

Addressing Gender-Based Harassment in Social Media: A Call to Action

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Abstract

Previous research indicates that women face a disproportionate amount of online harassment resulting from their identity as women. Despite its increasing prevalence, however, gender-based online harassment is still not well understood. Social media platforms are a critical medium for gender-based online harassment and the effects of this harassment on women can be devastating both to their personal lives and to their professional careers. While the field of Information Studies is uniquely positioned to address the serious problem of gender-based online harassment, there are significant gaps in key areas of the literature related to this problem. Critical research is therefore needed in order to produce key insights for empowering victims, for discouraging perpetrators, and for increasing awareness. This knowledge can also be grouped into three application areas: education, policy, and technological tools.

Keywords: Cyberbullying; Cyberstalking; Gender; Online Harassment; Social Media

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1 Introduction

Every person you meet, every message you receive, every word you say, and every thought you have can instantly lead to endless and public ridicule, accusation, criticism, or threats of serious bodily harm. Feel overwhelmed? Welcome to the world of online harassment.

Although forms of online harassment have been examined since the early days of the Internet (Dibbell, 1994; Greenberg, 1996; Huff, Johnson, & Miller, 2002; McGraw, 1995; Smith, 2002; Starr, 2000; Topper, 2001), online harassment is still not socially, legally, or academically well understood (Citron, 2014; Reed, 2009; Salter & Bryden, 2009). The concept of “cyberstalking,” for example, only recently became legally recognized, partly due to its strong relationship with the more-established crime of “offline” stalking (National Centre for Cyberstalking Research, 2011). Moreover, changing technologies generate different capabilities and limitations for both online and offline harassment, particularly through social media platforms (Citron, 2014; Perry & Olsson, 2009; Pew Research Center, 2014; Voelcker, 2006).

Cyberstalking and several related concepts (including “cyberbullying”) have significant gender-based components (Bastiaensens et al., 2014; Beckman, Hagquist, & Hellström, 2013; Calvete, Orue, Estévez, Villardón, & Padilla, 2010; Citron, 2014; Fenaughty & Harré, 2013; National White Collar Crime Center, 2013). Therefore, a generalized definition of “gender-based online harassment” can be understood to encompass these and other forms of online harassment, including hate speech or the posting of private photos without an individual’s consent (Citron, 2014).

2 Gender-based Harassment

The term “gender-based” recognizes harassment that is predicated on perceived gender identity. This type of online harassment must be understood within the larger framework of gender-based discrimination and hatred, particularly against women (Nussbaum, 2010; Citron, 2014; Cross, 2014). The U.S. Hate Crime Statistics Act officially includes gender as a protected category and has found that hate crimes motivated by gender bias more than doubled from 12% to 26% between 2004 and 2012 (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2014). Likewise, previous research indicates that women face a disproportionate amount of online harassment, *simply due to their identity as women*. Meyer and Cukier (2006) found that fake online accounts with feminine usernames incurred an average of 100 sexually explicit or threatening messages a day, while masculine names received only 3.7 messages. Working to Halt Online Abuse (2013) reports that women were the victims of 70% of the 4,025 cases that it handled between the years 2000 and 2013. Another survey found that only 6.3% of women had *not* experienced some form of online harassment (240 female respondents), compared to 12.8% of men (109 respondents) (National Centre for Cyberstalking Research, 2011).

As with “offline” harassment, the effects of online harassment on women can be devastating to their personal lives and professional careers (Citron, 2014; Hess, 2014). Women are almost twice as likely as men to list “fear of personal injury” as their primary fear related to online harassment, with “damage to reputation” as their second-greatest concern (National Centre for Cyberstalking Research,

2011). Because of a high level of online abuse and the multiple concerns (including physical safety) involved, many women admit to self-censoring or even erasing their online personas (Citron, 2014; Hess, 2014). From 2000 to 2005, Internet users who participated in online chats and discussion groups dropped from 28% to 17%, “entirely because of women’s fall off in participation” (Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2005, p. 14).

3 Social Media Platforms and Gender-based Harassment

Social media platforms generate unique forms of abuse and are a critical medium for gender-based online harassment (Citron, 2014; Pew Research Center, 2014). The National Centre for Cyberstalking Research found that 63% of women reporting online harassment were harassed through social networking sites (2011). Another survey found that social media is the most common venue for all types of online harassment, with young women experiencing the most severe forms of harassment at disproportionately higher levels than other groups (Pew Research Center, 2014). As social media is increasingly used to promote work in fields that rely on marketing an individual's unique skills and reputation, women in such fields can neither avoid using social media nor abandon their specific (gendered) identity online (Citron, 2014; Hess, 2014).

