Engaging in cyber space: Seeking and receiving information and help after sexual assault

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This study reports on a qualitative investigation of questions and answers about sexual assault posted on Yahoo! Answers. People (Askers) can post questions to which anyone accessing the website can respond during a four-day period, at the end of which Askers and the Yahoo Community can pick the ‘best’ answer. This paper reports on an analysis of 391 answers to 65 questions about sexual assault posted on Yahoo! Answers. The answers were categorised into content, tone and perceived helpfulness. A comparison between the answers posted by members of a cyber team based at a sexual assault counselling service and non-cyber team respondents revealed major differences in the content and tone of responses. The responses posted by the cyber team were more systematic and demonstrated greater detail, consistency and support than those posted by the non-cyber team respondents. The answers posted by the cyber team was voted as ‘best’ answer by both Askers and the Yahoo Community more often than non-cyber team respondents.

Keywords: sexual assault; internet and abuse, treatment/intervention

This paper is reporting on the findings from a study that aims to gain an understanding of the sexual assault issues raised and the answers provided by people accessing a community-driven question-and-answer (Q&A) internet site. Sexual assault can have devastating, long lasting consequences. The provision of counselling, support and information to sexual assault victims is important for their recovery and for prevention and minimisation of these negative long-term consequences, yet many young victims of sexual assault do not receive the support, advice or counselling they need. There is evidence which suggests that early counselling interventions reduce the sequelae of symptoms that typically follow the trauma of sexual abuse (Resnick et al., 2007). One of the greatest barriers to receiving timely counselling is that many sexual assault victims are unwilling to disclose the assault or seek help. As young victims of sexual assault are increasingly revealing their assault in anonymous online environments, a new opportunity to provide timely support and advice on where to go for help has developed (Derring-Palumba, 2006). However, little is known about the way victims of sexual assault use these sites or the tone and content of responses to questions posted on-line. Online counselling and advice for sexual assault is a relatively new venture with little research to guide the development of effective online support for this client group (DuBois, 2004; Williams, Bambling, King & Abbott, 2009).

In line with the burgeoning use of the internet, young people are increasingly accessing the internet for health related information in general. A 2001 U.S. study found that nearly half of all youth surveyed had accessed the internet for health related issues (Borzekowski & Rickert, 2001). The internet has become an
important source for information and support on health related issues for young people in Australia as well. Kids Help-Line is a free Australian national online and telephone youth counselling sand in support service for young people between five and twenty-five. It has had a steady rise in the demand for online counselling and online and email counselling with young people since it began in 2000 (Kids Helpline, 2009, p. 10).

People who have tended to avoid traditional forms of counselling are accessing the internet for information, advice and counselling. Online sites are more likely to be accessed by young, introverted, shy or embarrassed people in seeking help (Derrig-Palumbo, 2006). Young men also have been found to be reluctant to access more traditional counselling forums, while showing an inclination for accessing services via the internet (Wyn, Cuervo, Woodman & Stokes, 2005). Male survivors of sexual abuse have been found to over or under identify with traditionally masculine traits and/or feel confused about their sexuality with some reporting flashbacks during intimacy (Coxell & King, 1996; Doherty & Anderson, 2004). On-line counselling can assist online clients to talk about their concerns and also to encourage them to attend face-to-face or telephone counselling.

While research on on-line counselling is bourgeoning there is little research on the efficacy of counsellors joining social networking sites and responding to queries about current issues facing young people, such as sexual assault. For this reason previous research reports are only tangentially relevant to understanding social media, and the input of professional counsellors on these sites. The findings from our research on Yahoo! Answers make a contribution to the development of theoretical underpinnings that may be used in future research.

**Method**

We conducted a study on the questions and answers on sexual assault posted by the Yahoo community on the Australian site of Yahoo! Answers since 2005. This paper focussed on analysing the answers for content and tone as well as perceived helpfulness to those posting questions as evidenced by the voting patterns for the ‘best’ answer. We compare the type of answer posted by South Eastern Centre for Sexual Assault (SECASA) cyber team respondents (CT) with those posted by non-cyber team respondents (NCT). Reports on the analysis of the questions posted on Yahoo! Answers are contained in other articles under consideration for publication.
Yahoo! Answer

Yahoo! Answers\(^1\) was launched online in late 2005, it is currently available in twelve languages and 26 countries are identified. Google Trends reports that approximately four million unique visitors log onto Yahoo! Answers around the world each day. Australia is ranked the 10\(^{th}\) highest national user of Yahoo! Answers by Google Trends with NSW, followed by Victoria as the highest using State\(^2\). Yahoo! Answers is an online community where any signed up Yahoo! member can ask and answer questions on any topic. Askers and respondents to Yahoo! Answers identify themselves through nominating a ‘username’ and can upload an ‘avatar’ (which is an identifier). Sometimes Askers can reference to their ‘online’ age and gender in the text under their question. However, online reporting of age and gender needs to be treated with caution (Green, 2007; Whitty & Gavin 2001).

