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### Social Media “Ghosts”: How Facebook (Meta) Memories Complicates Healing for Survivors of Intimate Partner Violence

Nicolette Little

Sheridan College, [nicolette.little@sheridancollege.ca](mailto:nicolette.little@sheridancollege.ca)

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**Social Media “Ghosts”:  
How Facebook (Meta) Memories Complicates Healing for Survivors of Intimate Partner  
Violence**

Nicolette Little, PhD

Department of Communication, Media and Film, University of Calgary, Calgary, Canada

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**Author Note**

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Nicolette Little.

Email: [nicolette.little@ucalgary.ca](mailto:nicolette.little@ucalgary.ca) (Alternate: [nklittle@ualberta.ca](mailto:nklittle@ualberta.ca))

Twitter: @NicoletteLittl

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7962-4881>

LinkedIn: [www.linkedin.com/in/nicolette-little-phd](http://www.linkedin.com/in/nicolette-little-phd)

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**Author Bio**

Nicolette Little, PhD, is a lecturer with the University of Alberta's Media and Technology Studies program. Her research interests include feminist media interventions in gender-based violence (GBV) and mediated memory. She advises the Canadian federal government, media and policing services regarding GBV and media.

## **Social Media “Ghosts”: How Facebook (Meta) Memories Complicates Healing for Survivors of Intimate Partner Violence**

### **Abstract**

This paper contributes to feminist conversations about algorithms and *design justice* (Sasha Costanza-Chock 2020) by examining ways Facebook’s (Meta) Memories affordance, when it draws on previously posted photographs of abusive former partners, is problematic for gender-based violence (GBV) survivors. With analyses drawn from semi-structured interviews with twelve “survivor-users” and a walkthrough (Ben Light, Jean Burgess and Stephanie Duguay 2018) of Memories’ settings to better understand what opportunities users have to control this function, this paper finds that Memories triggers survivors, makes their abuser seem inescapable and reduces survivors’ sense of agency, among other challenges to their well-being. By extending abusers’ intimidation back into survivors’ lives, Memories unintentionally supports perpetrators’ aims: to scare, isolate and punish their targets. This paper concludes that a masculinist bias within Memories’ design leads to painful consequences for survivor-users of varying identities. Ultimately, this study proposes possible means of addressing Memories’ challenges for survivor-users, including the option for users to opt in to, rather than out of, the function in the first place; alterations to Memories’ interface to enable the immediate flagging of problematic content; and continued movements towards trauma-informed design practices in the technology sector.

### **Keywords**

digital media; technology-facilitated abuse; intimate partner violence; Facebook; platform governance

## Introduction

In 2015, Facebook launched Memories, an affordance that draws from users' past posts to highlight moments to look back on. While many people enjoy Memories' invitations to engage in mediated nostalgia, this is not always the case. Survivors of gender-based violence (GBV) often fall in this latter category. In 80% to 90% of GBV instances, the perpetrator is known to the victim, being a former acquaintance, family member, or intimate partner ("Sexual Assault" 2016). As such, it is often a reality that one's abuser was once one's Facebook Friend, or one posted photographs of or with the perpetrator to this social network site (SNS). Memories can therefore call up malign spectres for survivors, as they are reminded of a formerly trusted person who hurt them.

Study participant Nyla's comments capture the unwantedness of this mediated remembering: "My heart stopped...I know he lives far away now, but...I'm shaky and my heart's racing when these images pop up on Facebook" (personal communication, July 7, 2020). While Nyla has healed from the emotional abuse she faced, Memories occasionally highlights past posts about her ex, which include photographs (Figure 1). And experiences like Nyla's are not uncommon.

Women, especially those with intersecting identities (Kimberlé Crenshaw 1991), face disproportionate rates of violence in Canada and beyond. According to the Canadian Women's Foundation (CWF), one in four women reports GBV to authorities, although, because of concerns about being stigmatized or disbelieved, this number likely represents merely 6% of incidences (2020). Further, 80% of sexual assault victims/survivors are female, a Canadian woman is killed every sixth day by her intimate partner, and 80% of intimate partner deaths are women (CWF 2020; "Sexual Assault" 2016). The Government of Canada (2021) acknowledges that

certain populations experience high levels of violence, including women; young women and girls; Indigenous women and girls; LGBTQ2...and gender diverse individuals; women living in Northern, rural, and remote communities; and women living with disabilities. The intersection of any two or more risk factors may increase a person's risk and vulnerability to violence. (n.p.)

Contemporary considerations of GBV must include digital spaces, since abusers extend their violence online and as this study explores, platforms and algorithms can have unintended violent effects too.

