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Autobiographical narrations of sexual harassment on online blogs as tools for Egyptian women's empowerment: a linguistic and critical analysis

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Abstract

Sexual violence against women is still a global and pervasive problem (International Institute for Global Health, 2019), especially in male-controlled countries like Egypt. These days, an increasing number of Egyptian women is using autobiographical narrations on online blogs to condemn negative ideologies and misogynist practices in their society, denouncing episodes of sexual harassment that they have experienced or witnessed. In this study, it has been observed how they use language on blogs to recount their own experiences of sexual abuse. A sample of five autobiographies retrieved from the Egyptian blog *Speak Up* has been selected for the purpose of this investigation. These stories have been linguistically and critically analysed through Halliday's functional grammar (2014) and a Critical Discourse Analysis (Machin & Mayr, 2023), more specifically a Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (Lazar, 2007), with the aim of observing how personal female identities and empowerment are performed through this form of first-person narration (Lazar, 2006; Bamberg, 2010; Schiffrin et al., 2010). A special focus has been on verbal and semiotic choices, which suggest agency, transitivity, and power relationships, and on appraisal elements which give information about the narrators' "feelings and opinions" (Derewianka & Jones, 2016, p. 25). The analysis has proved to be useful in showing how these Egyptian women narrators consciously or unconsciously present themselves as "empowered victims".

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Keywords: Egyptian women, Functional Grammar, Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis, Autobiographical Narratives, Women's empowerment

Introduction

Sexual violence against women is still "a widespread and global problem" (International Institute for Global Health, 2019) associated with gender power relations that usually see women as subordinate and objects of men's sexual desire. Stories of abuses have been long unspoken by women for different reasons: because of fear, including the fear of being disbelieved (Hildebrand, 2021), because of lack of awareness or confidence in reporting their experience, because of trouble with telling trauma (Hildebrand, 2021), as well as because of lack of support services and laws (International Institute for Global Health, 2019, p. 4). However, since the early 2000s, women from all over the globe, either as survivors or activists, have started uniting their voices against violence. They are promoting a series of movements, such as the global #MeToo movement, which have had a huge social impact "encouraging millions of women across the world to speak out about sexual harassment" (International Institute for Global Health, 2019, p. 1: see also Ibrahim, 2019; Hildebrand, 2021; Abuzaid & Sultan, 2022).

More recently, after blogs have emerged as a new computer-mediated narrative genre (Arabuwa, 2021; Bielecka-Prus, 2014), an ever-increasing number of women writes autobiographies on online pages to speak out. Through these first-person stories, women share their personal experience of sexual harassment and assault through a "reconstructive memory" (Abrahão, 2012, p. 31; see also Smith & Watson, 2010; Cuesta, 2011) usually reporting comprehensive and detailed accounts of these significant events (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008). In their 'life narration' (Cuesta, 2011), they present facts from their personal perspective trying to present themselves as they want to be understood (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008, p. 380) and to "convince the reader that their report is true [and] their memory fresh" (Bielecka-Prus, 2014, p. 45; see also Hildebrand, 2021). For women, autobiographical narrations on blogs become "a window into [their] subjectivity" (Al-Rahman & Abdurrahman, 2024, p. 251). They use them as "communication tool[s] for expressing identity" (Al-Rahman & Abdurrahman, 2024, p. 251; see also Bamber, 2010; Bruner, 1987; Brockmeier & Varbaugh 2001; Smith & Watson, 2010; Nadeem, 2015) and "mak[ing] sense of themselves in light of these past events" (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008, p. 378). Nevertheless, "[a]utobiography is more than an account of events" (Bielecka-Prus, 2014, p. 45) and women's inner self. They are also strategic instruments to make testimonies about what happens in society more largely (Cuesta, 2011). Indeed, the "story about the self"

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becomes also the "story of other community members, those whose voice is unheard, on whose behalf the author speaks" (Bielecka-Prus, 2014, p. 45; see also Fonioková, 2020). With this function, they are able to provoke a social impact, raise "critical awareness and develop feminist strategies for resistance and change" (Lazar, 2007, p. 145; see also Ibrahim, 2019), becoming modern devices to condemn negative ideologies and misogynist practices.

