A Screenplay for
Bystander Intervention for Sexual Harassment Scenarios for College Students

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Abstract

This project was developed to describe the drafting of a screenplay for an interactive, virtual reality sexual harassment training module for students of the California Polytechnic University, San Luis Obispo. The research began with the examination of the prevalent and persisting issue of sexual harassment within college campus communities, and how to present college students with the tools to intervene as bystanders, thus encouraging them to intervene when encountering sexual harassment scenarios. The resulting screenplay was written to provide college students at Cal Poly with strategies to identify and take action when encountering sexual harassment, especially in small group gatherings where the perpetrator may even be a friend of theirs. The production of this screenplay is planned for the 2021 school year, and will then be shown to a trial group of students as a way to identify patterns fo sexual harassment scenario recognition and likelihood of student bystander intervention.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Statement of the Problem:

This project is an examination of the prevalent and persisting issue of sexual harassment within college campus communities, and how to present college students with the tools to intervene as bystanders, thus encouraging them to intervene when encountering sexual harassment scenarios.

This research began with a survey of literature describing issues of sexual harassment as they pertain to university age groups and how they manifest themselves on college campuses. A commonly known statistic describing sexual assault states that 'one in four women' have experienced sexual violence, and "approximately 25% of American college and university women are survivors of rape or attempted rape (Fisher et al. 2000; Tjaden and Thoennes 2000). At least two thirds of rapes are perpetrated by someone known to the victim, often in a party or date situation, and often involving drug or alcohol intoxication" (Burn 2018, 779). Due to these high rates of sexual harassment and violence towards women, many campuses have adopted prevention programs, most often incorporating some sort of bystander intervention (Coker et al. 2011). The development of these bystander intervention trainings aims to impact and lower rates of sexual harassment and violence against women on college communities.

Background of the Problem:

In the examination of sexual harassment on college campuses, questions arise regarding the most effective methods of encouranging intervention. Psychologist Shawn Burn examined these issues in universities, stating, "Sexual assault prevention and risk reduction programs are now found at most United States colleges and universities. A review of the sexual assault

prevention research literature from 1970 to 2002 identified two broad categories of programming, self-defense trainings and educational pro grams" (Burn 2018, 780). The focus on bystanders is due to the recurring observation that "bystanders (friends and/or other partygoers) are frequently present in the pre-assault phase and yet do not intervene to reduce others' sexual assault risk." (Burn 2018, 780).

Due to this general lack of initiative by college peers to take intervention measures, college campuses are adopting bystander intervention education modules that may be effective in providing students with the tools to identify a sexual harassment scenario and intervene to protect the victim. In an examination of a 'Green Dot' campus training program, Coker et. al found that "Green Dot-trained students (either Green Dot speech alone or SEEDS trained) were more likely to report observing active bystander behaviors than those who received no intervention suggests that the intervention may be diffused through students' social networks such that those trained are more likely to report observing active bystander behaviors in their own environment, which likely includes those in their personal social network" (Coker et al. 2011, 790). This illuminates the idea that students will be more likely to identify sexual harassment scenarios if they recieve training, and that they are also likely to see these types of scenarios within their own close social circles. It has become clear that an effective training program must be not only interactive and relevant to a student bystander's current experience, but also realistically depict perpetrators and victims that are socially close to the bystander.

Purpose of the Study:

This study is the second trial of a sexual harassment training module that emphasizes bystander intervention. What sets this training apart from others is that it is entirely virtual. The training module proposed for this study is the first of its kind; a virtual reality, interactive

film where students would choose their own storyline, given choices regarding the type of intervention action to take. The goal of this study is to provide students with different opportunities to identify and intervene in sexual harassment scenarios, and to also provide them with different methods of intervention so they may interact with the training film in a way that makes them feel the most comfortable.

Using the public relations framing theory, it was determined that language and framing were pertinent to the writing of the screenplays so that the optimal level of engagement was garnered from participants.

Setting for the Study:

This study is to be completed with data collection, screenplay drafting, and production at California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo in collaboration with Dr. James Werner and Dr. Christine Hackman and the Science, Technology, and Society department.

Research Question:

The following research question was used to direct data collection and for the development of the screenplay for the production of the virtual reality (VR) film:

How does the use of media, in this case a virtual reality film module, influence the training and motivation of university students for bystander intervention action against sexual harassment?

Definition of Terms:

The following terms are presented to clarify repeating topics within the study.