The question is open for anyone with a Yahoo account accessing the website to answer during a four-day period. Both Askers and respondents can vote on which answer they considered was the best answer. Askers have up to four days (although they can make this period longer if they wish) to pick the ‘best’ answer. Often, if the Asker needs help in a hurry, they can determine the ‘best answer’ within hours of asking the question or the next day. They can also add a comment about the answer/s. If the Asker does not choose a ‘best answer’, then it is opened to a community vote. The answer with the most votes after a set period of time is awarded ‘best answer’ status. If there is a tie, with the same number of votes for multiple answers, then the Question remains in the voting stage indefinitely. Questions and answers are not deleted; anyone can view them in Yahoo! answers. While the formal questions in Yahoo! Answers raise a specific topic, Askers can write additional material underneath including additional questions. Best answers are given a rating of up to five stars.

South Eastern Centre for Sexual Assault

South Eastern Centre for Sexual Assault (SECASA) is based in Victoria, Australia, and offers a 24-hour Crisis Service for adults, children and non-offending family members. In 2007 SECASA established a cyber outreach team and over the next three years expanded its online presence to include active participation in a number of online communities. The cyber outreach team responds to online questions and delivers service via a number of different web communities including Facebook, Myspace, YouTube, Twitter, and Q&A sites.\(^3\) In

\(^1\) For more information on Yahoo! Answers refer to http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yahoo!_Answers
\(^3\) The opinions and views expressed in the commentaries of Yahoo answers belong solely to the authors while supporting the mission and aims of SECASA.
a twelve-month period (2009/2010), the cyber outreach team answered a total of 538 questions from young people and had 244,886 unique visitors to their website\(^4\) (South Eastern Centre for Sexual Assault, 2010). SECASA endorsed our research and provided us with the ability to identify the responses to Yahoo! Answers given by members of the cyber outreach team.

Yahoo! Answers established the Knowledge Partner program to provide an opportunity for organisations to bring their knowledge and experience to Yahoo! Answers. SECASA is in dialogue with Yahoo! Answers about joining the Knowledge Partners program and has received permission to put the SECASA logo on their answers. A cyber team respondent said that staff are not directed to answer queries in a particular way but are encouraged to make their own professional judgements based on SECASA’s draft answering protocols. 

[answers] should include the three R’s, Reassure the Asker to deflate feelings of panic or isolation, Rephrase the question into a therapeutic format to allow the Asker to gain some therapeutic insight into their circumstances, Refer to a service or online resource. Try to include phone numbers (Australia wide are best unless the Asker is specific about their location) and URLs.\(^5\)

**Data Collection**

Data was collected using transcripts of questions posted by the Yahoo Community in Australia since Yahoo Answers began; two were posted twice under two different categories. We have included the double rendition of these because they each attracted different responses with separate voting patterns for the ‘best answer’ making 65 questions in total. 

The searches conducted for this project were limited to Questions in English, classified as Australian and contained the keywords: sexual assault, rape, and/or incest. Although the Questions were posted in the Australian section, the people who asked and answered them could come from any geographical location. The researchers began accessing questions and answers from the time Yahoo! Answers commenced in 2005 in order to get a large range of questions and answers. The first SECASA cyber outreach team member registered on Yahoo! Answers in August 2008 so we were able to undertake a comparison of the responses between the cyber team respondents and the non-cyber team respondents since that period.

In response to the 65 questions, 391 answers were lodged. The average number of replies to a question was six with the most receiving 51 answers. When analysing the response rate in respect to the 31 questions answered by the cyber team, there were 152 replies from non-cyber team respondents to 25 of the questions. There were no responses from the non-cyber team respondents to the remaining six questions.

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\(^5\) This came from a draft document supplied to the research team by SECASA.
It is widely known that some people ‘troll’ Yahoo! Answers, posting questions with salacious or extremely prejudiced content with the hope of generating online dispute.\(^6\) Although we suspect that some questions were fabricated (and some Askers were indeed accused of being ‘trolls’ by those posting answers) we have included all question and answers to illustrate the overall flavour of the online conversation. The policy of the cyber team is to respond to all online queries in a serious manner, even when others may think a query is not genuine.\(^7\) The reason for this is that even if the question is a troll, the cyber team’s response may assist people who are reading answers and who might have similar experiences.