In the footsteps of Potter's (2017) and Aragbuwa's (2021) research, who analysed the Stanford Rape Case victim's narrative and Nigerian women's narratives about domestic violence on blogs respectively, this article wishes to investigate autobiographical narratives written by harassed Egyptian women, for whom the practice of writing their own experience of sexual assault on online blogs and social media has become increasingly popular in recent years. As a consequence of this growing phenomenon, plenty of scientific studies (Abdelmonem, 2016; Abdelmonem & Galán, 2017; Ibrahim, 2019; Cochrane et al., 2019; Marzouk & Vanderveen, 2022, among others) about women's activism in Egypt and their battle against gender injustice and sexual abuse on virtual online space have emerged. Among others, it is worth mentioning Ibrahim's (2019) article *Cyberactivism and Empowerment* which is the closest to this research. In her study, Ibrahim (2019) reported and analysed the language of some Egyptian women's tweets about sexual harassment to demonstrate how they are breaking the silence by using the web as a tool "to share their own personal views and explain their feelings and struggles" (Ibrahim, 2019, p. 178). Accordingly, in this study, which wants to be a further contribution to the topic, the emphasis is on how Egyptian women use language to recount their own experience of sexual harassment in the first person. The main aim is to demonstrate that these narrations have become tools for them to make their voices heard and to empower themselves. However, while in Ibrahim's article, the analysis is carried out on the language employed by activists who, therefore, consciously and strategically build it to raise social awareness and create a demand for social justice, in this work, the language under investigation is the one used by victims which, instead, is less contrived and more spontaneous. In addition, Ibrahim (2019) carried out a qualitative thematic analysis of the online discourses she selected, whereas, in this work, for the first time to this author's knowledge, Egyptian women's first-person online narrative is explored within a Critical Discourse Analysis framework (Machin & Mair, 2023). Indeed, the research goal will be reached through the linguistic and critical observation of how personal female identities and empowerment are linguistically performed (Lazar, 2006; Bamberg, 2010; Schiffrin et al., 2010). Functional Grammar analysis (Halliday, 2014) and Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (Lazar, 2007) represent the main analytic procedures to inform this investigation.

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Sexual harassment in Egypt

It is difficult to define "sexual harassment" since no clear agreement exists on what it exactly is. According to the International Institute for Global Health (2019), sexual harassment is:

> *a gross violation of human rights associated with discrimination and abuse of power. It is generally perceived as offensive, unwanted, and unwelcome behaviour of a sexual nature […], and considered a form of violence against women and girls (p. 2)*

The International Institute also specifies that sexual harassment is not only associable with rape or physical assault, but it concerns a 'spectrum of action' (Carrell et al., 2018) including other offensive sexual behaviours ranging from grabbing, patting, kissing, making discriminating selection processes at work, writing obscene messages, making lewd comments or requesting dates or sex, among other actions, to group assault. These unwelcoming behaviours are widespread around the globe. They are prevalent in patriarchal societies, like the Arabic countries, where sexual abuse occurs with a higher density and frequency (International Institute for Global Health, 2019) due to predominant sexist and misogynistic views.

As far as Egypt is concerned, women are systematically victims of sexual assaults (Elbeblawy, 2021; Abdellatif & Ali, 2021). According to a "Study on Ways and Methods to Eliminate Sexual Harassment in Egypt" carried out by UN Women in 2013, more than 99.3 % of Egyptian girls and women, especially those between 19 and 25 years old, have experienced some form of sexual harassment in their life, both verbally and physically, including dirty look, usage of obscene language, whistling, stalking, following, gaslighting, harassment, rape, and group sexual assault (International Institute for Global Health, 2019; see also Sloan, 2014; Maher, 2022). In Egypt, there is a prevalence of street-based sexual harassment (International Institute for Global Health, 2019: 1) occurring while women walk on the way home, while they go to work or university, while they travel on means of transport, and in every other context in which they are in the public eye. These accidents reinforce the idea that a woman should stay at home. However, it also happens at work by employers or colleagues or even at home by husbands or other male family members (Mansour, 2023). What is worst is that, although, in theory, public laws that consider sexual harassment as a crime exist (Article 306(a) and 306(b) of the Penal Code), which also contemplate detention for a period of between six months and two years and a fine of between 3,000 and 20,000 Egyptian pounds depending on the seriousness of the act, in practice, the Egyptian government does not make real efforts to defend and protect women from both domestic and public violence. In many cases, these facts go

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unnoticed or are even justified and considered appropriate penitences for those women who have "forgotten [their] place" (Miller & White, 2003, p. 1237). So doing, these vicious tendencies towards women continue to be regarded both by male and female Egyptians as tolerable and acceptable actions in society and thus as actions to downplay and even to consider a normal part of a woman's life (Weatherall, 2002; Elbeblawy, 2021; Bouachrine, 2022).