<u>*Sexual harassment*</u> - Sexual harassment occurs when people are targets of unwanted sexual comments, sexual gestures, or sexual actions because of their actual or perceived gender, gender expression, or sexual orientation. (Burn 2018) Examples of sexual harassment include unwanted touching, sexualizing non-sexual relationships, inappropriately intimate conversations, sexual jokes at inappropriate times, commenting on women's bodies, supports sexual double standards, catcalling, spreading sexual rumors, intimidating body language, fixed notions of traditional gender roles, and more. (Burn 2008)

<u>*Bystander*</u> - A person who is present at an event but does not take part. (Banyard et al. 2003) In the case of this study, the goal is to encourage the bystander to intervene in the event.

<u>*Intervention*</u> - Taking action to change the course of an event, in this case to protect a victim from a scenario of sexual harassment. (Burn 2008) Bystander interventions aim to promote defending behaviors among witnesses to halt the aggression or mitigate its effects. Active bystanders can take many actions to stop the aggression, including active efforts to make the student(s) bullying stop, reporting the incident, asking a teacher or another adult for help, or supporting, consoling, or taking the side of the student(s) being victimize (Nickerson et al. 2014, 392)

<u>*Framing*</u> - A communications theory that suggests that those who consume media have pre-existing interpretations to make sense of information, media, and events. (Chong and Diruckman 2007)

Organization of Study:

      Chapter 1 is composed of a statement and background of the study, a purpose of the study, research question, and definitions of terms. Chapter 2 will explore the strategies in developing and eventually producing a virtual reality sexual harassment training module. Chapter 3 will describe the methodology of the study. Chapter 4 will interpret and review literature as it is applied to the drafting of the screenplay and the development of production plans. Chapter 5 will summarize and conclude the study with room for evaluation of plans for production during the 2021 school year.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

The review of the literature examines common scenarios of sexual harassment, bystander engagement in these scenarios, as well as media depictions of sexual harassment and violence and how to utilize media for educational purposes surrounding these topics.

Perceptions and Common Scenarios of Sexual Harassment:

In the literature review for this project, it was emphasized that "College students may be an especially vulnerable population for several reasons: young men and women are interacting with relatively little supervision, college is a transitional time when identities and social networks are dis- rupted and fluctuating, and alcohol use tends to increase" (Mcginley et al. 2016, 298). Research and data collection within literature surrounding sexual harassment and college campuses found that most studies supported the implementation of bystander intervention trainings on campus. One such study stated that their data did not show risk of sexual harassment declining over the four years in university, thus supporting "a reinvigoration of attention to [sexual harassment] prevention on college campuses from an administrative standpoint, as well as a call to action for sexual harassment researchers to reinvigorate research on this phenomenon in college environments." (Mcginley et al. 2016, 307). There is an emphasis in these types of studies for colleges to implement a training that effectively provides students with the tools to prevent harassment and assault.

With regards to specific bystander intervention tools, many studies referenced the five-stage bystander intervention model proposed by psychologists Latané and Darley. According to the model, bystanders "must first notice the event, then identify it as one where intervention is needed, then take responsibility for intervention, then decide how to help, and

finally, act to intervene. Situational barriers at any of these steps halt the bystander intervention process" (Burn 2018, 779). The research for this VR training module included an examination of these barriers for the purpose of equipping students to overcome them when experiencing a high risk, or even low risk scenario - as both are impactful and important. As Burn suggests, reducing this barrier should include informing people about the barrier and training them to be alert for it, then promoting the idea that bystanders and/or friends of the perpetrator or victim should assume this as part of their role in social engagement. (Burn 2018, 778).

Data collection also found that "although bullying and sexual harassment almost always occur in the presence of bystanders (Lodge & Frydenberg, 2005; Timmerman, 2003), witnesses intervene less than 20% of the time (Atlas & Pepler, 1998; Hawkins et al., 2001). Despite this lack of actual intervention, children often express disgust at witnessing bullying and state that they are interested in helping victims of bullying" (Nickerson et al. 2014, 392). This research focused the project to identifying *how* to best engage bystanders so they feel comfortable intervening. Nickerson's study also used the five-stage bystander intervention model proposed by Latané and Darley, and found that, "girls reported significantly greater cooperation and empathy, and noticed bullying events, interpreted them as an emergency, and intervened more often than boys" (Jenkins and Nickerson 2019, 141). This particular study was useful in the examination of empathy and its correlation to intervention, and guided script development towards strategies that would best engage the student taking the training.