**Analysis**

The questions and answers were imported into NVivo 9 program for coding. Prior to undertaking the coding the researchers immersed themselves in the data so that they were familiar with each of the questions and the related answers. They frequently dialogued as the interpretation proceeded. The questions and answers were analysed using interpretive description which is an inductive analytic approach designed to create ways of understanding phenomenon (Thorne, Reimer Kirkham, & McDonald-Emes, 1997). This method was used to interpret the meaning behind the questions, sub-questions and answers. This approach has been used in nursing and counselling settings (Osborne, 1990; Thorne, 2008). This paper focuses on the Answers with only a brief description of the questions to provide the context.\(^8\) The analysis sought to understand the underlying meaning behind the answers and to see how the tone related to the content. We retained the wording, grammar and spelling of the text as it appeared in Yahoo! Answers. An identifier precedes all quotes and indicates whether the response was from a member of the SECASA cyber team (CT) or from other members of the Yahoo community who was not part of the cyber team (NCT).

**Results**

The formal questions in Yahoo! Answers were contained within the header, however most Askers posted sub-questions in accompanying text. Most questions contained a reference to a specific sexual assault incident which provided a context to subsequent queries. Askers also sought factual information and practical or personal advice in addition to information about resources or places to go for help. There were questions about current debates around sexual assault with Askers seeking comments on a particularly viewpoint contained in the accompanying text.

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\(^8\) An analysis of the Questions is contained in a subsequent paper.
Content and Tone of Answers

We analyse the type of answers given by the Yahoo community in respect to content and tone. After which we look at the differences between the responses of the cyber team and the non-cyber team respondents and perceptions of helpfulness of answers.

Content

The content of the answers was classified according to five broad categories: defining sexual abuse, advice, reflections, accessing help and accessing resources. Most members of the Yahoo community attempted to respond to questions in a serious manner, but a few appeared self-promoting and provide facetious answers.

Defining sexual assault. In response to questions like ‘What is sexual assault?’ or ‘Could this incident be considered sexual assault?’ there were a variety of responses ranging from vague replies to extensive explanations, definitions and legal rulings and addressed questions on sexual assault, mandatory reporting, state of limitation and age of consent.

Y43 (CT). If you are under 16, no-one is allowed to have sex with you. It is a criminal offence. Sexual assault does not only mean penetration. Having a crotch shoved in your face without your consent would fall within the scope of an assault of a sexual nature.

Y1 (CT). The age of consent to sexual activity is usually 16 years throughout Australia, In Victoria if you are under 16 years a partner must be within 2 years of your age and in that situation the Police are very unlikely to press charges, provided both people are giving their consent to the sexual activities. So as you say he was 17 years old and you were 12 years old, it is Sexual Assault ie Rape.

Most respondents did not provided detailed responses or accurate information to legal questions like the respondents to questions Y43 and Y1 (above). Typically respondents generalised and gave personal interpretation of legal matters as indicated by the responses to the question “Is this child abuse or am I just overreacting?”

Y21 (NCT i). depends on how much older her was than you. if he was an adult then it would be called statutory rape. what happened to you is the reason 30 year old men go to prison when they have sex (even if the child is more than willing) with 13 year old girl.

Y21 (NCT ii). its hard to say. in a way yes in a way no. this happens so much, that i would legally say no. u said no but then u froze u didnt fight and u stayed with him so technically he didnt do anything "wrong."

TECHNICALLY.

A small number of respondents responded to queries about how the law could be applied to the situation described in the question by providing simple, but seemingly accurate information.
Y46 (CT). At this point she can not actually ‘sue’ [your son] and your family. She does however have the right to make a formal statement to police and request to have him charged. This does not necessarily mean legal proceedings will go ahead.

Y18 (CT). Consulting a Lawyer or Legal Aid centre could be a start, and investigate an Interim Intervention Order against him. He can contest it in Court before it becomes a full Intervention Order.

In contrast, most answers to questions that required the application of the law to a specific situation tended to lack specificity or to personalise the response.

Y56 (NCT). But there has to be proof. It may be a testimony of several key witnesses, which is what someone referred to as ‘no proof’ but it has to be pretty compelling. Also each state has different laws on what statutory rape is. So she can say anything she wants. And so can you. Just refuse to speak to her anymore and don’t defend yourself, she may be recording those calls of your admission of having sex with her.

Advice. The second type of Answer revolved around giving advice in respect to i) taking legal action, ii) seeking help, and iii) avoiding repetition. Taking legal action was recommended by a large number of respondents who suggested that Asker report the incident to the relevant authority such as the police, a lawyer, legal aid, Department of Human Services, Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission and/or starting legal proceedings. The motives for suggesting Asker report incidents to the police were related to expected outcomes of the reporting process, with some respondents anticipating that the police would provide protection; others anticipated that the offender would be punished, while a third group anticipated that this would prevent the perpetrator from sexually abusing someone else. The following answer was to a question which detailed a rape by classmate illustrates a preference for retribution.

Y9 (NCT). ...did u report this? Don't let the bastard go freewheeling about after this heinous crime. He must be punished and punished severely. ...... REPORT...i would say, for the sake of every women who has ever suffered this brutality.