This idea has long discouraged women from taking action and rebelling and has led people to consider sexual harassment not an identified problem (Abdelmonem, 2015). Only in 2005, for the first time, did the Egyptian Centre for Women's Rights (ECWR) start a program aimed at fighting sexual harassment in the streets of Egypt (Abdelmonem, 2015). Still, the situation began to change only after the 25th January 2011 revolution which saw a high participation of ordinary women "calling for freedom, equality, and democracy" (Center of Arab Women for Training and Research, 2018: 11; see also Hafez, 2012; Sika & Khodary, 2012; Moghadam, 2014; Sorbera, 2014; Alvi, 2015; Hammad, 2017; El-Ashmawy, 2017; Ibrahim, 2019; Hamzeh, 2022). During the riots, many episodes of sexual harassment and assault took place in Tahrir Square, maybe organised by the government itself to discourage women from participating in the protest (Abdelmonem, 2015; Saad &Abed, 2020). These events have led to a growing interest in women's rights (Saad &Abed, 2020; Khorshid, 2021) which grew after the revolution and led to the proliferation of numerous organisations against women's abuses and assault (Sika & Khodary, 2012; Earls, 2017). Moreover, many anti-sexual harassment independent initiatives like *I Saw Harassment* and *Harassmap* (Abdelmonem, 2015: Magdy, 2017; Ibrahim, 2019; Cochrane et al., 2019) emerged, putting pressure on the Egyptian government for gender discrimination to be ceased (Abdellatif & Ali, 2021; Abirafeh, 2020). Although with much effort and with no immediate results, the action of women's rights activists started having a positive impact on society. Especially, it affected Egyptian women themselves who are increasingly acquiring a critical awareness of their being a woman in such an androcentric context, being encouraged to develop "feminist strategies for resistance and change" (Lazar, 2007, p. 145). Hence, while in less recent times, Arab women and human rights activists have tried to defend their rights "only very timidly against the tide" (Ghoussoub, 1987), also because Egypt is a patriarchal society where women have less privilege to speak than men (Hildebrand, 2021), in the last couple of years, activism has become more audacious and vibrant with increasingly more women speaking about the unspoken (Auf, 2024).

"As part of the increased visibility of feminist activism […] digital campaigns have emerged to not only challenge sexual violence, but give victims a voice and provide them alternative forms of justice" (Mendes et al.,

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2019). Among the digital strategies employed, autobiographies and testimonials of violence on social pages and blogs are the most used. This tendency began in more recent times, especially after the spread of the Internet and the introduction of social media like Twitter (Mendes et al., 2019), or Facebook in Arabic countries. Since then, Egyptian women and activists started writing on the web reporting their own experiences with sexual abuse (Hamzeh, 2022), bravely breaking the fear barrier. With their stories, they rally together in solidarity to oppose gender discrimination (Lazar, 2007) and social gender stigma (Downes, 2018) and ask for the advancement of women's rights. They also call for justice and laws that permit men who commit sexual harassment to be punished (Abdellatif & Ali, 2021). This "not-so-ordinary activism" (Downes, 2018) has generated a reaction from Egypt's patriarchal authorities that, in turn, has led to a new wave of violence against women "with female activists subjected to sexual violence and intimidation by the regime" (Hamzeh, 2022; see also Allemandou, 2017; Park, 2019; Khorshid, 2021). This situation creates a vicious circle placing women in an extremely vulnerable situation and condemning them "in a state of perpetual war" (Bouachrine, 2022, p. xii). However, this does not succeed in bringing to an end their protest which, indeed, continues unstoppable with "feminist voices […] still being heard" (Allemandou, 2017) and even feared by those men in power (Perez, 2022).

Sample and method

For this study, a sample of testimonies has been selected from *Speak Up*[1], an Egyptian online blog. The blog, linked to a Facebook page, has the main aim of providing victims of sexual violation with a space to share their stories with the wide public of readers (Aragbuwa, 2021). Thanks to this 'virtual space', Egyptian girls speak out about their personal experiences of sexual harassment and abuse, ranging from touching to rape, maintaining their anonymity (Wael, 2018; Abuzaid & Sultan, 2022). This allows them to express their thoughts and emotional state without the fear of being judged and without being inhibited by social conventions and ideologies. Narrations, retrieved from the section *Harassment Testimonies* and published from August 2020 to September 2021, are written both in Arabic and in English. Only the English narrations, 8 out of more than 80 testimonies, have been taken into consideration, of which only 5 have been selected for this study, namely, those telling stories about sexual harassment and assault used by men on girls, while excluding those stories telling about girls sexually harassed by other girls. Full-text testimonies are reported in the Appendix.