Media Framing and Media Use for Education:

In order to best influence a media user to take action, data was collected on communications strategies that observe the way people interact with media and on the way sexual scenarios are depicted in most mainstream media. One such study examined mainstream

news depictions of sexual harassment and found that "media strategies potentially undermine public awareness of the extent of the gendered harm caused by sexual harassment by presenting each case as a potentially vexatious one, and juxtaposing two opposing interpretations: harmless prank or sex crime, without explicitly presenting a position in weighing opposing versions" (Mcdonald and Charlesworth 2013, 97). This is a dangerous representation, and furthermore one that does not inform media consumers how to identify and protect themselves and others from sexual harassment and violence. In addition, these news articles "had a tendency to confine the reported behaviors to those that were overtly sexualized. Only 40 (14%) articles cited non-sexualized forms of bullying or incivility co-occurring with sexual harassment"(Mcdonald and Charlesworth 2013, 99). This misrepresentation illuminates the need for accurate depictions of sexual harassment scenarios for the age group, so they may be more equipped to identify these scenarios.

A short *Thinx* piece examined how a pop culture Netflix program, *Big Mouth*, could be used to spark conversations about puberty, sex, and sexuality among children and adults. The author, a sex educator herself, argued that this use of media can be used as an aid to facilitate her sex education. She writes, "This is a great example of what consent doesn't look like, and its relative subtlety makes it a great teaching tool. It's not a violent assault that everyone would denounce without question — it's a disrespect of boundaries that a lot of people (like the boys in the show) might not see as a big deal... A critical step in ending rape culture is discussing these types of interactions with young people, unpacking why they're not okay, and teaching ways to ask for, check in on, and give enthusiastic consent" (Mell-Taylor 2019). This examination of media describes the use of television and film as an educational tool surrounding rape culture, and also calls for concrete examples of how to identify sexual harassment scenarios that most may write off because of their lack of explicit violence.

Chapter 3

Methodology

This chapter will be used to discuss the methods of the VR film design, data collection methods, script outlining intervention plans, and limitations pertaining to production and player/bystander engagement.

VR Film Design:

The design of this training module takes the form of a 'choose your own adventure' type film. It begins with data collection and research, compiled by a team of researchers and facilitated by Cal Poly faculty. Then, two writers were hired on (myself and one other) to use the data to draft a VR, interactive screenplay to give students the opportunity to engage with likely scenarios of sexual harassment and choose from different options of intervention. As a writing team, we split the writing of the script, each completing about 11 pages of the final product. The screenwriting process involved eight or nine points of choosing, each providing the VR user with two to three options ranging from 'doing nothing' to 'direct intervention'. Various methods of intervention were implemented to give users many opportunities to intervene depending on their confidence and comfortability. These choices composed various paths to three distinct endings, ranging from minimal intervention to maximum intervention. The plan for production is scheduled for shooting during the 2021 school year, and will involve the hiring of actors and cinematographers for film production. This training module, when complete, will begin trials with hopefully hundred or thousands of students, who will "play" the virtual reality film and arrive at different endings based on their intervention choices.

Data Collection:

Data collection for this research was conducted by a team of students who read relevant literature to the topics of sexual harassment and bystander intervention on college campuses. They compiled information of common examples of harassment, common traits held by perpetrators, accessible intervention actions for college age students, and language to be used for the screenwriting process as concrete examples of various types of interventions.

Script Outline and Intervention Plan:

When outlining the script, the research team wanted to use specific language to give actual examples for bystanders to use. For this, we used the 5 "Ds" of bystander intervention;

Direct (directly address incident), **Distract** (utilize distraction to stop inciden), **Delegate** (ask for help via 3rd party) , **Delay** (take action after incident), **Document** (record incident). (Hollaback! 2020).

Direct application to script development included using these options to cultivate the language for the screenplay. For example, when **distracting**, screenwriters could give the player/bystander the choice to say something like:

"What time did you say you wanted to get home tonight?", "Have you seen Selene's cat yet?", "Lilah, can you show me where the bathroom is?", "Lilah, I really like your pants/skirt/dress."

These strategies were incorporated into every choice in the screenplay, and present player/bystanders with specific examples of how to intervene in a sexual harassment scenario.

Production Plan:

The filming of a VR, interactive film is an extremely new concept. Only one such film already exists, a 2018 *Black Mirror* film called *Bandersnatch* produced by Netflix. The production of our particular training module will involve a 360 degree camera lens on a tripod, which will act as the VR player, in this case our 'bystander'. The actors will engage with the camera, asking the bystander to be a part of the action in different ways and prompting their choices.

