

A Survey of Online Harassment at a University Campus

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This exploratory study of 339 students at the University of New Hampshire found that approximately 10% to 15% of students reported receiving repeated e-mail or Instant Messenger (I-M) messages that "threatened, insulted, or harassed," and more than half of the students received unwanted pornography. Approximately 7% of students reported online harassment to an authority. Messages originated from strangers, acquaintances, and significant others. No difference in online harassment was found based on demographic variables except sexual orientation. Sexual minority students were more likely to receive online harassment from strangers than were heterosexual students. Implications for further research and for policy/program development are discussed.

Keywords: stalking; cyberstalking; Internet; e-mail; higher education

Online communications are now ubiquitous on college campuses. A recent Harris poll of a national sample of college seniors found that virtually 100% of college seniors had used the Internet (Harris Interactive, 2001). Many students bring their own computer to campus, and some schools require all students to have one. Almost all universities and colleges now make high-speed Internet access available in residence halls and provide computer labs and library computer access for students who do not have their own computer. Students routinely e-mail professors, friends, and family, and many students now use Instant Messenger (I-M), which allows real-time communications through typing of messages back and forth across the Internet. Use of the Internet has many benefits that enrich a student's scholarly and social experiences through access to a multitude of information and entertainment Web sites, libraries, online databases of scholarly journals, newsgroups, and listservs. There is also, however, evidence that use of the Internet can result in a variety of difficulties. These include "cyberaddiction," identity theft, exposure to unwanted violent and/or pornographic content or messages, e-mail harassment, and cyberstalking (Finn & Banach, 2000; Kandell, 1998; Leibs,

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1995; Waldron, Lavitt, & Kelley, 2000). The extent to which college students experience these problems and know what to do if they occur is largely unknown.

The term "cyberstalking" has been used to describe a variety of behaviors that involve (a) repeated threats and/or harassment (b) by the use of electronic mail or other computer-based communication (c) that would make a reasonable person afraid or concerned for their safety (Fisher, Cullen, & Turner, 2000; U.S. Department of Justice, 2000). Cyberstalking can be just as threatening as stalking in the real world and can lead to anxiety, mental anguish, physical harm, and even homicide (Kennedy, 2000; Lamberg, 2002). Cyberstalking may include the following:

- Sending repeated e-mail or instant messages that may or may not directly threaten the recipient;
- Flooding a victim's e-mail box with unwanted mail, sending the victim files with a virus;
- Using a victim's e-mail address to subscribe her or him to multiple listservs or to purchase books, magazines, or other services in her/his name; sending misinformation and false messages to chat rooms, Usenet groups, listservs, or places of the victim's employment;
- Stealing a person's online identity to post false information; sending a victim's demographic information and/or picture to sexually oriented or pornographic sites;
- Seeking and compiling various information that a victim may have posted on newsgroups with the intent to locate personal information and then use this information to harass, threaten, and intimidate the victim either online or in the real world (Finn & Banach, 2000; Jenson, 1996; Spitzberg & Hoobler, 2002).

Cyberstalking is part of the larger stalking problem on college campuses. The National Institute of Justice (1996) estimated that 8% of women and 2% of men have been stalked at some point in their lives. With regard to college campuses, there is some evidence that stalking may have a different profile than stalking nationally. A National Institute of Justice (1998) study of 4,446 female students at 223 colleges and universities in the United States found that 13.1% ($n = 581$) of women said that they had been stalked during a 7-month period in 1997, and 24.7% of all victims reported that the stalking included e-mail (Fisher et al., 2000). Brownstein (2000) compared data from a study of two universities with national data and noted that those in the university had a higher proportion of male victims, 42% compared to 22%, respectively. Another study of one college campus found that between 26.6% and 35.2% of female students and between 14.7% and 18.4% of male students had been stalked (Fremouw, Westrup, & Pennypacker, 1997). Studies

are very difficult to compare due to differences in the definition of stalking and research methods employed.