[1] https://speakupeg.com/

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The language used in the selected narrations was critically analysed through a (Feminist) Critical Discourse Analysis (Lazar, 2007; Machin & Mayr, 2023) and more exactly, through a linguistic analysis based on Halliday's functional grammar (2014) Indeed, in autobiographies "there are many implicit linguistic strategies" (Al-Rahman and Abdurrahman, 2024, p. 248) that suggest narrators' feelings and the power dynamics among characters in the stories. Results have been organised into three sections: verbal choices, semantic choices and appraisal elements. Particular attention was placed on verbal and semiotic choices. Emphasis was put on verb form, mood, and verbal process types (material, verbal, mental, behavioural, relational, or existential) that give information about the agency, transitivity patterns, and participants' roles (Halliday, 1994, 2014), and on 'circumstances' that refer to time, place and manner (Halliday, 2014; Gebhard & Accurso, 2012). A special focus was also on 'appraisal resources' like narrators' attitude and graduation, which implicitly give information about the narrators' "feelings and opinions" (Derewianka & Jones, 2016, p. 25). These linguistic and semiotic choices were critically analysed with the aim of observing how male-female roles and power relations are displayed in the stories, and how personal female identities and empowerment are performed through this form of autobiographical narration (Lazar, 2006; Bamberg, 2010; Schiffrin et al., 2010).

Results

Verbal choice

Agency and transitivity: victimisation, blaming and a reversal in power dynamics

As Machin and Mayr (2023) claim, by analysing verb classifications, it is possible to observe how actions are characterised and how they reveal "who does what to whom" (Machin & Mayr, 2023, p. 148). In other words, they determine who is the agent in texts (Potter, 2017) and who is the goal or beneficiary (Machin & Mayr, 2023), as well as their interpersonal dynamics, role, agency, and degree of power. This information is (sometimes unconsciously) constructed by narrators and is mainly determined by the use of the verb form, active or passive, and by transitivity.

In the texts analysed in this study, there is a strong contrast between the active and the passive form of verbs, which, in these cases, serves women narrators to "represent themselves […] as the dominated group, and their abusers as the dominant group" (Aragbuwa, 2021, p. 251). This victim-abuser dichotomy is evident in the following examples:

> *Testimony 1:* ***he wanted*** *to tell me something, […]* ***He took off*** *his pants and* ***held*** *me up […]* ***he didn't let me down.***

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*Testimony 2: **I have been harassed** many times from my uncle – my dady's brother – […] **he was kissing me**, **takes off** my pants **laying** me on the bed **puts** his cock in my ass.*

*Testimony 3: I was 6 or 7 when **my male cousins harassed me** by touching my vagina […] **i was pinched** in my vagina.*

*Testimony 4: **I got harrased** from a guy last year in the […] I see that **s.one is going to harass me** or s.one i see sooner or later.*

*Testimony 5: **This person tried** like **to hug me** under the name of "tabtaba" till when i just stopped **he forced me** to hug him and **he tried touching** my a**.*

As evident in the instances above, the use of the passive and active forms creates a divisional polarisation between the abused and the abusive person and thus the subjective and objective pronominal distinction between *I*/*me*, the woman-victim, and *he*/*him*, the man-abuser (Aragbuwa, 2021). To notice, the active voice is used more than the passive voice which implies that the focus is mainly on the doer and his actions. Indeed, the stories stress men's behaviours, who are described as the ones with active agency. Men's actions are conveyed by the use of the active form and of transitive and material process verbs like *to take off sth, to lay sb, to let sb, to harass sb, to hug sb, to force sb* among others. Women, instead, represent themselves as the 'affected', the object of the action, through the use of the passive form as in *I have been harassed* and *I was pinched*, operating thus a certain victimisation of the self.

Generally, the active form is associated with the one in power, while the passive form is related to those who passively suffer the others' actions. However, in these narrations, the message is totally different. Indeed, by using the active form to describe the oppressors' actions and the passive form to describe what women have suffered, narrators do not aim at presenting men as powerful people, but contrary they wish to highlight their abusers' meanness and "to make it clear to the reader both the level of [their] blame and accountability" (Potter, 2017, p. 7). It is an attempt to present the abusers as the unique perpetrators of the evil acts, while women show themselves as neither responsible for nor accomplice in what happened to them. Through these linguistic strategies, female narrators appear in a position of power since they have the possibility to reverse the traditional idea that women should feel ashamed and guilty for such assaults (Sadler, 2019; Ibrahim, 2019) and to judge men by putting the blame on them overtly and freely.

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Likewise, despite the passive form, women are not always represented as suffering men's actions passively. Contrary, they sometimes represent themselves as reacting to men's abuses, as it is told in testimonies 1 and 2:

> *Testimony 1**: I tried to scream and cried** so much but he didn't let me down.*
>
> *Testimony 2: i have ever never told anyone, and whenever **i decided** to tell mumy.*

Both examples show the use of the active form for girls' reactions, which suggests active agency for women too (Potter, 2017) and their "ability to refuse sex" which is one of the "best fitting models of empowerment" (Samari, 2019, p. 147). In detail, in the first example, the girl made efforts to protect and defend herself by screaming and crying loudly instead of remaining silent and docile and being inertly subdued and dominated by men. In the second example, the girl decided to speak up and courageously denounce her experience by telling everything to her mother. In the two instances, women's active agency is also confirmed by the use of the behavioral process verb *try* denoting both psychological and physical behaviour (Machin & Mayr 2023) and the quoting (or verbal process) verb *decide*, a power verb denoting volition.