In what follows, I use the term “survivor-user” to connote participants who have both experienced GBV and use Facebook. I also use the term “survivor” broadly, reflecting that a spectrum of behaviours constitutes abusiveness within relationships, including emotional, economic, physical and sexual violence. With this in mind – and aiming to contribute to conversations about design justice (Costanza-Chock 2020) – I take an intersectional approach (Crenshaw 1991) to exploring how Memories “haunts” survivor-users ask the following research questions: how does Facebook Memories impact survivors and their healing; what steps might survivor-users take to limit Memories’ access to past posts; and what should Facebook do to support survivors? Ultimately finding that Memories has emotional, physiological, social and economic consequences for survivor-users, I emphasize platform developers’ responsibility to recognize the damage inequitably designed software can cause, rather than urge survivor-users to alter their social networking practices. I do not want to reproduce society’s tendency to place the onus for addressing assault on survivors’ shoulders.

## **Literature Review**

I situate this study within feminist conversations about technology-facilitated GBV, mediated remembering and design justice. Scholarship that is particularly useful for my research considers how SNSs' algorithms adversely impact marginalized groups, digital technologies benefit and/or harm GBV survivors, and processes of remembering and forgetting have shifted in an intensely networked society.

Several voices contribute to conversations about social media algorithms' oppressiveness for non-dominant groups: a research area that supports my exploration of Facebook's algorithmic harms. Alexander Cho (2018) highlights Facebook's "default publicness": how its heteromasculinist design assumes people are surveilled similarly, dangerously exposing queer people of colour (POC) in the process. Ariadna Matamoros-Fernández (2017) suggests a white male-dominated tech sector embeds racism in platforms' core, while Adrienne Massanari (2017) locates Reddit's governance structure and algorithms as promoters of misogynist content. Additional works demonstrate that algorithms constrict the lives of gender-diverse communities (Costanza-Chock 2020; Rena Bivens and Oliver Haimson 2017), black women (Safiya Noble 2018) and the poor (Virginia Eubanks 2018). While platforms' algorithms have been studied for the transphobia, misogyny, racism and class oppression they perpetuate, however, their automated reintroduction of abusers into survivor-users' lives remains, to my knowledge, unstudied. It is primarily to this space that the current study contributes.

While SNS algorithms' consequences for survivors remain under-interrogated, a broader and growing body of scholarship examines how digital technologies impact and/or empower this population. On one hand, mobile devices provide connection with loved ones and potential employers, and safety (Delanie Woodlock 2017; Jill Dimond, Casey Fiesler, and Amy Bruckman 2011). Survivors also video record their assaults to provide evidence in court, or publicly expose perpetrators when opportunities for formal (e.g., judicial) justice seem foreclosed (Emma Jane

2017; Anastasia Powell and Nicola Henry 2017). The #MeToo Movement (2017) inspired abundant scholarship on marginalized individuals' use of mobile technologies and SNSs to intervene in sexism, street harassment and sexual assault, while gaining support and learning from other feminists (Carrie Rentschler 2017; Kaitlynn Mendes, Jessica Ringrose, and Jessalynn Keller 2019; Verity Trott 2020). Meanwhile, I argue elsewhere that the bereaved mobilize Facebook to challenge the victim-blaming narratives to which deceased loved ones, who have died following GBV, are subjected (Nicolette Little 2019).

While digital technologies offer the above-mentioned boons, however, they extend perpetrators' opportunities for abusing and isolating survivors, and what Delanie Woodlock terms "technology-facilitated stalking" (588; Molly Dragiewicz, Jean Burgess, Ariadna Matamoros-Fernández, Michael Salter, Nicholas Suczor, Delanie Woodlock, and Bridget Harris 2018). Facebook's Global Positioning System (GPS) tagging capacities, for instance, allow abusers to monitor victims through their or their social connections' profiles (Woodlock 2017). Perpetrators also non-consensually post, or threaten to post, intimate images to the site (Delanie Woodlock, Mandy McKenzie, Deborah Western, and Bridget Harris 2020). Digital and mobile technologies create "ease and immediacy" of access to victims, making them feel their abuser is "omnipresent" and shifting the "spatial boundaries of security for women leaving domestic violence" (Tara Matthews, Kathleen O'Leary, Anna Turner, Manya Sleeper, Jill Woelfer, Martin Shelton, Cori Manthorne et al. 2017; Woodlock, 592, 596). Despite the abuses these platforms facilitate, the corporations governing these sites inadequately address complaints due to lenient or underdeveloped policies (Michael Salter and Chris Bryden 2009; Noble 2018). Also, among professionals whose role is to support survivors (e.g., shelter staff or lawyers), few have adequate training to practically advise about safe technology use (Diana Freed, Jackeline Palmer, Diana Minchala, Karen Levy, Thomas Ristenpart, and Nicola Dell 2017). While such scholarship



demonstrates how perpetrators use technology to intimidate targets, I explore ways platforms *themselves* appear to mimic the role of an abuser.