Colleges across the country are increasingly dealing with cases of cyberstalking (Lee, 1998; Olsen, 2001). Students may be especially vulnerable to stalking and cyberstalking because they live in a relatively closed community where class schedules, phones, and e-mails are easy to find. Most college students are in the age group (18 to 29) that fits the stalking victim profile. Furthermore, as Lee (1998) argued, stalking will be problematic on college campuses because most college students are developmentally at a mate-seeking age, and stalking is rooted in a culture in which romance is often associated with pursuit of a reluctant female by a persistent male. There are no studies that accurately document the extent of cyberstalking; however, the number of reports related to online harassment is increasing (Fremouw et al., 1997; Lee, 1998). Furthermore, many anecdotes and stories of cyberstalking have been reported online (Wildangel, 1999). A nonprofit organization, Working to Halt Online Abuse (WHOA), reports that it receives approximately 100 requests a week looking for guidance and support to stop cyberstalking (WHOA, 2002).

As more people use the Internet, the extent of cyberstalking is likely to increase. In fact, the Internet medium itself may promote cyberstalking. The online environments can promote a false sense of intimacy and misunderstanding of intentions. People may feel in proximity to each other when they are online despite the actual physical distance involved. In addition, Walther (1997) found that emotionally intensified interactions often develop in online communication. The limited nonverbal, historical, and contextual information available in mediated contexts may promote potential cyberstalkers to develop idealized perceptions of those with whom they communicate online and to misjudge the intentions of the messages they receive. In addition, the relative anonymity, the lack of social status cues, and the propensity for disinhibited behavior in the online environment may promote greater risk-taking and asocial behavior by a greater number of people.

Campus Policies

A number of organizations provide guidelines to help prevent and stop cyberstalking (Hatcher, 2000; WHOA, 2002). Guidelines include not sharing personal information in public online places such as chatrooms and newsgroups; creating a user name that will be gender and age neutral; creating separate e-mail accounts for chatroom and newsgroup use; sending personal information only to secure sites; sending a clear message that a recipient does not want further communication and will contact authorities if

messages continue; saving all copies of communication from a cyberstalker, whether it is e-mail or I-M; and contacting local law enforcement if feeling threatened. Filters are now available to sort out unwanted "junk mail" or unwanted e-mail from individuals. Guidelines strongly recommend that the meeting of individuals from the Internet, if done at all, take place in a public area. Although these suggestions are widely available on the Internet, the extent to which college students (or others) are aware of these guidelines or know what to do in case of cyberstalking is unknown.

A few colleges and universities have taken concrete steps to intervene in cyberstalking (George Mason University, 1999; Olsen, 2000; Wellesley College, 2001). For example, the University of Maryland–College Park has created a NEThics office to intervene in campus computer-related crimes and problematic issues, including cyberstalking (Carlson, 2002). The University of California–Santa Cruz has a Frequently Asked Questions section on their Web site that defines e-mail abuse and provides phone and e-mail contacts for reporting it (<http://www2.ucsc.edu/cats/sc/help/policies/email-faqs.shtml>). George Mason University and Wellesley College have a specific policy that defines stalking and harassment and the consequences for engaging in it. The GMU policy states,

GMU defines stalking as any behaviors or activities occurring on more than one occasion that collectively instill fear in the victim and/or threaten his or her safety, mental health, or physical health. Such behaviors and activities may include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Nonconsensual communication, including face-to-face, telephone calls, voice messages, *electronic mail*, written letters, unwanted gifts, etc.

Stalking behavior will not be tolerated. Incidents occurring on or off campus are subject to University discipline when such actions materially affect the learning environment or operations of the University. (George Mason University, 1999; emphasis added)

Although colleges and universities are becoming aware of campus problems related to online harassment and cyberstalking, there is yet limited data that documents the extent of the problem or how students respond when it occurs. This study explores the following research questions:

- What is the frequency that online harassment occurs for students at the University of New Hampshire (UNH)?
- From whom do messages originate?
- What are the demographic and computer use variables that may be associated with increased risk of online harassment?

- Do students report online harassment when it occurs, and to whom do they report it?
- Are students aware of campus policies and resources related to online harassment?