In testimony 2, it is also possible to observe the employment of the imperative mood. The example is reported below:

> *Testimony 2: Please i have a message to every mother please please **don't leave** your children with one of your relatives alone.*

The imperative mood is here used to amplify the narrator's worries about further acts of violence on young girls and children but also implies a change in the power dynamics (Gebhard & Accurso, 2012). Indeed, thanks to her experience, she is now able to give other women suggestions to avoid a similar treatment for them and their daughters. The exhortative nature of the narrator's message, which is also reinforced by the use of the word *please* repeated three times, makes the woman empowered and her words inspiring for other women. They encourage and suggest how to act (or not to act) to avoid sexual assaults and this implies that life stories on the web also have the power to serve "as a source of inspiration and motivation" (Al-Rahman & Abdurrahman, 2024, p. 248) for other women.

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Process types and tenses: vivid memories and empathy with the reader(s)

The narrations analysed "have argumentative structures in which the victims are seen trying to make their stories […] more credible and acceptable with a view to provoking empathy and solidarity" (Aragbuwa, 2021, p. 265). Empathy and solidarity are conveyed through different linguistic strategies. Firstly, through the use of multiple mental process verbs as visible in the instances below:

> *Testimony 2: no one ever knew about this, i have ever never told anyone, and whenever i decided to tell mumy,* ***i feel afraid****, […] to be honest* ***ana really afraid*** *that probably ana momken akon have lost my virginity!!!* ***I remember, remember*** *that he was kissing me.*
>
> *Testimony 4;* ***I feel traumatized*** *from transportations in Egypt because I got harrased from a guy last year in the Metro and I just* ***do not feel safe*** *taking any transportations in Egypt.*
>
> *Testimony 5: i spent the remaining 3 days since it was a mo2tamar infront of him acting normal while* ***i was panicking*** *deep inside.*

The cognitive verb *to remember* in testimony 2, even reiterated twice, reflects the free stream of the narrator's thoughts and memories, while the perceptive verbs *to be afraid, feel afraid, to feel traumatized, not to feel safe*, and *to be panicking* throughout the three narrations reported, are used to emphasise narrators' sensations and fears. Both verb subcategories are useful for women narrators to represent themselves as the 'focalisers' or 'reflectors' of the action offering a deep insight into themselves, a "device through which listeners and readers can be encouraged to have empathy with [them]" (Machin & Mayr, 2023, p. 150) and align with their sentiments. In addition, to amplify their feelings of fear and their worries, exclamations are used as well, as it is evident in testimony 2, where not only one but three exclamation marks are used at the end of the sentence *ana momken akon have lost my virginity!!!*.

Secondly, empathy with the reader(s) is also created thanks to a mixture of tenses switching from past to present, and vice versa, which creates a "rift between the present and past self" (Fonioková, 2020, p. 391; see also Nadeem, 2015) of the narrator. When presenting the events, the Past Simple is the prevalent tense. However, when expressing feelings, narrators switch to the Present Simple. This is evident in testimonies 2 and 4 in the expressions *i feel afraid, I remember, I feel traumatized, I just do not feel safe*. This shift from the past to the present perspective "breaks with the linear space-time mode of giving meaning to experiences" (Abrahão, 2012, p. 36) becoming a

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strategy used by women narrators to show themselves as still affected (Potter, 2017). In fact, if the past tense conveys a sense of distance (Fonioková, 2020), the present tense shortens the distance between the story moment and the narrative moment, emphasising the idea that the abuses that women suffered still have repercussions on their psychology, state of mind and memory. This reduction of the temporal distance and the fact that memories and feelings of repugnance, fear, and confusion are presented as still vivid in the stories, also encourage the reader(s) to empathise more with the victim narrators, and encouraging readers' empathy is a form of empowerment.