The second type of advice was around respondents encouraging Asker to seek counselling, medical assistance or other forms of personal support. Typically, respondents who recommended counselling were emphatic about the need for Asker to tell someone about the incident.

Y42 (CT). tell a trusted adult and keep telling till someone helps you to make it stop. People you could tell: your parents, another relative like an aunt, uncle or grandparent, your teacher, school counsellor or nurse, your doctor, the parents of your best friend. If all of these are too hard, then tell a friend. You can talk to a confidential counsellor at …

A few respondents explained the process that would take place if they sought this kind of professional assistance.
Firstly, go and see your Doctor as soon as possible. Despite any legal wranglings, they have a duty of care that means they have to do what is best for your health, but still maintain patient confidentiality. In other words, regardless of your age and what happened to you, they will refer you to a clinic to be checked, as your long term health is their primary concern. As with any medical check regarding STD’s etc, the results are confidential, and only you and your doctor will know. For peace of mind you need to do this as soon as possible. Don't panic or stress, just speak to your doctor and they will do the best for you.

Occasionally it was suggested that the perpetrator of a sexual assault seek professional help.

Y11 (CT). If he suggests he wants to change his ways he could call Men's Referral Service, MRS where he can talk to another male about attending a Behaviour Change Group where men can learn about respectful relationships.

The third type of advice contained suggestions about how Askers could prevent a re-occurrence of similar incidents. Some respondent suggested that women should resist sexual pressure more forcibly and if the person does not cease the abuse then they should aggressively resist.

Q52 (NCT i). Next time, yell, scream, fight. Make sure you say no FORCEABLY. There were several times, in your story when you could have simply LEFT.

Askers sometimes attempted to place the sexual incident in the context of sub-cultural norms, in order that Askers would be in a better position to avoid similar incidents in the future. This type of advice was often set in the context of explaining how and why the conduct of the Asker contributed to sexual abuse. For example, some male respondents suggested that a sexual assault incident should be viewed from the perspective of the perpetrator.

Y40 (NCT i). Women really need to learn to get PISSED OFF and yell in anger. We men think you girls are just toying with us if you don't. And that turns us on.

On a few occasions respondents gave advice on the ways in which perpetrators of a sexual incident might be helped to change their behaviour so that they did not re-offend.

Y46 (CT). Your son needs to know that this behaviour is not o.k. He also needs to be supported in developing an understanding of why he acted out in this way, as well as learning how to prevent acting out in this way again. below i will provide links where you and your family can access such help and support.

Reflections. Respondents provided their own reflections on the circumstances that led to a particular sexual incident. Sometimes in the process of reframing a question, respondents disclosed their own experiences of sexual assault as demonstrated by this response to the question “Is this child abuse or am I just overreacting?”

Y21 (NCT iii). A lot of youngins lose their virginity young, very young like 12, 13. I lost mine at 13 slept with so many guys I felt GROSS seriously, but you were young and you didn't know better and u have to believe that.
haven't had sex in 6 months and before that felt really nasty. the fact that I haven’t had sex in 6 months (just kissing), makes me feel really strong and worthy. u should try it. I'm almost 20 now so yeah that's just an example of how you can feel better about your past.

Sometime the accuracy of rape figures or rape accounts is questioned as illustrated to by a response to the question, “What's the deal with rape?”.

Y14 (NCT). I feel that rape and molestation is overly reported and in MOST cases it NEVER happened. Women ‘CLAIM’ rape so the man will be ruined for life in the public eye, even if he is found innocent, and to try and to get power and control over the man, molestation is overly reported as well, parents will use whatever means they want to try and get power and control over men.

The interpretations of incidents tended to be divided between those that were supportive of the victim of sexual assault, and those that were condemnatory of the victim and blamed Askers, at least in part for the sexual assault. An Asker could receive both types of comments from different respondents, with some being supportive and others less so.

Respondents who were supportive in their interpretation of an incident sometimes provided low level counselling as part of the reframing of the background to the sexual assault and to help the person deal with the trauma that resulted from the assault. In these instances respondents explained that their reaction to the assault was normal and was not the fault of the Asker.

Y54 (CT). Having nightmares and flashbacks are ways that the body manages after trauma. The body thinks about what happened and processes that information. Flashbacks are the body and brain remembering very vividly what has happened to it...and is very normal.

Y4 (NCT). Also, just because other girls and guys your age are sexually active doesn't mean you're ready. Not all of us are ready to jump into bed with someone just because everybody else is supposedly doing it.

Y58 (CT). Date rape happens because people either aren't listening to their partners or they're only thinking of themselves and what they want. Date rape happens because there is an assumption by one party that by saying yes to a date means saying yes to sex. As you have pointed out, perhaps it can be confusing but that's why people need to be mature enough to be able to talk to each other about things like sexual expectations.

There were five occasions where ‘psycho-education’ was evidenced with respondents trying to educate Askers to understand their emotions or distress. The following dialogue between an Asker and a Yahoo member illustrates a ‘psycho-education’ response.

