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Experiences of Harassment and Support after Sharing One's Personal Abortion Story Publicly

Key Points:

- Some people who have had abortions may choose to share their abortion story publicly in an effort to increase empathy and counter stigma.
- More than half of people who share their abortion story publicly experience harassment and other negative incidents as a result, including threats of physical harm.
- This harassment may lead to emotional stress, problems with loved ones, and difficulties at work and/or school for many people who share their abortion story.
- Despite this, positive experiences motivate many to continue sharing their story.

Background

Abortion is both a common and stigmatized experience in the United States.^{1,2} In recent years, public education campaigns have aimed to counter stigma and humanize the abortion experience by highlighting stories of people who have had abortions.³ These campaigns encourage people to share their personal abortion experiences publicly – online in a post or article, or in person at hearings, rallies, and/or educational settings.

Public education campaigns report shifts in attitudes among their target audiences as a result of their campaigns.⁴ Yet little research documents the experiences of people who tell their abortion stories publicly.

Anecdotally, those who share their abortion story publicly report harassment and threats as a result, as well as increased support.⁵⁻⁶ While no research has specifically documented harassment of people who tell their abortion stories, a Pew survey finds that roughly 40% of Americans have experienced harassing or abusive behaviors online.⁷ A growing body of research documents the gendered and racialized nature of online harassment⁸⁻¹⁰ and the toll it takes on emotional and psychological health, particularly for young people.¹¹⁻¹³ As such, online harassment is a growing public health concern.¹⁴

Given that abortion is a particularly stigmatized experience, people who share their abortion story publicly may have unique experiences of harassment and support. **In this study, we sought to explore individuals' positive and negative experiences as a result of telling their abortion story and to examine what they saw as the impact of these experiences on their lives.**

Methods

- We surveyed people who have shared their personal abortion story in a public setting, which we defined as in an outlet or at an event that is accessible to the general public for attendance and comment, whether individuals used their name or chose to remain anonymous.
- We recruited potential participants by email through contacts with public storytelling campaigns. 211 potential participants were invited to participate; 88 (42%) completed a brief anonymous survey online.

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Table 1: Participant characteristics	
Age Range	n (%)
18-19	1 (1%)
20-29	19 (22%)
30-39	23 (26%)
40-49	11 (13%)
50 or over	24 (27%)
Missing	10 (11%)
Sex	n (%)
Female	74 (84%)
Gender nonconforming	4 (5%)
Missing	10 (11%)
Ethnicity	n (%)
White	56 (64%)
Latinx	7 (8%)
Black	6 (7%)
Asian/Pacific Islander	5 (6%)
Mixed Race	2 (2%)
Other	2 (2%)
Missing	10 (11%)
Region	n (%)
West	22 (25%)
Southeast	18 (20%)
Northeast	17 (19%)
Midwest	13 (15%)
Outside the U.S.	7 (8%)
Missing	11 (13%)
Number of Times Story was Shared	n (%)
1 time	14 (16%)
2-5 times	37 (42%)
6-10 times	11 (13%)
More than 10 times	26 (30%)
When Abortion Story was Shared	n (%)
Within the last 5 years	54 (61%)
More than 5 years ago	34 (39%)

Results

- Participants shared their abortion story in a number of different outlets, including social media posts (60%), educational campaigns (51%), articles in newspapers and websites (24%), visits to policymakers (23%), and public testimony (17%).

- The majority experienced harassment or other negative incidents as a result of sharing their story (see Table 2). Participants reported negative experiences both online (53%) and in “real life” (36%). Fourteen percent reported feeling that they or their loved ones were in physical danger as a result of sharing their abortion story.

Table 2: Most common negative experiences as a result of storytelling	
Experience	n (%)
I was called offensive names*	42 (48%)
Someone purposefully embarrassed me	22 (25%)
I received death threats	12 (14%)
I was physically threatened	10 (11%)
I was sexually harassed	6 (7%)



- Almost half (47%) reported that these negative experiences as a result of sharing their story caused problems in their life, including mental or emotional stress; difficulties with friends/family or work/school; and damage to their reputation (see Table 3).

Table 3: Most common problems caused by storytelling-related harassment	
Experience	n (%)
Mental/emotional stress resulting from harassment	32 (36%)
Trouble with friends/family	24 (27%)
Missed activities with friends/family	9 (10%)
Caused problems at work and/or school	9 (10%)
Caused damage to my reputation	9 (10%)

- Positive experiences as a result of storytelling were also common (see Table 4). Many reported that these positive experiences motivated them to continue sharing their abortion story despite the harassment they experienced.

Table 4: Most common positive experiences as a result of storytelling

Experience	n (%)
I received a supportive response from friends and/or family	57 (65%)
Someone thanked or praised me for my story	56 (64%)
I received supportive comments from strangers online	53 (60%)
I made new friends/connections with other storytellers	44 (50%)
Someone told me that my story helped them after their own abortion	43 (49%)

- Participants reported many strategies to minimize their exposure to or harms from harassment, including using their first name only (28%) or an alias (10%) rather than their full real name, as well as carefully choosing when and where to share their story.

Conclusions

- Harassment and other negative experiences are common after people tell their abortion story.** Even with careful efforts to control when and how they share their story in order to avoid harassment and other negative experiences, more than half of storytellers experienced one or more negative incidents online – including physical threats and death threats – and more than a third experienced a negative in-person incident.
- It is possible that people who had negative experiences were more motivated to participate in this study. Even if we assume that people who chose not to participate had only positive experiences, that would still mean more than 25% of the overall invited pool of potential participants had a negative experience.

- Positive experiences as a result of abortion storytelling outnumber negative ones,** and motivate many people to continue sharing their stories. However, harassment and physical threats have made some people “hesitant” or “scared” to share their personal abortion story again.
- Policy makers, journalists, and reproductive health advocates should recognize the potential harms experienced by people who share their abortion stories publicly.**

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