Semantic choices

Circumstances: frequency and time

In the stories selected, it is possible to notice numerous linguistic elements indicating frequency, time, place, and manner. As far as frequency is concerned, "[t]he women-victims' narratives depict cycles of abuses" (Aragbuwa, 2021, p. 260). Indeed, the majority of stories analysed does not account for one experience only or for one experience which occurred just once, but they describe numerous and frequent abuses during the narrators' lifetime. This is particularly evident in testimonies 1 and 2:

> *Testimony 1: I have **multiple** experiences with harassment since I was only 6 or 7 years old here in Egypt and also abroad.*

> *Testimony 2: For more than 17 years ago, I have been harassed **many times** from my uncle – my dady's brother – […] i were almost 5-6 years old. too young to remember every detail and to know about harassment/rape/virginity.. and so on.*

In the two testimonies, the girls have been subjected to continuous sexual harassment, sometimes by the same man, as in the case of the uncle in testimony 2, other times by different men as in the other case. The cyclical nature and frequency of sexual violations are here stressed by the use of quantifiers and expressions like *multiple* and *many times*, which on the one hand underline the girls' exhaustion and, on the other hand, implicitly inform about the relentless misogynistic view and behaviour of many men in Egypt.

Notwithstanding, it is possible to observe that the determiners above mentioned also give an idea of indefiniteness. The reader is never informed of the exact number of abuses. Similarly, there is no clear information about the exact moment of the women's lives when they happened. With the exclusion of testimony 4 where the narrator clearly writes that what she is telling occurred the year before (*last year*), in all the other cases there are indefinite adverbs indexing imprecise spans of time. This is evident in testimony 2 and

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3 in which the authors begin their stories with the expressions *I was only 6 or 7* and *For more than 17 years ago* or *almost 5-6 years old* respectively. This inaccuracy may be due to the 'traumatic amnesia' (Hildebrand, 2021), but also stresses the concept that what is fundamental in these narrations is not the exact story moment in which the violence(s) happened, but the more general fact that these acts of violence occurred in these girls' infancy, when, due to their tender age, they were still innocent and harmless. This idea is reinforced by the use of some adverbs such as *just, only* or *too* as shown in the following examples:

> *Testimony 1: I have multiple experiences with harassment since I was **only** 6 or 7 years old here in Egypt and also abroad. […] I was **just** a child.*

> *Testimony 2: i were almost 5-6 years old. **too** young to remember every detail and to know about harassment/rape/virginity.. and so on.*

These adverbs are used as intensifiers to upgrade the force of what is said and to emphasise the man's wickedness and cowardice in committing violence towards a helpless child. These implicit details put the abusers in a very bad light, transferring the humiliation from girls to unscrupulous and pitiless men. By so doing, the women narrators want to communicate that they do feel neither guilty nor complicit in the actions because they were too young and not conscious of what was really happening to them. Hence, again, they describe themselves as innocent victims, while the only ones to blame are their abusers. In so doing, they demonstrate to be able to "largely control all discourses of power abuse" (Aragbuwa, 2021, p. 262).

Circumstances: place and manner

As for place, although there is no detailed description, space seems to play an important role in narrations and is always clearly specified. Violent acts are said to have happened in the house, in the private building, in the neighborhood, in public means of transport and in the church, underlying the fact that women might be victims of sexual violations in every context of the Egyptian society, in both public and private spheres including those which are supposed to be safe for them. This fact reinforces the idea that they cannot trust anyone, either unknown people in the street or their closer relatives. Hence, being explicit in reporting places, they condemn their society and indirectly state that they feel protected nowhere and with no one in their country.

Not only *when* and *where*, but also *how* the violence occurred seems to have a certain importance in the stories. It is for this reason that the manner

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in which actions took place is reported in detail. Instances are observable in almost all testimonies:

> *Testimony 1: He took off his pants and held me up I tried to scream and cried so much but he didn't let me down.*
>
> *Testimony 2: I remember, remember that he was kissing me, takes off my pants laying me on the bed puts his **cock** in my **ass** this is what I didn't ever forgot.*
>
> *Testimony 3: I was 6 or 7 when my male cousins harassed me by touching my **vagina.***
>
> *Testimony 5: This person tried like to hug me under the name of "tabtaba" till when i just stopped he forced me to hug him and he tried touching my **a**** but i couldn't face him.*

Except for the last case in which the term is veiled, in the other narrations, it is even possible to observe the use of uncensored language. Intimate body parts such as *cock*, *ass* or *vagina* are directly mentioned. By using such direct terms, and detailed descriptions, these women "prove the authenticity of their experiences" (Aragbuwa, 2021, p. 265) and wish to demonstrate the significance of these events in their lives (Potter, 2017). In addition, since terms that explicitly refer to reproductive organs or private body parts are avoided and banned in Egypt because they are considered taboos (La Causa, forthcoming), by explicitly using them without the use of metaphors or euphemisms, women also go against their social and cultural expectations, using thus the language as a form of liberation.