Previous Information Studies literature has covered some areas related to gender-based online harassment. For example, scholars have examined potential criteria for predicting general cyberbullying in online forums, including the possibility of using automatic tools (Moore, Nakano, Enomoto, & Suda, 2012). However, most of this literature is focused on the cyberbullying of minors (Bastiaensens et al., 2014; Beckman et al., 2013; Casas, Del Rey, & Ortega-Ruiz, 2013; Fenaughty & Harré, 2013; Law, Shapka, Hymel, Olson, & Waterhouse, 2012) and of college-age adolescents (Lindsay & Krysik, 2012; Schenk, Fremouw, & Keelan, 2013).

Another important area of research is the application of sentiment analysis to online harassment. These studies have primarily looked at insulting or offensive comments on various online news sites and social networking platforms (Chen, Zhou, Zhu, & Xu, 2012; Yang, Kiang, Chen, & Li, 2012), particularly in relation to cyberbullying (Dadvar & de Jong, 2012; Dinakar, Jones, Havasi, Lieberman, & Picard, 2012; Dinakar, Reichart, & Lieberman, 2011; Ptaszynski et al., 2010; Reynolds, Kontostathis, & Edwards, 2011). Interestingly, few of these sentiment analyses have considered the relevance of gender (Dadvar, Jong de, Ordelman, & Trieschnigg, 2012).

Other recent studies have examined topics such as women's experiences with harassment (including queer women and women of color) in online gaming communities (Cross, 2014; Gray, 2011; Kuznekoff & Rose, 2012; Salter & Blodgett, 2012), “flaming” on YouTube (Moor, Heuvelman, & Verleur, 2010), the effect of “accountability” versus “anonymity” on levels of civility in news websites' comments (Lapidot-Lefler & Barak, 2012; Rowe, 2014; Santana, 2014), the effect of policies on social media participation (Stein, 2013; Youmans & York, 2012), and the socialization process of making “uncivil” comments in online political discussions (Hmielowski, Hutchens, & Cicchirillo, 2014).

Information Studies literature, however, has not adequately addressed the magnitude of gender-based online harassment among adults. Scholars must develop a nuanced understanding of the frequency, features, and effects of this type of harassment. Researchers should also analyze the specific affordances of social media platforms for either supporting or discouraging online harassment. Lastly, scholars must connect gender-based harassment through social media platforms to the larger social structures of gender bias and offline harassment.

4 Applications

Such research could be applied to three different groups of stakeholders with distinct needs. Specifically, insights could be used for empowering victims, for discouraging perpetrators, and for increasing awareness among the designers and managers of social media platforms. Knowledge about online gender-based harassment could likewise fit into three general application areas: education, policy, and technology.

4.1 Education

Data about gender-based harassment on various platforms could be made available in order to help potential victims make informed usage decisions. Awareness programs aimed at potential harassers could also be designed to reduce and prevent harassment, and then implemented within both formal and informal educational channels. Lastly, information about this problem allows platform designers and managers to better understand online gender-based harassment and its effects on victims. Such

education should also be applied more broadly to increasing public awareness about this specific problem within the larger social milieu of gender-based discrimination and abuse.

4.2 Policy

Developing clear policies (both legal and platform-based) for preventing harassment and for handling abuse would empower potential victims. Clearly establishing and enforcing criteria for sanctioning harassers might also discourage some potential harassers. Lastly, the presence of such policies can convince developers and managers of other social media platforms that gender-based harassment is an important problem to address.

4.3 Technology

Potential victims could be aided through the development of auto-collection methods for reviewing and archiving harassing messages, in addition to advanced filtering mechanisms or even predictive blocking tools for potentially abusive content. Alternatively, an automatic detection feature that increases senders' awareness of the potentially harassing implications of online posts could be used to prevent some instances of harassment. Such technological options may also be implemented as platform-wide features, and may further inspire social media designers to develop new ways to combat harassment.

5 Conclusion

In order to address these applications, however, critical Information Studies research is desperately needed. This research might include:

- Generating a detailed quantitative and qualitative picture of the magnitude and features of gender-based online harassment in current social media by collecting and analyzing data from multiple social media platforms where many harassing messages are publicly available.
- Analyzing the suggestions and recommendations of prominent individuals who have publicly written about their experiences with online gender-based harassment, and then exploring these preliminary recommendations further through interviews conducted with women who have experienced such harassment.
- Evaluating current suggestions regarding education, technological tools, and policies in order to identify gaps or discrepancies and to ultimately offer several concrete recommendations—related to the three areas described above—for future solutions to this complex social problem.

The world of gender-based online harassment may initially seem overwhelming. With meaningful action research, however, we can envision effective solutions to this problem.

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