Y38 Question: [Sexual assault] I think I am loosing my mind, is this normal? I was drugged and rapped by a so called friend about 10 years back (I was only about 15 when it happened he was an adult). and I am only getting over the violation and assault. But lately I have been getting feelings for men (same sex) ..... Will this
pass, or am I gay and it is just making itself known to me now because of the traumatic event in my past it was some how camouflaged?

Y38 (CT) Answer: For heterosexual men, sexual assault almost always causes some confusion or questioning about their sexuality. Since many people believe that only gay men are sexually assaulted, a heterosexual survivor may begin to believe that he must be gay or that he will become gay. …… People do not ‘become gay’ as a result of being sexually assaulted. Whether you're a man or a woman, sexual assault is a trauma. The trauma of sexual assault involves losing control of your own body and possibly fearing death or injury. ‘Rape trauma syndrome’ is a term used to describe the common reactions that occur for both men and women after sexual assault. It is a normal reaction to an abnormal, traumatic event.

Some respondents reframed incidents in a way that diminished the effect of the incident, denied the incident, put blame on the ‘victim’ of the abuse or contested the accuracy of rape statistics. Some respondents stated that claims of rape were unsubstantiated and motivated by women who wanted to harm men, aided by a legal system biased towards women as the response to the question. “How does date rape occur?” shows.

Y58 (NCT). Its nature, with consent or not, is the man thats the one going forward because end of the day, its the man that sticks it in. If it turns out to be her word against his, thats why she will always have the advantage. There were several ‘blame the victim’ responses including name calling and humiliating or denigrating the Asker.

Y59 (NCT). So let's just do this - stop being stupid. Date people your own age and have consensual sex. When the word no pops out, drop it, go home and call another or refer to rosy and nice movie. A ‘blame the victim’ interpretation often was used when it was revealed that the abused woman was drunk, had initially responded to a sexual act and subsequently wanted the sexual encounter to cease, or had gone home with the man. An example of this attitude can be seen in the response to the question, “When is it sexual assault?” which was posted by a woman who went to the home of her date and wanted the sexual activity to stop.

Y40 (NCT ii). it's sexual harassment but you kissed him which is were you messed up, you gave him the wrong impression so he was probably acting out a submissive fetish thing. Punish the perpetrator was the mantra of some respondents to sexual abuse incidents. These comments tended to contain unrestrained language and be highly judgemental.

Y46i (NCT). He did it, so he faces the consequences. Sounds like this little nutcase son of yours doesn't belong in public school.
Y11 (NCT i). he needs 2 be shot with his own gun. he is a piece of ****.0 can do much better 4 you'r self and 4 you'r kids! he is a joke :(

Statement questions. Asker raised controversial topics in statement questions which tended to be posted by people who had a particular view of the present law or legal system. These type of questions generated discussion with Yahoo members challenging the assumptions contained in the questions and in so doing creating a debate. In response to the question “Is everyone else sick of ‘Was this a rape’ question?”, some respondents condemned women who get themselves into situations which result in rape, others blamed feminists for ‘revising’ definitions of rape and still others attempted a rational discussion about the topic. The variation in answers by the seventeen respondents is illustrated in the three answers noted below.

Y65 (NCTi) I truly believe today that young women are confused when it comes to consensual sex. They have been bombarded by sexual images constantly to the point that they don't know or are incapable of drawing the line when it comes to sex.

Y65 (NCT ii). It's not their fault, it is the fault of the ‘Feminists!’ They are the morons who expanded rape definitions to be so broad and the laws as well, that practically everything, including consensual sex and non-sexual acts are ‘rape.

Y65 (NCT iii) The only people who ask those questions are male trolls who make out a ridiculousness story, pose as a woman just so they can get people to agree with them. Those are the people with no lives and to make it worse they aren't twelve, they are middle aged. Its pathetic beyond belief.

Accessing help and resources. At the end of each posting there is a section called ‘Sources’ where a respondent can enter additional information. Typically the information provided is about resources or places that provide counselling or other assistance. Sometimes the word ‘source’ was misinterpreted by non-cyber team respondents who instead of providing a list of resources provided details about their own source of information or support.

Y11 (NCT ii). common sense and married for 17 years.

Y46 (NCT ii). My Ph.D. in psychology

Y46 (NCT iii) Crappy life

Detailed information about sites and organisations both within Australia and in other countries was provided by one group of respondents who also provided extensive information about where go to get help or counselling for sexual assault.

Y5. (CT). There are a couple of things that could really help with you coping with this situation. One, is the a Sexual Health Centre near to you, Melbourne Sexual Health Centre is @ 625 Swanston Street, 9341 6200

9 Only the cyber team provided this kind of detail.
1800 032 017 www.mshc.org.au and doesn't need a Health Care Card, the consultation and any treatments if you need them are free. Secondly talking to a counsellor at a Centre Against Sexual Assault would help you get over the rape try looking at www.secasa.com.au or www.secasakids.com.au to see how they would try to help you.