Works that examine the adverse social effects of algorithms and technologies frequently allude to their conceptualization by a homogenous tech sector – one that US Centre for Employment Equity (2016) statistics reveal is dominated by white, educated and socioeconomically privileged men – as a cause for this oppressiveness (Salter and Bryden 2009; Noble 2018). Meanwhile, US Bureau of Labor (2018) statistics demonstrate that only 26% of computer science workers are women and, among these, merely 12% are not white. Considering Facebook in particular, women make up only 15% of its artificial intelligence researchers, while 78% of its board members are male: most of whom (89%) are also white (as cited in Catherine D’Ignazio and Lauren Klein 2020, 27-28). As Catherine D’Ignazio and Lauren Klein write, “the ease with which [the typical male data scientist] traverses the world is invisible to him because it has been designed for people just like him,” making a risk “that they will hard-code sexism, racism and other forms of discrimination into the digital infrastructure of our societies” (28-29; Costanza-Chock 2020). These findings undergird my consideration that a uniform tech sector impacts individuals who do not identify as men and who, in addition, hail from diverse racial and LGBTQ+ communities. What consequences emerge for survivors when the capacity for intimidating them is *built into* SNSs by developers who fail to take survivor-users’ experiences into account?

Because my research explores how Facebook’s algorithms perpetuate unwanted remembering for survivors, memory studies scholarship that probes SNSs’ unexpected reminders is additionally relevant. Taina Bucher (2017) explores how Facebook’s algorithms produce “whoa moments” for citizens by highlighting some friendships over others, or showing ads based on users’ recent conversations (35). Poignantly, Andrew Hoskins (2017) notes that the inception

of Facebook's digital archives in the early 2000s made the past "restless": We have not been *allowed* to forget since. Others cite Memories specifically as a source of painful remembering, for example, when images of deceased loved ones resurface, upsetting the bereaved (Bucher 2017; Jed Brubaker, Gillian Hayes, and Paul Dourish 2015, 157, 159). In the current study, as I examine how Facebook's algorithms churn up fragments of the past, I transfer the focus from problematic reminders of the deceased to ones of living perpetrators. In so doing, I tie the contemplation of mediated remembering to the subject of GBV. The current study adds to design justice, technology-facilitated violence, and mediated remembering conversations outlined above by exploring how Facebook's algorithms force survivor-users to reflect on abusive experiences with troubling consequences – and what we can do about this.

## **Methods**

This research stems from an earlier multi-year study of multimedia GBV interventions that I conducted through the University of Calgary. Relying on purposive and snowball sampling, I emailed participants from the above-mentioned project who indicated both discomfort with Memories and willingness to engage in follow-up interviews. During follow-up interviews, I asked participants if they had acquaintances who might also be willing to speak with me about their experiences with Memories. In such instances, participants forwarded a short email I had prepared – noting my role, research foci and contact information – to interested parties. The current study is covered by the original project's Research Ethics certification.

My requirements for participants' inclusion were that they (1) self-identified as a GBV survivor; (2) used Facebook *prior* to experiencing abuse; and (3) continued to use Facebook afterward. These caveats ensured participants not only had time to post pictures of a perpetrator

they knew *prior* to the GBV incident, but to experience Memories at play afterward, as it draws from a cache of earlier photographs.

While the considerations above determined participants' inclusion, I understand that individuals experience the world differently depending on their identity markers: including, but not limited to gender, race, age, class and ability (Crenshaw 1991). Additionally, this work is driven by the feminist belief that all voices are important and long-silenced ones – women's, racialized individuals' and survivors', as examples – must be fairly considered (Christa Davis and Dána-Ain Craven 2016). These commitments attuned me to participants' self-disclosures about their identities and the ways these influenced their experiences using SNSs. Overall, I spoke with twelve participants who, while united in survivorhood, identified as women (7), men (4), or non-binary (1). Participants further identified as LGBTQ+ (3), POC (2), a person with a disability (4), white-passing (1), or white (9). Participants ranged from twenty-nine to fifty-three years of age. Speaking with diverse participants helped me appreciate how Memories is experienced by individuals with unique identities and backgrounds.

Survivors often do not feel safe following abuse. In recognition of this fact, participants received a "List of Participant Supports" along with consent documents and were invited to contact me should they find our discussion distressing. All participants indicated they were not upset following interviews. Because GBV can be difficult to talk about, I additionally wanted participants to feel they could lead me to topics with which they felt comfortable. Interviews were therefore semi-structured and open-ended. To foster comfort, participants were given the option of speaking by telephone or video conferencing tool of their preference. All opted for the former. Throughout the ensuing discussion, I also refer to all participants pseudonymously to protect their safety and privacy.

Interviews ran fourteen to twenty-seven minutes in length, were recorded with participants' consent and transcribed. I used discursive textual analysis, which centres the way individuals understand their social reality, to analyze each transcript (Ruth Wodak 2004). To nuance my analysis, I manually coded transcripts to highlight key ideas and patterns emerging within the raw data (Juliet Corbin and Anselm Strauss 2008). Key themes included *access to victims*, *ease of maneuvering Memories' settings*, *survivors' well-being* and *recommendations*.

To complement interview findings and explore Memories' interface and affordances, I used Light, Burgess and Duguay's (2018) "walkthrough method." This method "involves the step-by-step observation and documentation of an app's screens, features and flows of activity" to examine "how it guides users and shapes their experiences" (882). Because these authors confirm different technologies "presen[t] different app mediators and alte[r] the user experience" (892), and a 2020 *DataReportal* report shows that 99% of SNS users access social media through mobile devices, I explored Memories using my smartphone.