METHOD

This study examined online harassment at UNH through a survey of undergraduate students during April 2002. The survey questions focused on the types of online harassment described in the literature—specifically, use of e-mail and I-M to insult, harass, threaten, or send inappropriate material such as pornography. In addition, the study focused on harassment that was repeated rather than a single incident. The survey asked about the frequency of these events while at UNH using four categories: *never*, *1 or 2 times*, *3-5 times*, and *more than 5 times* (see Table 1). The term “cyberstalking” was not used because many college students may not know its meaning. As will be reported later, a weakness of the study was that students were not asked about fears for their safety. For example, one item was “Repeatedly getting an e-mail from a stranger that threatened, insulted, or harassed you.” Thus, the study represents situations that may be considered online harassment rather than cyberstalking, although cyberstalking may have occurred. If students experienced online harassment, they were also asked open-ended questions about whether they reported it and to whom. If they did not report it, they were asked why they did not do so. Students were also asked questions about their use of computers, including the frequency of e-mail, I-M, chatrooms, listservs, and newsgroups. Finally, the survey asked about demographic information that might be associated with cyberharassment: age, race, gender, year in school, residence, and sexual orientation.

Demographic variables were included because it was hypothesized that females, minority students, and gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender (GLBT) students would have higher rates of online harassment as they are more likely to face harassment in the real world. It was also hypothesized that those who used online groups and listservs more frequently would have higher rates of online harassment, just as those who go to social meeting places with strangers, such as bars or singles parties, are more likely to encounter harassment. It was also hypothesized that those who lived on campus would have higher rates of online harassment because they were more likely to have a high-speed Internet connection that could be left on at all times, thus promoting more online communication. Finally, based on anecdotal reports from students about their confusion over UNH privacy policies, students were asked

TABLE 1: E-mail and Instant Messaging (I-M) Harassment at University of New Hampshire (in percentages)

	<i>Never</i>		<i>1-2 Times</i>		<i>3-5 Times</i>		<i>5 or More Times</i>	
	<i>E-mail</i>	<i>I-M</i>	<i>E-mail</i>	<i>I-M</i>	<i>E-mail</i>	<i>I-M</i>	<i>E-mail</i>	<i>I-M</i>
Getting repeated messages from someone you don't know or barely know that threatened, insulted, or harassed you.	84.8	81.7	6.0	12.6	2.4	3.9	6.9	1.8
Getting repeated messages from an acquaintance or friend that threatened, insulted, or harassed you.	90.4	85.7	5.4	9.3	1.8	3.0	2.4	2.1
Getting repeated messages from a "significant other" (boy/girlfriend, spouse, etc.) that threatened, insulted, or harassed you.	90.4	89.0	5.4	6.8	1.8	3.3	6.9	0.9
Getting repeated messages from someone even after you told him/her to stop e-mailing you.	85.9	86.9	10.8	10.1	2.4	1.5	0.9	1.5
Getting unwanted pornographic messages or pictures.	41.3	82.0	16.5	9.3	10.8	4.5	32.5	4.2

NOTE: E-mail $n = 337$; I-M $n = 334$.

about their experiences with reporting online harassment. They were also asked whether they knew that their personal information was listed in UNH online directories and whether they knew that they could request that it be removed.

The survey was pretested with a group of 15 students, and changes were made to improve the clarity of the questions. The survey was two pages long and required about 5 minutes to answer.

Sample

The sample consisted of 339 undergraduate students from a population of 10,239 at the University of New Hampshire. This provides a 5% margin of error and 95% confidence level (McCall, 1980). The sample was limited to undergraduates because they were more likely to live on campus and they were believed to be more likely to need assistance from campus helping resources if online harassment problems were found.

The sample was a convenience sample with a randomizing procedure. The survey was conducted at the Memorial Union Building (MUB) on campus during the spring semester of 2002. Because this is a highly popular area where students congregate for meals and extracurricular activities, it allowed a diverse sample. Every fourth person encountered by a researcher was asked to participate in the survey. To obtain a diverse sample, the researchers visited the MUB on various days and at different times throughout the day. There were 60 (13.7%) students who were asked but declined to participate in the survey.