Contact details
In Victoria ring 1800 806 292
Australia wide 1800 200 526
Kids helpline 1800 55 1800
Lifeline 13 11 14
UK 0845 4647
Ireland 1800 778 888
USA 1800 656 HOPE

Web addresses
http://www.secasa.com.au
http://www.secasakids.com.au
http://www.rcni.ie/hlp_map.htm
http://www.rainn.org
http://www.rcne.com/
http://www.rapecrisis.org.uk/
http://www.rapecrisiscotland.org.uk/
http://www.rapecrisis.org.nz/

Most respondents did not supply any information and those that did usually failed to provide contact detail or web-addresses.

Y62 (NCT). if you can't afford an attorney, i hope you have a free legal aid where you live. look in the phone book for legal aid or a civil liberties group.

Tone

While there was little consistency in the tone of answers across questions, there were instances where all the responses were supportive in response to a particular question. This tone was adopted when there was a reported sexual assault incident which involved bullying, child abuse or spousal abuse.

Y42 (CT). it sounds like he is a bully, and you are right to ignore him. It’s his problem, not yours so you shouldn’t have to feel embarrassed about it

Y3 (CT). It does seem you have been taken advantage of, and with your past experiences you need protection and support in avoiding people who have abused you in the past.

Y18 (NCT i). and your right it wasn't right. im sorry for what happened to you and i hope you can grow to get past it! good luck and take care of yourself

Support or empathy was directed towards parents who were unable to protect their children, particularly if the abuse happened during an access visit.

Y13 (CT). Please remember that you are a great mother, and trying to make your daughter safe…… You know you are in the right.

There were many examples of affirming comments that endorsed an action taken by Askers to redress the situation or resist an attacker.

Y26 (NCT i). Good for you, that took courage and you did it. I hope that justice is served and you can get back to living your life without turmoil. Good Luck!!

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Y30 (NCT). I’m sorry this had to happen, but move on with your life because life is beautiful!!! hope i helped, but be strong!!!

Y51 (NCT). I personally congratulate you on fighting an attacker. You did well and may have saved yourself more mental anguish.

In situations where a young woman was seen to have put herself at risk, the tone was varied, with some being highly supportive while others were condescending, condemnatory.

Y52 (NCT ii). Hum either you are a nympho or you are plain dumb yes it is rape you said know and he still did it but since you liked it i guess you like rough sex.

There were instances where comments were neither helpful nor practical as indicated by this response to a question about a childhood sexual assault by a sibling.

Y26 (NCT ii). Good heavens. Report him, hound him, have him booked and shot between his legs!!!!!!

Some people used humour in their responses which was directed at both Askers and perpetrators of a sexual assault.

Y37 (NCT). Do the same thing back to her, or even better, attack her with a dildo. Oh wait, she may actually enjoy that.

Y18 (NCT ii). It seems like he is raping your image, and you should rape him with a restraining order, and if that doesn’t count, rape him in court.

Some respondents wrote in a satirical tone as illustrated by the following comments by a male respondent who took the opportunity to detail what he thought is the present state of affairs in respect to feminist domination of society as illustrated to this reply to the question, “If feminists believe in equality, why don’t they stand up for men that have been sexually assaulted by women?”.

Y6 (NCT). Silly rabbit, you forgot the basic feminist equation: man = bad; women = innocent victim.

Always…..Everything is always the man’s fault. Period. Some feminists are obviously conspiracy theory nuts….

**Comparison between the Cyber Team and the Non-cyber team**

A major difference between the cyber team and the non-cyber team responses was that the former always provided systematic replies that matched a set formula while none of other responses contained all of these features. There was no commonality between the answers provided by the non-cyber team respondents. The answers from the non-cyber team were amorphous, with respondents wandering off in many different directions. This made it difficult to classify their responses because there was no commonality between them. While some non-cyber team respondents addressed answers in a serious manner, they did not provide comprehensive or detailed responses. In contrast, the cyber team tended to follow a formula in terms of
content, tone and style. Their answers included: support, validations, advice (legal/medical/counselling), interpretation, and specific details about resources and assistance, in a non-judgemental and empathetic manner. No-one from the non-cyber team addressed all these points. Individual answers might contain one or two of these features, but rarely more than this.

A further difference between the two groups was in terms of consistency of responses as demonstrated in advice about help seeking. Although both groups recommended seeking counselling or legal advice in response to questions in which a sexual assault incident was cited, the cyber team did it as a matter of course. Sexual assault incidents were reported in twenty-three of the 31 Questions that both groups answered; in each of these instances the responses posted by the cyber team recommended that the Asker seek counselling and/or legal assistance. In contrast, while a few non-cyber team respondents made similar recommendations, most did not.