Although Light, Burgess and Duguay suggest a full "technical walkthrough" involves registering a new account, navigating the app and discontinuing the account, since my research examines the re-emergence of *past* posts made to an *existing* Facebook account, I focused instead on the "everyday use" step (892): Walking through Memories as an existing, rather than new, user helped me investigate how it disgorges photos from my previous Facebook use. I documented my walkthrough through screengrabs, included in the Appendix.

While conducting this study, from April to July 2020, memories were announced on seven occasions as I opened my Facebook app. I studied each memory's presentation, then clicked it. Next, within the memory, I explored the available settings to determine what options users have to restrict what memories they see – findings I weave into the discussion below to highlight the technical possibilities and shortfalls that shape survivor-users' experiences with

Memories. To understand how someone less familiar with Facebook's interface might learn to control Memories, I used the search terms "Facebook" and "Memories" to locate instructions related to the function online: specifically, the Facebook Help Centre's "How do I Control What I See in Memories" and "What things appear in Memories on Facebook?" webpages (2020b).

### **Memories' Digital Spectres**

Perpetrators' access to victims has expanded because of digital devices' worldwide reach and portability. As scholars note, a perpetrator's intimidation can follow the survivor-user anywhere: not only in public, but the intimate spaces of the home (Woodlock 2017). It follows that this study's participants felt overly accessible to their abuser via Memories. "It felt like I couldn't get away," Nyla says, adding, "no matter where I went, I'd find him looking at me, even if it was from my cell phone." Similarly, Kelly, who left an emotionally abusive relationship four years ago, expresses that blocking her ex made only a minor difference in removing him from her world, since "sometimes, if I had posted photos where he was in them, Facebook Memories will pop that photo up" (personal communication, April 10, 2020). For most participants ( $n=10$ ), having a problematic ex's photograph resurface is, as Kelly puts it, "unwelcome." In an age of networked technologies, a survivor needs to avoid their abuser digitally as well as physically. Not only has abusers' access to targets expanded, but affordances like Memories increase the likelihood survivors will receive reminders of their abusers' existence, even after they have left the perpetrator or "blocked" them on social media.

Multiple participants ( $n=10$ ) expressed that facing unanticipated memories of an abusive ex harmed their well-being. For many, there were psychological consequences. Steve, Nyla, Kristine, Lila and Kelly describe being "triggered," while Kelly continues that, when photos of her abuser come up, "I get overwhelmed with anxiety and...it brings back all those unhelpful thoughts or emotions." As a trained facilitator with a Canadian mental health organization, Kelly

uses the term “trigger” to appropriately connote the powerful anxiety felt by traumatized individuals in the face of harmful stimuli.

Additionally, for Nancy, seeing “happy” pictures with her ex-wife, with whom she’s stayed “Friends” for their children, seems “surreal” (personal communication, September 2, 2021). She remembers watching friends Like the photos when they were posted, feeling engaged in a “cover up.” Despite the couple’s smiles, Nancy recounts, “we were fighting,” or “I know what I was actually thinking and that I would be leaving her.” In addition to creating a sense of “lack of reality,” memories like this still hurt, since they remind Nancy that her children would soon learn about their mothers’ impending divorce. Nyla echoes Nancy’s feelings of confusion. She recounts Friends commenting on how “adorable” she and her ex looked, although, behind the scenes, this participant was enduring escalating jealousy and put downs. At a certain point, Nyla started to doubt her reality, since her experiences weren’t what others were seeing. In addition to making perpetrators seem omnipresent, Memories can destabilize survivor-users’ sense of psychological well-being long after they’ve left an abusive relationship.

Connected to these psychological consequences were physiological and social ones. Nyla, for example, “panic[s],” sweats and her “heart races” when unwanted memories surface, while Kristine experiences “shock” and a “sinking feeling in [her] stomach” (personal communication, July 10, 2020). Meanwhile, the emotional and physiological consequences of unwanted memories restricted survivor-users’ socio-relational worlds ( $n=3$ ). Facebook’s reminders caused participants to doubt their instincts regarding current relationships. After images resurface of Steve and his ex-wife, who verbally and physically “came after [him] on multiple occasions,” Steve feels less safe with his current partner, despite describing the relationship as fulfilling. “When I see pictures of me and my ex arm-in-arm,” he says, “it makes me wonder how I could have gotten it so wrong, and then I question whether I’m making a mistake reading my current

partner” (personal communication, July 22, 2020). Melissa adds, “it’s like you gaslight yourself” when “once-happy memories make you wonder, ‘was this person [abusive]?’” She explains that trust issues, resulting from this psychologically manipulative relationship, flare when such photos resurface on Facebook, contributing to her decision to refrain from dating for a time (personal communication, July 7, 2020). Nyla, meanwhile, feels so upset she goes to her room to lie down, sometimes cancelling plans with friends in the process. Evidently, by making one feel physically unwell; fostering distrust in one’s assessment of others, including current partners; and causing survivor-users to disengage from daily activities and connections, and/or self-isolate, to deal with the overwhelming feelings Memories elicits, this affordance can have a constrictive effect on survivor-users’ physical well-being and social, including romantic, lives.