As can be seen in Table 2, the sample approximates the population of undergraduate students at UNH. The sample, however, was overrepresentative of juniors and underrepresentative of seniors. It may be that by the time students are seniors, they are less likely to live on campus or frequent the MUB. Students are predominately White and traditional-age undergraduates. In addition, the majority of students (64%) lived on campus. Approximately 4.8% ($n = 16$) of students described their sexual orientation as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender.

RESULTS

Online Harassment

When online harassment is defined as "repeated messages that threatened, insulted, or harassed," then approximately 10% to 15% of students reported having experienced online harassment either from strangers, an acquaintance, or a significant other. Table 1 shows the percentages and frequencies of the types of harassment encountered for e-mail and I-M. The table shows that people are experiencing problems through both e-mail and I-M. The highest proportion of harassment reported by students is from strangers, 16.2% by e-mail and 19.3% by I-M. Note that 14.1% of students reported receiving harassing e-mail even after they requested of the sender that it stop. Similarly, 13.1% of students reported receiving harassing I-M even after they requested it to stop.

A majority of students, 58.7%, received unwanted pornography, which could be considered harassment. Students were not asked, however, whether the messages were sent to them personally or were part of a large distribution list. Thus, it is not possible to determine whether the messages were part of a targeted individual harassment strategy or reflected a more general mass mailing.

TABLE 2: Demographic Characteristics of the Sample

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Study Sample (%)</i>	<i>All UNH Students (%)</i>
Gender	F = 64.9, M = 35.1	F = 59.0, M = 41.0
Age (mean)	20.34	20.59
Class standing		
First year	26.7	26.0
Sophomore	22.0	24.0
Junior	32.2	21.0
Senior	18.9	29.0
Race/ethnicity		
American Indian	0.3	0.2
African American	1.2	0.8
Hispanic	1.8	0.8
Caucasian	92.7	89.0
Asian/Pacific Islander	2.7	1.5
Other	1.2	6.4

Demographic and Internet Use Differences in Online Harassment

To examine differences in online harassment, each harassment variable was recoded into absence or presence of online harassment, with "never" recoded as "absence" and any reported frequency recoded as "presence." Demographic variables were examined for differences in online harassment. No significant differences were found in age, race, class standing, or residence. No differences by gender were found in e-mail or I-M harassment variables.

E-mail harassment was more prevalent for those who identified as a sexual minority. Approximately one third (5) of the 16 students who identified themselves as GLBT reported getting repeated e-mail from someone they did not know, or barely knew, that threatened, insulted, or harassed them. Only 14.6% of heterosexual students reported receiving such e-mails (chi-square = 3.84, $df = 1$, $p < .05$). Similarly, 37.5% of GLBT students reported getting e-mail from someone even after they told him or her to stop e-mailing them. Only 13.1% of heterosexual students reported this (chi-square = 7.37, $df = 1$, $p < .007$). No differences were found in e-mail harassment by acquaintances or significant others with regard to sexual orientation. In addition, no differences were found in I-M harassment with regard to sexual orientation.

Students reported being frequent users of the Internet. Almost all students, 96.7%, reported use of e-mail one or more times per week. Similarly,

81.5% reported use of I-M one or more times a week. Very few students use listservs, newsgroups, or chatrooms: 87.9% report that they never use a listserv; 78.2% never use a newsgroup; and 88.7% never use a chatroom. No demographic differences were found in relation to frequency of use of e-mail, I-M, listservs, or chatrooms. No differences in online harassment were associated with the frequency of Internet use.

Campus Resources and Policies

One question asked, "Have you ever reported a bad experience related to e-mail or I-M?": Only 6.8% ($n = 23$) of students responded yes; 239 students (70.7%) responded no, and 76 students (22.5%) did not answer the question. Students that reported the harassment were asked in an open-ended question to state to whom it was reported. The most common response was that it was reported to the Internet service provider (30.4%, $n = 7$). Other responses included reporting to a residence hall advisor, to the Computer Information Services help desk, to another UNH office, and to the campus police. When asked if the situation was resolved to their satisfaction, 47.8% ($n = 11$) responded no.