While how facts occurred is clearly described, other circumstantial details are presented inaccurately by the use of indefinite pronouns. Some examples are reported below:

> *Testimony 1: some guy […] asked me to come with him because he wanted to tell me **something.***
>
> *Testimony 5: it was in the church (safe place it should be) i was crying to **someone** because of **sth** happened. This person tried like to hug me […]*

In testimonies 1 and 5, the indefinite pronouns *something, someone* or *sht* (abbreviation for *something*) are used to distinguish between what is relevant and what is not (Haspelmath, 1997). For example, the term *somethig*

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in testimony 1, suggests that the focus is not on what the man wanted to say to the girl, which indeed remains unspecified, but the major attention is on the man's bad intention and on the fact that he convinced the girl to follow him under false pretenses. Similarly, in testimony 5, the pronouns *someone* and *sht* underline the fact that what the girl was doing in the exact moment of the violence and how she met the man is not relevant in the narration, but the emphasis is on what happened to her while being in that specific context. This indefiniteness demonstrates that the focus, in these narrations, is on men's actions.

Appraisal elements

A focus on the negativity of facts

Contrary to what Potter (2017) and Arabuwa (2021) found in their research, in the stories investigated in this study the abusers are not described with derogatory adjectives. They are always referred to with neutral common nouns. They are presented as the "guy from the neighborhood", the girl's "uncle" or "cousins", thus according to their relation with the victim, or more generally as "a guy […] in the Metro", or even with indefinite determiners, pronouns and expressions like in the instances below:

> *Testimony 1: I still remember all the ugly details, how **some guy** from the neighborhood saw me playing alone in my building and asked me to come with him.*
>
> *Testimony 4: I just do not feel safe taking any transportations in Egypt specifically the Metro and I see that **s.one** is going to harass me or **s.one** i see sooner or later.*
>
> *Testimony 5: it was in the church (safe place it should be) i was crying to someone because of sth happened. **This person** tried like to hug me.*

By referring to men with indefinite linguistic elements, which seem to be used in a pejorative mood, women narrators distance themselves from the abusers and highlight their disgust and frustration towards them (Potter, 2017).

Similarly, there is no description of women themselves through adjectives. A part from testimony 3, where the girl indirectly describes herself as a chaste and well-mannered Arab woman who *grew up to be veiled, wearing modest clothes* that *aren't tigh or see through*, there are no adjectives used to describe themselves in the other narrations. In other words, there is neither representation of the violence agent (the men) nor self-representation of the violence goal (the women), meaning that it is not their representation what really matters in these accounts. This confirms what has been said throughout

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this article, that the focus of these narrations is almost exclusively on the victims' feelings and opinions and on the abusers' actions, which, indeed, are the only ones to be qualified through judgmental adjectives, as noticeable in the examples below:

> *Testimony 1: I still remember all the **ugly** details […] my screams were not going out and this was **the hardest** feeling ever! […] This is one of the **worst** cases I had experienced.*
>
> *Testimony 2: Thank you for giving me the space to speak it out. my heart is **really heavy**.*

These two testimonies are rich in judgmental adjectives like *ugly, the hardest, worst* that are negatively connotated. Their negative meaning is reinforced by the fact that they are sometimes expressed in the superlative form or by the use of adverbs like *really* which give more strength to the linguistic expression and qualify women's remarks as certain and unquestionable. These judgmental adjectives and adverbs are employed to maximise the significance of their experience, showing the degree of their abhorrence and the intensity of their feelings, and also to highlight the negativity of the events. Moreover, they are employed to create empathy with the reader. In fact, women narrators present the facts as highly sickening and offensive (Potter, 2017) not only because they really feel disgusted and upset, but also because they want to create a strong impact on readers.

Discussion

The autobiographies analysed in this study present women narrators' personal experiences of sexual harassment and abuse. Specifically, it has been observed that these narrations centre on the women narrators' feelings and men's actions. Indeed, the findings of their linguistic and critical analysis have suggested that, in these first-person stories, women strategically, although unconsciously (Hollstein, 2019), make language choices to condemn their abusers' petty acts and "to tell the audience how they feel about the event" (Potter, 2017, p. 25), also building connections and empathy with it.

From the analysis of verbal choice, it has been possible to observe that the narrators present the abusers as the the doer of the action while presenting themselves as the receiving participant, the victims. Indeed, oppressors' actions are all described through the use of the active form, and by means of material verbs, while oppressed women's actions are in the passive voice. As such, as also Aragbuwa (2021) found in her study, these stories, "provide empirical evidence of male oppression against women, [and, by so doing] contribute more to negative […] representation of the abusers" (Aragbuwa,

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2021, p. 265). The message is that men and only men are guilty, while women are innocent and victims of the unwanted violence(s). So, in the attempt to write about their experience, women narrators operate a certain reversal in power relations, since they acquire the authority to point the finger at abusers and condemn their actions.