In addition to impeding participants’ offline engagement with others, troubling memories impacted survivor-users’ social media use. Nyla notes that, for a year following her assault, she closed Facebook’s app in panic whenever her ex’s image came up. She would refrain from opening the app for the rest of the day and sometimes several after. Meanwhile, if Kelly suspects her ex will show up in her Newsfeed on a given day, she “won’t go on Facebook or social media, because I don’t want to see it.” By causing survivor-users to exit the app and/or avoid accessing Facebook for days and in some cases even weeks, Memories has a chilling effect on survivor-users’ SNS use. This is emphasized by the fact that, for users like Kelly, seeing her ex on Memories causes her to avoid *all* social media – not just Facebook. As Freed et al. (2017) and Matthews et al. (2017) similarly point out, avoiding one’s phone, as Nyla and Kelly also do, can lead to other missed opportunities for connection: for example, phone or FaceTime calls with loved ones.

This SNS disengagement is especially problematic considering social connection is important for individuals healing from GBV (“Past Trauma” 2019). By separating survivor-users

from online connections, Memories extends the damages of past mistreatment into the present: Isolation from family, friends and other relationships, of course, is an indicator an individual is experiencing abuse. When Memories sustains a survivor-user's isolation after they have left their abuser, it continues the work of a perpetrator. [1] Thankfully, however, not all participants were socially impacted by stepping away from Facebook. As Nancy states, "I go to friends offline when I need support." Nonetheless, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, SNSs offer important means of connecting with others and unwanted memories have clear psychological, physiological and social consequences for survivor-users.

### ***Eradicating the Digitally Remembered Abuser***

Recommendations for avoiding digitally facilitated abuse come from many sources, including police, advocates and well-meaning acquaintances. One popular suggestion involves survivor-users leaving their mobile devices at home. This, however, is impractical and inequitable. The phone is a relied-upon device for modern sociality and communication. It also promotes the holder's safety, as they can call 911 or loved ones when in trouble (Woodlock et al., 2020) or look up important information online. Many "practical" solutions are extensions of the victim-blaming seen elsewhere in society, where non-dominant individuals are counselled to take extra measures to protect themselves—for example, by staying away from an essential communication tool or social media—while perpetrators' online behaviours remain inadequately addressed. [2]

Memories' functioning raises questions concerning survivor-users' agency. Nyla, Kelly, Steve and Bob "unfriended" their ex on Facebook, describing this step, in Kelly's words, as "freeing." Since Memories draws from users' past posts, however, blocking and/or deleting an abuser as a Friend, while cathartic, does not obviate seeing them via the function. As Kelly notes, "you think by deleting them as a Friend, Facebook would know, OK, you don't want to see this



person anymore, but...those people [still] show up.” Kristine similarly deleted her psychologically manipulative ex as a contact, but from Instagram, where she posted a picture of them on vacation. Since her Instagram account was configured to allow cross-platform posting to Facebook, however, she was “caught off guard” when the memory came up on the latter site, to which she never added the person as a Friend or posted the image. The empowerment survivor-users experience from unfriending or blocking troubling exes can be reduced when the survivor-user *still* sees this person via Memories ( $n=10$ ). Although police, courts and advocates frequently instruct survivor-users to unfriend and/or block abusers (Woodlock et al. 2020), and these options can indeed limit perpetrators’ online aggressions, these steps do not resolve algorithms’ regurgitation of hurtful content.

Deleting photographs from one’s Facebook account is also recommended – notably by Facebook Help (2016) in an online comment I will discuss momentarily – as an effective means of reducing the troubling content from which Memories can draw. This seemingly practical option, however, takes time and ignores emotional considerations. To explore the photo deletion process, I walked through it. From my profile’s main page, I selected “Photos,” then, from within a subsequent section called “Your Photos,” scrolled down to and clicked an image I wished to delete. Then, I selected the “Settings” icon, consisting of three dots located in the top right of the screen. For photographs I had posted, the icon offered me the option to “Delete Photo,” wording that appeared at the top of a drop-down list in bright red lettering (Figure 2). Once I pressed “Delete Photo,” a second screen asked, “Are you sure you want to delete this photo?” (Figure 3). After confirming my intentions, it took a few seconds for the image to disappear. Meanwhile, for photographs other users posted of me, I faced different options: to (1) un-tag myself or (2) report the photograph (Figure 4). Both options, when clicked, subsequently permitted me to flag issues like “Nudity,” “Hate Speech” and “Something Else,” or (3) block or unfollow the Friend in

question. If a user knows how to navigate “Photos” within their profile, deleting images is straightforward.