Limitations:

The limitations to this project mostly pertained to the engagement of the player/bystander and the limited mobility of the camera on the tripod. In VR, the player can rotate 360 degrees to observe the full action around them. It was important to write a screenplay that would direct the attention of the VR player/bystander in an attempt to keep them from losing interest in the action in front of them and disengaging with the intervention training. Strategies for mitigating the loss of their attention included asking the player/bystander direct questions and cultivating a scenario in which it is perceived that the player/bystander is a close friend of the victim and perpetrator. With regards to the camera, because the film will be shot on a tripod, the player/bystander will not be able to walk around on their own. This was taken into consideration when writing the screenplay, making sure to keep scenes focused on the bystander, the victim, and the perpetrator and using transitions to show the passage of time or change to a new location.

Chapter 4

Data Analysis

Screenplay Storyboarding:

When drafting the screenplay, it was imperative to utilize the data to cultivate a relevant, engaging, and impactful storyline. One study suggested that "training needs to be specific to the type of situation in which they may be called upon to act. According to Christy and Voigt (1994), an intervening bystander is someone who feels personally responsible to stop the witnessed abuse. Their study also shows that "intervening bystanders felt certain about how to intervene" (Banyard et al. 2003, 68). This data emphasized the importance of not only making the player/bystander feel inclined to take action and intervene during the training module, but feel as though they can walk away from the training with the tools to intervene in a real life scenario.

According to the intervention situational model, the first step towards helping is for the bystander to take notice of the event. "Bystander distraction resulting from self-focus or sensory distractions may lead to a failure to notice barriers" (Burn 2008, 781). As Burn describes, these barriers include; failure to notice, failure to identify situations as high-risk, failure to take intervention responsibility, failure to intervene due to skills deficit, and failure to intervene due to audience inhibition (Burn 2008). It was decided that the screenplay must emphasize these barriers and encourage player/bystanders to surpass them with the skills the VR training is providing them with.

Jenkins and Nickerson wrote that "bystander intervention training should delineate different options available for helping to stop bullying. For example, individuals who are cooperative may not know how to intervene directly with the person bullying if they are not assertive. However, if they are taught that offering social support and comfort to the victim is

another way of intervening more indirectly, they may be more likely to take action in a way that is more comfortable" (Jenkins and Nickerson 2019, 158). This specification was crucial to the development of a storyline that provided player/bystanders with many opportunities to intervene in different ways in order to show them that they have more than one option for intervening and can do so in the way that makes them feel the most comfortable.

This study also found that "Empathy, the ability to share or relate to another's emotions, was the strongest unique predictor of the bystander intervention model, confirmed through the moderate to large bivariate correlations between empathy and each step of the model" (Jenkins and Nickerson 2019, 397). When developing the screenplay it was important to create emotional connections between the player/bystander, so it was decided that the player/bystander would play a character in the script who is already part of a close friend group in which the perpetrator and victim are also both a part of. It was also outlined that there would be multiple moments throughout the screenplay in which both the perpetrator and victim look directly at the camera and ask a question or ask for advice. Because it is already established that there is a level of trust between the player/bystander and these characters, we hope to create this aspect of empathy that will further engage the player/bystander and encourage them to intervene.

Drafts and Revisions:

The following is an example of early drafting for the storyline of the script:

- "Begin in an intimate setting with just the player and one other character. The scene can introduce the relationship of perpetrator with the player/bystander and will allow the VR user to get familiar with 360.
- Scene two could have 3-4 people. It will introduce characters and have the VR user make choices to learn the interface and process.

- The third scene could be a small gathering such as a super bowl party or similar; approx. 8-10 people, where mingling can happen in different ways (kitchen or backyard vs living room) and there is potential for some alcohol consumption."

Second, the research team drafted specific requirements for the screenplay writing process:

- "Victim and perpetrator characters can be in a relationship, possibly a new one.
- All characters should be acquainted.
- Conversations should be specific and intimate, supplying character details for future decisions.
- The friend perpetrator can hint at his attraction towards the victim, and visa versa.
- Main points of information that are important to a storyline should be delivered in a similar way if occurring in different tangents to keep statistical data accurate.
- There should be secondary distractions, and choices that provide opportunities for users to either pay attention to the main story line, or follow another tangent.
- Choices for intervention should include a variety of options for levels of comfortability"

In the final draft of the screenplay, the choices were formatted this way:

```
CHOOSE: "Intervene - direct: "C-bass come on, that wasn't
cool." OR "Intervene - distract: "Oh my god, have you guys
seen the trailer to the new [INSERT RELEVANT FILM TITLE]?" OR "Laugh it off"
(in other script).
```

In concept, these choices will pop up as buttons on the lower half of the screen, giving the player/bystander a limited time to make their decision. If they fail to make a choice within the allotted time, the module will default to the "Do nothing" option (in this case, "Laugh it off")

emphasizing that sexual harassment intervention is extremely time sensitive, and that waiting too long to take action could also ultimately be dangerous for the victim.