Similarly to what Potter (2017) observed in her study, narrations also provide the readers with a visceral insight into the victims' experience(s) (Potter, 2017). Through the use of mental process verbs, exclamations, the Simple Present tense, judgemental adjectives and intensifiers the focus moves from the abusers' actions to the women's feelings and memories, thanks to which narrators are able to create an impact on readers and establish a certain empathy with them. In addition, these stories are also inspirational examples for other women who might be facing similar experiences. They implicitly encourage them to denounce these facts, and "assert themselves as legitimate and powerful over the common tropes around sexual assault" (Potter, 2017, p. 26).

To sum up, by sharing their experiences and using language as they do, Egyptian women narrators demonstrate to be in control of the events and show off their will for resistance (Aragbuwa, 2021) against misogynistic ideologies and sexist behaviours of many men in Egypt.

Conclusions

This article focused on the analysis of narrations by Egyptian women sexually assaulted. It has been seen that in Egypt, women are increasingly making their voices heard. Many organisations and initiatives are emerging and a growing number of women are finding the courage to face social convictions and tell on sexist behaviours of many men in their society. Among the devices they have at their disposal, the writing of autobiographical narrations on online blogs is one of the most effective and functional. Indeed, through this anonymous practice, they are able to "further enhance resistant ideologies against [violence]" (Aragbuwa, 2021, p. 265) and violent behaviours by speaking out. As such, autobiographies provide women with the opportunity to revenge themselves against centuries of silence and fear in which they have been relegated, in a society like the Egyptian one where the prevalent idea was that "being silent was the best way to keep them safe" (Praminatih & Nafiah, 2022, p. 200; see also Ibrahim, 2019).

In this study, using Halliday's (2014) functional grammar and a (Feminist) Critical Discourse Analysis (Lazar, 2007; Machin & Mayr, 2023), five testimonies taken from the Egyptian blog *Speak up* were analysed. It has been found that, in their stories, women narrators make specific linguistic and semantic choices (Bielecka-Prus, 2014), including the employment of specific verb tenses, mood and processes, and the use of certain circumstantial and

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appraisal elements that stress abusers' pettiness while emphasising on their own feelings, victimisation and empowerment. Thanks to these strategies, which are mainly unconscious (Hollstein, 2019), these stories become tools to condemn evil male sexual behaviours and reverse power male-female power relations, showing women as 'empowered victims'.

However, although interesting data have been found, this study presents some limitations mainly related to the sample size. To verify whether these results may be generalised to a larger population of Egyptian women, further online first-person narrations (including testimonies written in Arabic) should be investigated. Future research on the topic is thus encouraged.

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Appendix

Testimony 1: I have multiple experiences with harassment since I was only 6 or 7 years old here in Egypt and also abroad. I still remember all the ugly details, how some guy from the neighborhood saw me playing alone in my building and asked me to come with him because he wanted to tell me something, I was just a child 7 years old! He took off his pants and held me up I tried to scream and cried so much but he didn't let me down my screams were not going out and this was the hardest feeling ever! My voive couldn't even help! This is one of the worst cases I had experienced.

Testimony 2: For more than 17 years ago, I have been harassed many times from my uncle – my dady's brother – no one ever knew about this, i have ever never told anyone, and whenever i decided to tell mumy, i feel afraid, i were almost 5-6 years old. too young to remember every detail and to know about harassment/rape/virginity.. and so on. to be honest ana really afraid that probably ana momken akon have lost my virginity!!! I remember, remember that he was kissing me, takes off my pants laying me on the bed puts his cock in my ass this is what I didn't ever forgot.
You know what? I used to meet him most of days as we are in the same house and now he keeps trating me as if something not happened. Thank you for giving me the space to speak it out. my heart is really heavy.

Please i have a message to every mother please please don't leave your children with one of your relatives alone.

Testimony 3: I was 6 or 7 when my male cousins harassed me by touching my vagina, i grew up to be veiled, wearing modest clothes that aren't tigh or see through, i was pinched in my vagina once when i was in my early 20s, another incident a man came up after me in my own building to touch my boobs!

Testimony 4: I feel traumatized from transportations in Egypt because I got harrased from a guy last year in the Metro and I just do not feel safe taking any transportations in Egypt specifically the Metro and I see that s.one is going to harass me or s.one i see sooner or later.

Testimony 5: it was in the church (safe place it should be) i was crying to someone because of sth happened. This person tried like to hug me under the name of "tabtaba" till when i just stopped he forced me to hug him and he tried touching my a** but i couldn't face him and i spent the remaining 3 days since it was a mo2tamar infront of him acting normal while i was panicking deep inside.