While deleting photos diminishes Memories’ source of content, however, this course of action can, as outlined, be technically protracted. Facebook, in its well-established covetousness of users’ data, has deliberately designed the platform so deleting photographs is onerous (D’Ignazio and Klein 2020). One must sometimes scroll through years’ worth of photographs to locate hurtful ones. This can be especially time-consuming given the thousands of images many people have uploaded to their profile: particularly early adopters, who have been posting since 2007. Because scrolling through images requires the app to frequently reload, this adds additional time (and frustration) to the process.

Further, once I entered “Your Photos” on my app, I faced multiple sub-categories in which images were stored: “Photos of You,” “Uploads,” “Albums” and “Videos” (Figure 5). If I selected “Albums,” several sub-albums again appeared, each of which also contained images. Survivor-users, in navigating these storage areas – and additionally, in scrolling to find offending photos, then taking the steps needed for their deletion, buffering lag-time included – can find themselves in prolonged engagements with images that hurt them. Since, as discussed, for survivor-users like Kelly, seeing Memories of an abuser is “overwhelm[ing]” and “triggering,” it is likely that scouring one’s Facebook cache for photos of this person will be difficult too.

In fact, Kelly and Nyla cannot even bring themselves to take this course of action. For Nyla, “even the thought of scrolling those years makes me feel anxious. I couldn’t do it.” It is neither emotionally safe nor possible for some survivor-users, especially those who endure post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and/or are susceptible to triggering, to take steps others recommend as “easy.” Also, as mentioned, deleting photographs does not ensure they will not re-emerge: In an answer to an online comment left by an angry user, who finds Memories still calls

up images he deleted, Facebook Help (2016) says, “It’s possible that a friend posted the same picture as you, and tagged you in it. This photo would still appear on your memories” (Figures 6 and 7). Ultimately, while a survivor-user can take the recommended steps of deleting images from their cache, there are few infallible protections against Memories dragging up past posts. Reaching out to a Friend to have oneself untagged in a photo may represent yet another engagement with one’s upsetting past: This Friend is somehow connected to the period of abuse.

Other solutions lie within Memories’ controls. Ten of twelve participants, however, were unaware such settings existed. Even Steve and Jill who, as digital media specialists, were best positioned to know of them, did not. Steve muses, “I didn’t even know you could opt out [of Memories]. If a guy like me doesn’t know that, it’s a problem.” Of all participants, Kelly alone was aware such settings *likely* existed, but her knowledge of them was vague. Jill sums participants’ sentiments well: “Overall, Facebook makes it hard to navigate, and that’s speaking from somebody who uses computers all the time...I think all that stuff should be really clear” and “people should be able to turn the function on and off...with ease, depending on moments when they feel less or better able to deal with past moments” (personal communication, July 14, 2020). Even participants who do not experience triggering, like Jill, feel Facebook needs to make controlling Memories more transparent to support users’ well-being.

Walking through Memories’ settings clarifies what steps survivor-users must take to control it. Since only one participant (Kelly) imagined such management possible, however, I took a further step upstream in the walkthrough process: I located the Facebook Help Center’s Memories-related information pages online, as someone might if they needed help navigating the affordance. From here, I selected “How do I turn notifications for Memories on or off on Facebook?” and was linked to a similarly titled page that explained, “You can choose whether to get notifications for your memories on Facebook. You may still see some memories in your

Newsfeed. Learn how to control which memories you see” (Facebook 2020b, n.p.). According to this page, to turn Memories notifications off I needed to enter my Facebook app, select “Menu” and, once in the Menu area, “Scroll down and tap See All Apps > On This Day” (Facebook 2020a, n.p.). While I was unable to find “See All Apps,” I located “On This Day” (Figure 8). After clicking it, I was presented with my most recent Memories notification – containing a past photograph and its attenuating written post – and a Settings icon, depicted as a mechanical wheel in the top right of the page (Figure 9). By clicking this icon, I accessed “Memories Settings.”

In “Memories Settings,” I faced three options for limiting Memories: I could (1) control how often Memories shows me old posts (Figure 10); select that (2) no memories would be highlighted (e.g., “We won’t notify you about memories”); or (3) control who and what time periods I could be served (e.g., “...hide memories that involve people and dates you’d rather not see”) (2020). The latter option permitted me to enter names of people who were and were not Friends, as well as date ranges from which I did not want Memories to draw (Figure 11). Being able to list both individuals with whom one is and is not currently Friends is helpful for survivor-users, who have often deleted an ex from their Friends list. Meanwhile, blocking periods of time hides images posted during the relationship.

While exploring the Help Center showed me how users unfamiliar with Memories might learn to navigate its settings, Memories’ controls are more easily accessed by clicking on a memory that has come up. New memory alerts are listed in the “Notifications” area of a user’s account, where all page activities are registered.