Another major difference in the responses to questions between the two cohorts was that only the non-cyber team respondents included humour, colloquial language, text talk and emoticons in their response. As noted earlier, the SECASA protocol states that answers should “rephrase the question into a therapeutic form to allow the Asker to gain some therapeutic insight”. Consequently, in an attempt to comply with the protocol the cyber team provided low level counselling and ‘psycho-education’. In contrast, when on the few occasions that this was undertaken by a non-cyber team respondent it was usually by someone who claimed to be counsellor themselves or was studying counselling.

There was evidence of emotional support and validation for the person in the answers from both cohorts however the cyber team consistently did this whereas the non-cyber team respondents did it less frequently. The cyber team members’ answers never contained condemnatory or negative comments but their response was ‘cool’ to the Asker (Y14) who minimised the impact of rape on women. In contrast, there were frequent instances of negative and condemnatory statements about the Asker or the abuser from the non-cyber team respondents.

A clear difference between the two groups was that the cyber team never self disclosed. There were seven instances of respondents reporting their own experiences of sexual assault all of which were posted by non-cyber team respondents, a few of which seemed to be self promoting.

Y11ii (NCT). I’ve just has dealings with a narcissist. now i have ptsd

Perhaps to most significant difference between the two groups was in respect to providing information about resources. The non-cyber team respondents never provided detailed information
about resources and where to go for help including phone numbers and web addresses. Most people from the non-cyber team failed to fill out this section and those that did, for the most part, provided perfunctory answers. The cyber team provided comprehensive lists of resources and places to go for help at the end of each question which were directed to specific needs.

**Perceived helpfulness**

We assessed how helpful the Askers found answers by analysing those that were voted as the ‘best’ answer as well as the comments posted by the Asker in response to certain answers.

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**Best answer**

A comparison between the votes awarded to the cyber team and the non-cyber team was based on the 31 questions that were posted since 2008 which was when SECASA joined the Yahoo community. Figure 1 outlines the responses to these questions and notes the type of response provided to them. Out of thirteen votes posted by Askers, the cyber team was voted as having supplied the ‘best’ answer ten times and a non-cyber team respondent was voted ‘best’ three times. Yahoo members can vote for ‘best answer’ if the Asker does not vote. Analysis revealed that the cyber team’s answers were voted ‘best’ fifteen times out of a possible seventeen times in this situation. In three instances, the cyber team posted the only response. One question had a tied vote for ‘best answer’; this ‘tie-breaker’ will remain indefinitely until another vote is received. Responses that included all or most of the items listed in Figure 1 (clear legal advice, clear other advice, validation, therapeutic response, and empathy) received the vote as ‘best’ answer from Askers and the Yahoo Community. These were the things that the cyber team routinely covered in their responses but were not systematically provided by any individual member of the Yahoo Community.

An examination of the type of answers that were voted ‘best’ shows that condemnatory, rude or antipathetic answers received no votes from Askers and few votes from Yahoo members, while affirming responses that validated their reaction to the assault were voted ‘best’ by Askers as indicated by the following answers by a member from group. Both answer received a five star rating from the Asker.

Y53 (NCT). Everyone copes with it differently. Talk to someone about it, tell them how you feel, and vent to them whenever you need to. The way you cope must be normal, if it helps you feel better. That's what I did...
Y15 (NT), This sounds like a terrible situation to be in, so what about you call one of the Sexual Assault Crisis lines, Australia wide it is 1800 200 526 or in Victoria 1800 806 292, they can advise you about what to do next. You may want to have a medical, you may need the morning after pill, and eventually to tell the Police what has happened. The Police will investigate and Mr Jones may find he is living with only a lot of other men in a place called a Prison for quite a long time

**Asker Feedback**

Askers are able to leave a very short line of feedback in Yahoo! Answers and many did so. The cyber team received only positive feedback with comments indicating that the responses were helpful to Askers. The following comments to a response made by a cyber team respondent, provides validation to the usefulness of providing skilled feedback.

Y22. This answer fully answers the question I asked. Not only that, it shows that not all guys are like my boyfriend and don't believe that his opinions regarding his behaviour are at all good nor are they correct.

Answers posted by non-cyber team respondents also received some positive comments particularly to responses that contained emotional support, factual information and suggestions about appropriate strategies that Askers could adopt. The following comments that were posted by two Askers illustrate their appreciation for this type of advice.

Y51. Thank you! I hope this will help others out there as well

Y62. thnx to all the people who have helped me i have the evidence and hes going down

In five of the 65 questions, Askers wrote comments indicating their disfavor for respondents for posting rude and offensive answers.

Y31. You are so rude. I was RAPED and you show no compassion.

