive or angry as my friend did not mean that I was less of a survivor. We both had our own, unique traumas to deal with and we dealt with them in different ways. It was then that I nervously private messaged a moderator and asked her to change my member group. She was very understanding and supportive and by the next day, at least one site on the planet considered me a "real" survivor.

Even having the word "survivor" attached to your name on a single internet site can be rather validating. My parents didn't believe me, and only one or two people in real life had any idea that I was raped (though I had told them both that I was unsure) but this site gave me a membership that "counted" me among survivors. At the time, I was in and out of therapy, and I never really found a therapist who was a good fit. Whether I was in or out, I still often needed support that a single hour (or forty-five minute) session per week could not give me. No therapist could be awake at two o'clock in the morning when I couldn't sleep and just needed to vent a bit of frustration. Also, most therapists could not tell me, "I've been where you are and it gets better." Having an active community not only helps survivors to get support, but I believe that [forum name] has helped many of us to actually realize we are survivors in the first place. I grew up with most of my traumatic memories dissociated beyond reach. Without memories to back up my knowledge that *something* horrible had happened to me, I felt completely lost most of the time. When I came to [forum name], I could see that my pain was very similar to the pain other survivors were describing. Many of their challenges were the same challenges I was facing, and many of them had the same difficulty in figuring out what happened and how to categorize any of it. This site gave me recognition as a survivor and believed me when I said something was wrong even before I could adequately remember much of what happened. This is something I haven't really gotten from therapy or even from most people I have told in real life, and I'm thankful for it."

Survivor & Forum Member

17.9.6 Comment 6

"Seeking help is not just about doing 1 thing, it's about a lot of things. I think the internet has opened a *lot* of doors in this area - maybe when we are questioning

ourselves and wondering whether to seek help, the internet is a place to turn to help sort out our thoughts. Then, when we're ready, we can move onto a different kind of help."

Forum Member

17.9.7 Comment 7

"[forum name] is really my first and only experience so far of 'meeting' people online, and forming kind of friendships I guess you could say, with people that I don't know.

I think the initial drawcard was anonymity, and a really supportive environment when I was going through a tough time. It's a pretty unique community, where everyone is generally pretty comfortable sharing things about how things might not be so great for them, but also supporting others that are having a hard time too. There just seems to be more of a culture of acceptance here than in real life. Many of my friends would have no idea how to react to some of the things that I have found support for on ..., so as a result, if things are a bit tough, I am more likely to come on here to get support/facts/perspective than talking to a friend in real life, because everyone here is so understanding, where 'real' friends might not be."

Forum Member