Clicking the memory notification enlarges the photograph and post in question. Then, clicking the “Settings” icon, in the upper right of the page, provides options to “Delete” the current memory or “Turn off notifications for this post” (Figure 12). After selecting the second option, I was pleased to face an easy process: Facebook simply gave me an opportunity to “Turn

notifications [back] on for this post” (Figure 13). Nonetheless, the non-imposing and side-positioned “Settings” icon, through which users gain control over Memories’ operation, may be easy to miss, especially for users less familiar with Facebook’s interface or in a rush to delete an upsetting memory. Also, for users who need the Help Center’s directions, the process from initial internet search to accessing “Memories Settings” takes a time-consuming seven steps. The fact that the online instructions do not fully match what the user sees on the app’s interface is additionally confusing. A simplified process would benefit survivor-users.

### ***Inequities in Memories’ Design***

Further simplified functionality, however, would not benefit survivor-users equally. In Nyla’s and Kelly’s cases, triggering once again erases the usefulness of the above-described steps to limit Memories’ access to the past: as discussed, both women close their app in panic the moment they see their abuser’s face. They also feel it is too difficult to search for and decipher how to use these settings under such upsetting circumstances. In Kelly’s words,

...the thing that I don't love about Memories is that there's no process where we can select what kind of Memories we *would* like to see...it comes pre-set to *on*, so you have to go in and select if you don't want to see notifications.

Essentially, by requiring users opt out of, rather than in to, receiving Memories notifications, Facebook strips users like Nyla and Kelly of the agency it purports to offer them in making control settings available. This design creates a dynamic whereby the survivor-user must be triggered by a photograph to realize they do not want Memories to have unfettered access to their posts. Once triggered, however, the survivor-user is no longer emotionally well enough to effect these changes.

And this triggering is no simple matter: As trauma sufferers and psychological services workers know, offending stimuli can catapult the traumatized into intense distress (“Past

Trauma” 2019). Meanwhile, it takes time, ongoing counselling and/or losses (e.g., financial costs, including loss of work or productivity, and expensive specialized psychological treatments) to re-establish a sense of well-being. Facebook needs to provide simple and effective tools, that do not require survivor-users to wade through a triggering function or photos, to prevent upsetting posts from resurfacing. As all participants agreed ( $n=12$ ), Facebook should reconceptualize Memories so users are asked to opt in, rather than automatically channeling memories to them and requiring they opt out.

### *Algorithmic Re-traumatization?*

When Memories disgorges photos of a troubling ex, it renders them more “present” in the survivor-user’s life. It therefore intensifies the sense of a perpetrator’s “omnipresence” that Woodlock identifies as inherent in technology-facilitated abuse (2017, 592). Also, as discussed, this digitized remembering causes some survivor-users to disengage from their daily lives and online networks. This augmented intimidation, isolation and sense of an abuser’s inescapability suggests this function extends the damages of the original abuse into online spaces, and specifically Facebook’s platform. Indeed, as discussed, instead of trying to escape their exes, survivor-users like Nyla and Kelly are now attempting to get away from Memories’ reminders of them: memories that presently challenge participants’ well-being in ways like the original mistreatment. By amplifying survivor-users’ sense of the perpetrator’s presence and intimidation, even without active use by the abuser, Facebook and its Memories function enact a form of platform violence.

Again, given statistics concerning who experiences GBV and related trauma in Canada, as well as much of the world, and the fact that, of Facebook’s 2.26 billion active mobile users, 56% identify as women in contrast to 46% who identify as men (Omnicores 2020), what I’ve called Facebook’s platform violence is gendered. In fact, because of GBV, North American women are

afflicted with PTSD at double the rate of men, while a concerning high number of other non-dominant users come to this platform with experiences of violence (“Past Trauma” 2019).

Facebook’s designers need to consider these groups’ well-being and all-too-common victimization in adapting Memories.

Memories’ impacts on survivor-users are problematic when the stages of healing from abuse are considered. Trauma recovery psychologist Judith Herman (1992) outlines three phases of healing, noting that, in stage one, survivors often do not feel safe, physically and in relationships, and struggle with emotional dysregulation. In stage two, survivors share their experiences with others and grieve, then begin, in stage three, to see themselves as not necessarily defined by their trauma. Here, they “redefine themselves in the context of meaningful relationships” (in Amanda Kippert 2019, n.p.; Herman). Participants’ comments reveal Memories affects them in areas of distinct vulnerability within the recovery process. The feelings of fear, confusion and mistrust, both of themselves and others, that these digital reminders ignite perpetuate the emotional dysregulation many victims experience. Complicated too, is their ability to surround themselves with loving social connections and progress into healthy new relationships: critical indicators of recovery from Herman’s model. As Nyla says, “It didn’t feel healthy to have ended the relationship...only to be hiding in my house, trembling, after checking Facebook. These memories were sending me backwards in terms of healing.” By extending survivor-users’ suffering post-abuse, Memories is detrimental to their healing and health.

### ***Benefits of Mediated Nostalgia***

Not all participants, however, felt Memories’ resurrection of problematic exes was entirely negative ( $n=4$ ). Jill, for instance, still values seeing hers via Memories. She explains that leaving her marriage revealed her own strength and enabled her to develop new life skills. When memories of her ex come up, she feels “empowered” about the way she made decisions and

protected herself. Looked at from this vantage point, Memories evidently fosters some survivors' sense of agency and self-regard.

