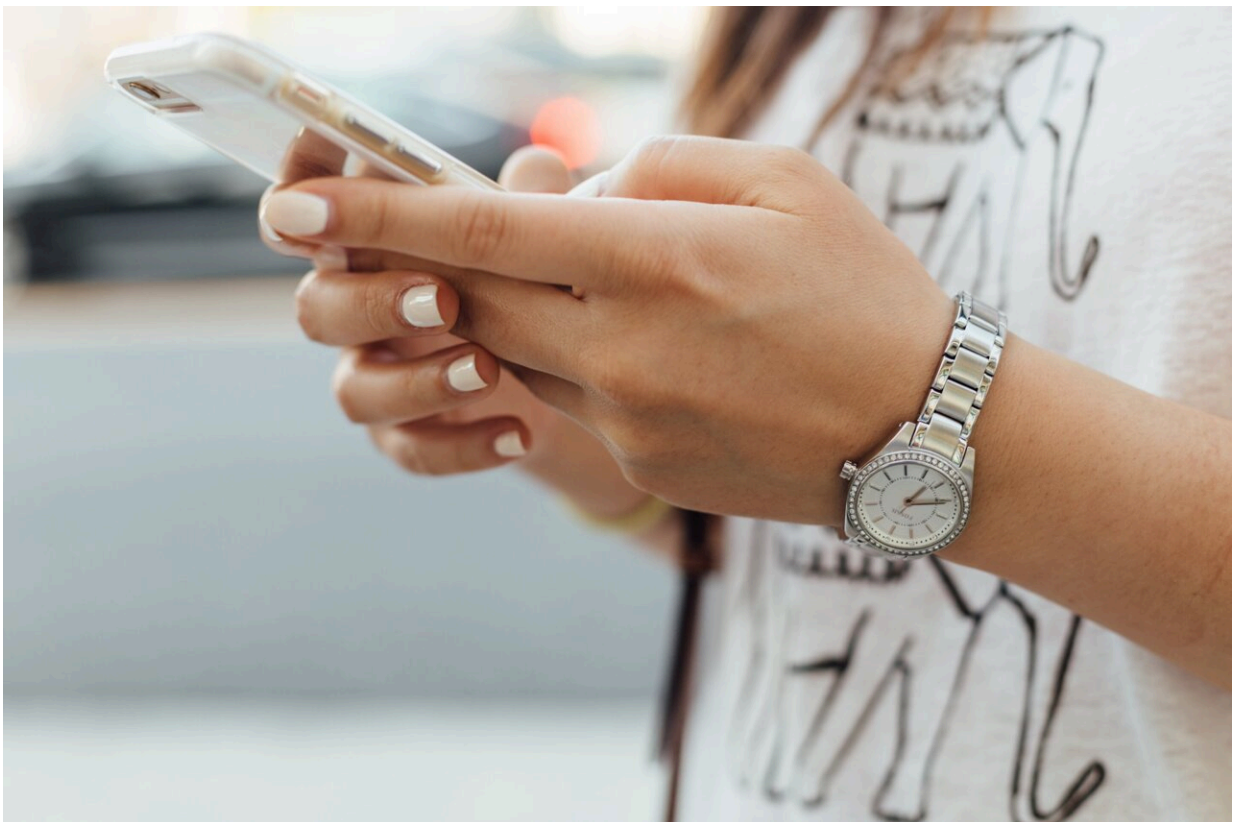


# Ghosts in the machine: Social media 'memories' can trigger survivors of gender-based violence

February 23 2023, by Geoff McMaster

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Credit: Unsplash/CC0 Public Domain

A woman called "Nyla" (her name changed to protect her anonymity) logged on to Facebook one day only to see a photo of her former abuser

staring back at her.

"My heart stopped," she told University of Alberta researcher Nicolette Little. "It felt like I couldn't get away.... No matter where I went, I'd find him looking at me."

Nyla was being haunted by a Facebook feature called "Memories" that randomly pulls photos from a user's photo collection, inviting them to engage in moments of nostalgia. She was one of 12 [subjects](#) interviewed by Little, a lecturer in Media and Technology Studies, for a study showing how the feature affects survivors of abuse.

"It makes their abuser seem inescapable and reduces survivors' sense of agency, among other challenges to their well-being," says Little, who advises the [federal government](#) and others on gender-based violence and media.

## **The problem with unbidden Facebook memories**

Facebook launched the Memories feature in 2015, assuming most people would enjoy the look back. But as Little points out in her study, published in *Feminist Media Studies*, 80% to 90% of survivors of gender-based violence know their abuser—often a former acquaintance, family member or intimate partner.

For those who use the app, that means an abuser may still show up in Facebook Memories even if the survivor has unfriended them. You can block a friend, but opting out of or controlling Facebook Memories is no easy process, says Little.

And so Nyla's predicament is not uncommon. In Little's estimation, any efforts to reduce gender-based violence "must include digital spaces, since abusers extend their violence online," she says.

"I kept hearing in my interviews that it was a shocking moment when an image comes up of someone you left five years ago, or that beat you up or sexually assaulted you. One person would throw her phone across the room and go to bed for a couple of hours," while others would flinch at slamming doors or other loud noises.

Some of Little's subjects would leave their phones at home, or hide them away on anniversary dates or on Valentine's Day, dreading what might turn up.

In addition to interviews, Little also used a "walkthrough method" to assess how easy it is to navigate Facebook Memories' controls on a smartphone, the most commonly used device for accessing Facebook.

She found that the process from initial internet search to accessing "Memories Settings" takes a "time-consuming seven steps." Confusing matters further was the fact that online instructions "do not fully match what the user sees on the app's interface."

Ten of her 12 subjects were unaware such settings even existed, including two who were self-described media specialists.

"I didn't even know you could opt out," said one participant. "If a guy like me doesn't know that, it's a problem."

Another said, "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. People should be able to turn the function on and off with ease, depending on when they feel less or better able to deal with past moments."

## **Empowering users is key**

But there are ways the user experience of Facebook Memories could be improved, says Little, starting with a visible thumbs-down icon on a photo that would not only delete it, but also feed the information to Facebook's algorithms to avoid showing certain types of images across the platform.

By far the easiest solution, however, aside from making settings simpler, would be empowering users to opt in rather than opt out of Facebook Memories, she says.

Beyond those immediate fixes, Little recommends training that includes not only diversity and equity, but also trauma-informed approaches to design, for the entire digital sector. Software designers in Silicon Valley tend to be "of a certain demographic," she says, typically white, heterosexual males who may not recognize how certain images could be harmful to users.

"A trauma-informed approach assumes an individual will likely have a history of trauma ... and will seek not to reinjure in the first place."

**More information:** Nicolette Little, Social media "ghosts": how Facebook (Meta) Memories complicates healing for survivors of intimate partner violence, *Feminist Media Studies* (2022). [DOI: 10.1080/14680777.2022.2149593](https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2022.2149593)

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