**Discussion**

Answering a question on Yahoo needs a different approach from a face-to-face counselling session or an online counselling session, as there is little or virtually no interaction with the ‘client’ and little possibility of follow-up. The research demonstrated that people who have been sexually assaulted are accessing on-line networking sites to obtain support, advice and information. As Yahoo questions can be searched by anyone going into the Yahoo! Answers web site and also appear in Google keyword searches, they become part of the online resources available to people seeking information about sexual assault generally on the internet.

The responses provided by the cyber team were voted ‘best’ by Askers in the majority of cases indicating that they found them more helpful than the responses from non-cyber team respondents. The response given by the cyber team were detailed, accurate, systematic and supportive. In contrast, while some answers
provided by the non-cyber team respondents were supportive they did not provide detailed and specific responses to the questions and sub-questions. This is particularly evident in respect to: queries about legal and medical concerns and where to go for help or information. The popularity of the cyber team’s responses, particularly by Askers, provides an important validation of the usefulness of the answers supplied by the cyber team to the person posting the question and becomes a valuable resource for others searching for information on sexual assault online.

A given internet site like Yahoo! Answers has the potential to be both helpful and harmful. Some of the responses to questions posted on this site by the Non-cyber team respondents were at best unkind and at worst destructive. We concur with Borzekowski (2006, p.214) that the efficacy of delivering Internet-based support and counselling should be the focus of future studies.

**Conclusion**

Social media sites are now popular sources of health related information and support. This data provides evidence that organisations such as SECASA can make a positive contribution in this rapidly developing area. The research provides support for the proposition that there is a role for professional advice or help to be offered for sexual assault on community-driven social network sites such as Yahoo! Answers. Further research exploring the efficacy of these interventions would enable evidence-based funding applications and decisions to be made in a considered manner about the allocation of resources into cyber counselling.

**Acknowledgement**

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**References**


South Eastern Centre Against Sexual Assault. (2010). *Annual Report 2009-2010: South Eastern Centre Against Sexual Assault* Moorabbin: South Eastern Centre Against Sexual Assault.

South Eastern Centre Against Sexual Assault. (2011). *Online procedures manual for Yahoo! Questions: South Eastern Centre Against Sexual Assault (draft)*. Clayton: SECASA.


### Figure 1: Comparison of votes for ‘best’ answer between the cyber team and the non-cyber team respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Answers by cyber team and non-cyber team</th>
<th>CT Answers</th>
<th>NCT Answer s</th>
<th>Voted best by Asker</th>
<th>Voted Best by Yahoo -</th>
<th>Characteristics of the Answers voted ‘best’</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(nos)</td>
<td>(nos)</td>
<td>Legal advice</td>
<td>Other advice</td>
<td>Validation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y53 How do teenage sexual abuse victims cope~</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>NCT</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y62 My dads sleeping with my 11 year old sister what should i do?</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>NCT</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y64 Would you consider this abuse?</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>NCT</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y4 Is there a cause to my asexuality~</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>CT</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y5 Im not being racist or anything so please dont say i am~</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>CT</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y6 If feminists believe in equality, why don't they stand up for men..</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>CT</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y9 After rape my partner doesn't want to talk about it.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>CT</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y14 Whats the deal with rape~</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>CT</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y15 Neighbor raped me~!<del>!</del>!~</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>CT</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y18 This guy says i raped him~</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>CT</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y20 I need to help my friend but dont know how~</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>CT</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y22 I'm concerned my boyfriend may be a manipulative control freak~</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>CT</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y28 A little help with sexual assault~</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>CT</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y1 In Australia, what is the legal age for girls to have sexual intercourse</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>CT</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y2 Domestic Abuse next door~</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>CT</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y3 Legal in Queensland Australia~</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>CT</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y7 What are teachers responsibilities for reporting on possible abuse</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>CT</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y8 Getting into trouble for not doing much to help~</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>CT</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y10 What are our legal options if the police wont press charges~</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>CT</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y11 How to leave abusive husband, who is a police officer?</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>CT</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y12 Civil case to criminal case~</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>CT</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y13 Sexual Abuse on child from father!~</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>CT</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y16 What to say in a thankyou card to my parnter</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>CT</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y17 Is 3.5 months long enough for an accurate HIV test~</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>CT</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y19 What if u suspect ur little sister was being abused by your dad</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>CT</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y21 Is this child abuse or am i just overreacting~</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>CT</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y38 [Sexual assault] I think I am loosing my mind, is this normal~</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>NCT</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y42 Would this be considered sexual assault~</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>CT</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y46 How would you feel if your son got accused of sexual assault~</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>CT</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y54 Flashbacks to sexual abuse- how to tell if you have been raped~</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>NCT</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y61 Can i go to the police for assistance with this? (tied vote)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Total | 31 | 152 | CT= 10 | NCT= 3 | CT= 15 | NCT= 2 | 15 | 28 | 20 | 16 | 29 | 26 |