Similarly, despite occasional malaise when Memories unearths upsetting moments, several participants ( $n=7$ ) noted the function highlights happy-making times with family and friends too. As Steve states, "I think there's good there for lots of people, and I've enjoyed looking back on some good memories," while Kristine says she still "generally appreciates the memories...[since] they remind me of my good friends." The decision to turn off Memories notifications is, for many participants, an ambivalent and even difficult one. Once again, it is evident how recommendations that survivor-users abandon social media unfairly impact them by limiting their access to pleasurable memories of the past.

## **Conclusion**

When Facebook's product manager, Oren Hod, announced the release of the "On This Day" feature, he cited research that thinking back on one's memories could improve one's mood (2018). Facebook was not unaware that not all memories are pleasant. Indeed, Hod noted, "We know that memories...are not all positive," and explained, "We try to listen to feedback and design features so that they're thoughtful and offer people the right controls that are easy to access" (n.p.). Apparently, Facebook also tries to "automatically...filter out negative memories based on certain keywords and reactions" (Amit Chowdhry 2018, n.p.). Facebook's attempts to resurface only positive memories, however, do not always work – sometimes with grave consequences.

Contained within the platform's algorithms is the possibility of retraumatizing a significant percentage of the population: those who have experienced GBV at the hands of someone *they knew*. When Memories regurgitates posts of one's troubling ex or abuser, it can cause intense and persisting emotional and physiological consequences. It can also lead survivor-



users to disengage from their social circles, destabilizing their well-being in current and future moments. Being triggered and socially withdrawing are, for trauma sufferers, antagonists to healing, with recovery more effectively achieved when one feels connected to and supported by others. Economic consequences also accrue when triggered survivor-users miss work or require costly counselling.

By fostering the feeling that the abuser is “omnipresent,” as well as survivor-users’ increasing anxiety and isolation, Memories continues several harms identified by Woodlock (2017), Dragiewicz et al. (2018) and others as key components of abuse, including online abuse (Woodlock, 592). This algorithmic intimidation, which does not require active SNS use by perpetrators, can be severe, and amounts to what I’ve called platform violence.

What does this exploration of Memories tell us? Light, Burgess and Duguay conclude that “Apps matter because they reflect our cultural values, bring multiple actors...into an interaction space and communicate meanings that shape our everyday practices” (896). This research highlights that, given Memories’ current architecture, the Facebook team’s “privilege is showing:” The well-being of non-dominant individuals, including survivor-users, has not been adequately considered by its homogenized pool of developers and leaders.

Facebook can adapt its platform to make it more equitable. First, survivor-users need immediate means of shutting down disturbing memories. Second, the photo deletion process requires simplification. These amendments would help survivor-users avoid triggering experiences, including wading through past content. Facebook could foreground a button on each memory that reads “I do not want to see this,” or, simplified further, offer a prominent “thumbs down” icon that, if clicked, immediately closes the memory (Matamoros-Fernández 2017) and updates Memories’ algorithms about images, time periods and/or users it should avoid showing.

Simplifying and centralizing such buttons would lead more survivor-users, many of whom otherwise close their app in distress, to click them.

Best, however, is avoiding re-traumatization in the first place. This means restructuring Memories to have users opt in, rather than out once unpleasant photos arise. Opting in could involve asking the user if they want to use the function at all, or letting them select which time periods or individuals they wish to see in advance of use. In addition to preventing triggering, the opportunity to opt in will give survivor-users a sense of agency: that they can take steps to protect their well-being. Facebook could also make learning about the affordance's functioning and controls a requirement of the opt-in process, affording survivor-users further preparation, empowerment and safety in their engagement with Memories.

Finally, training not only in diversity and equity, but trauma-informed tech design could foster a tech sector that is sensitive to the platform inequities increasingly identified by scholars. A trauma-informed approach “assumes that an individual is...likely...to have a history of trauma” and “promotes environments of healing and recovery” (Institute on Trauma 2020). Trauma-informed approaches, which recognize triggering's destructiveness, seek not to (re)injure in the first place.

While this research contributes to our understanding of survivor-users' Facebook experiences, there remains much to investigate. Other SNSs and apps, such as Instagram and iPhone's Photos, as examples, similarly regurgitate ghosts from the past. Photos generates year-end montages of users' memories, drawing from photos stored on users' devices and in the Cloud, while Instagram adopted a Memories function in 2019.

Additionally, while this paper surveyed the experiences of participants of differing identities, our understanding of platform violence would deepen from exploring the experiences of survivor-users from specific groups: individuals who are Indigenous or LGBTQ+, for

example. Access to and experiences of SNSs vary among differently positioned people, opening opportunities for further investigation – and promoting *design justice* (Costanza-Chock 2020).

### Note

1. In Freed et al.'s study, survivors confirmed that distancing themselves from their networks felt like a continuation of the abuse (15).
2. For a similar discussion of victim-blaming “solutions,” see Woodlock et al., 375-76.

**Word Count: 7,939**

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