The three endings of the VR interactive film are as follows:

Ending A - the harassment escalates to the point that the victim is forced to make the decision to leave on her own, she is visibly very upset.

Ending B - the bystander is able to confront the perpetrator and make him see how he is affecting the victim, and he backs off. He stops consuming alcohol and tries to reach out to her, but she won't give him any more attention. This version ends with the victim thanking the bystander for saying something to the perpetrator.

Ending C - there is no direct confrontation and the victim is encouraged to leave by her friends, who also observe the harassment. This time the victim is supported by her friends and the bystander has the option of leaving with her or staying at the party, as shown below.

```
CHOOSE: "intervene-Document: Make sure Lilah is okay." OR "Stay with everyone
else."
```

If the player/bystander chooses to go with Lilah (the victim), she thanks them for getting her out of the situation. If they stay, they witness the rest of the friend group calling Sebastian (the perpetrator) out for his harassment, as shown below.

```
                    SELENE
          Sebastian, that was kind of lame.

                    SEBASTIAN
          What?

                    SELENE
          She left 'cause of you, you know.

                    SEBASTIAN
          Wha-? Come on.
```

Sebastian looks around at the others for a second opinion, but they're nodding too.

                   SELENE
You wouldn't stop touching her, you
called her easy in front of everybody.
Not cool.

...

                   SEBASTIAN
Shit. Why didn't anyone say anything?

                 Selene & Anders
                    (in unison)
We tried!!

Sebastian puts his face in his hands and groans.

                 Sebastian (CONT'D)
She probably hates me now huh.

No one answers. They just look at each other.

                                         FADE OUT

Chapter 5

Discussions and Recommendations

Summary:

This project was developed to describe the drafting of a screenplay for an interactive, virtual reality sexual harassment training module for students of the California Polytechnic Univerisity, San Luis Obispo. The research began with the examination of the prevalent and persisting issue of sexual harassment within college campus communities, and how to present college students with the tools to intervene as bystanders, thus encouraging them to intervene when encountering sexual harassment scenarios. As a result, the screenplay that was written for this project comes from careful and thoughtful research, and aims to provide college students at Cal Poly with strategies to identify and take action when encountering sexual harassment, especially in small group gatherings where the perpetrator may even be a friend of theirs. The production of this screenplay is planned for the 2021 school year, and will then be shown to a trial group of students as a way to identify patterns fo sexual harassment scenario recognition and likelihood of student bystander intervention.

Anticipated Findings with Production:

Because the production of this film has not yet happened, neither have the trials for implementation and findings. The current plan is to ask a large test group of students to engage with the VR training, and complete the 'choose your own adventure' scenarios to arrive at the ending that correlates with their choices of intervention. Anticipated findings will illuminate how students identify sexual harassment risk situations and how and to what extent they feel

comfortable intervening as bystanders. A survey following the training may provide further information to how students make these choices.

Conclusion:

Through the implementation of this project, our research team hopes to provide Cal Poly, and eventually many college students across the nation, with the tools to identify scenarios of sexual harassment, intervene to protect future victims, and encourage their peers to do the same. Our research emphasizes that "It is of utter importance to acknowledge that frames should be used by scientists and activists to provide their own agenda setting for the media and convincing people to act in different times and places" (Rinaldo 2018, 17). This encouraged us to take incredible care in the language and phrasing of our screenplays, as the way we depict these harassment scenarios may be met with preconceived notions of what is or isn't acceptable behavior. We want to highlight that sexual harassment is not just high risk scenarios of violence and assault, but can actually be smaller actions such as jokes, pressure, inappropriate and unwanted touching and comments, etc. Given the knowledge we have right now, and in order to increase awareness and intervention, this VR interactive screenplay was drafted in the hopes that students will find it current, engaging, and most importantly educational.

Our research found that "Among descriptions of bystander programs, differences can be noted regarding the length of training time for potential bystanders, the format in which training occurs, and whether students are trained in mixed-gender or gender-specific groups." (Coker et. al 2011, 779) Keeping this in mind, we hope that our study can also be used for future research in identifying the most effective forms of intervention training and aid in awareness and prevention of sexual harassment in college communities.

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