Chi-square was used to examine differences between the 23 students who reported online harassment and those who did not. No demographic differences were found, nor were there differences in reporting related to the frequency of use of the Internet, e-mail, chatrooms, listservs, or online newsgroups. Students who reported online harassment were more likely to experience e-mail harassment from strangers (chi-square = 8.04, $df = 1$, $p < .005$), acquaintances/friends (chi-square = 8.29, $df = 1$, $p < .004$), and significant others (chi-square = 16.93, $df = 1$, $p < .000$). They were also more likely to receive unwanted pornography (chi-square = 4.28, $df = 1$, $p < .039$). Similarly, they were more likely to experience I-M harassment from strangers (chi-square = 7.54, $df = 1$, $p < .006$), acquaintances/friends (chi-square = 13.51, $df = 1$, $p < .001$), and significant others (chi-square = 11.98, $df = 1$, $p < .001$).

Seventy-two students (21.3%) answered the open-ended question, "If you did not report the harassment, why did you not report it?" Students who did not report online harassment listed several reasons for not reporting it including: "The problem was not serious enough" (37.5%), "I ignored it" (19.5%), "I handled it myself" (19.5%), and "I did not know to whom to report it" (12.5%).

When asked about the student information system, most students (91%) knew that their personal information, such as address, phone, and e-mail address, was listed online by the university system. Approximately two fifths

of those students (41.6%), however, did not know that they could request to have the information removed from the system.

DISCUSSION

The ubiquitous use of the Internet by college students will require colleges to address new social problems associated with online participation. This study found that approximately 1 in 10 college students at the University of New Hampshire experienced repeated threats, insults, or harassment resulting from the use of e-mail and/or I-M. Students experienced messages from strangers, acquaintances, and significant others. This study also explored demographic and Internet use variables related to online harassment. The extent of online harassment only differed by sexual orientation, with GLBT students experiencing higher rates than those who identified as heterosexual. As discussed below, due to a number of conceptual and methodological limitations, all results of this study must be viewed very tentatively, and much research is needed to fully examine the extent of online harassment on college campuses.

Only a small proportion of students that received online harassment attempted to report it to an authority, and almost half of those were not satisfied with the outcome of their report. Romeo (2001) has advocated that colleges should publish and distribute a Campus Anti-Stalking Policy and Procedures Handbook containing information for stalking victims such as the definition of stalking, a description of stalking behaviors, life experiences of stalking victims, and a list of services provided by campus police and psychological services, local community law enforcement, and mental health agencies. This study suggests that colleges should also consider developing materials and a protocol that includes information about e-mail etiquette and online harassment. Prevention efforts might also include limiting access to the online student directory to a secure server available only to campus members and publicizing that students have a choice to remove their name from the online directory. Because cyberstalking and online harassment can lead to anxiety and health problems that interfere with a student's academic and social life (Lee, 1998), colleges should investigate the extent of online harassment on their campus and, if necessary, institute both prevention and intervention efforts.

This study found that more than half of students received unwanted pornographic messages or pictures, with one third of students receiving them five or more times. It appears that these messages were not necessarily part of online harassment because a much larger proportion of students received

them than received other harassing messages. In any case, unwanted pornographic messages contribute to a hostile environment, and colleges will need to take steps to eliminate them by providing students with e-mail filters and with enforcement of campus codes related to sexual harassment. As noted below, further research is needed about the source, frequency, and impact of pornographic messages related to campus e-mail.

Limitations of the Research

Research is limited about the nature and extent of online harassment on college campuses. Although this investigation provides support that online harassment may be a problem on college campuses, the study has a number of limitations that will need to be addressed in future research.

Sample

This case study represents a single campus using a convenience sample of students who visit the student union building. Given these limitations, the results suggest hypotheses for further study but cannot be generalized to other populations. A concerted effort should be made to conduct a study using a random national sample of college students that would allow researchers to test the association of online harassment with both student and institutional variables. This would provide information for targeted prevention and intervention activities as well as knowledge about what institutional factors result in lower rates of online harassment.

Conceptual Clarity

Studies of online harassment and cyberstalking are difficult to compare due to a lack of conceptual clarity and differences in definition of terms. A clear definition of cyberstalking is essential. Most studies have included three dimensions as part of the definition: repeated threats and/or harassment, use of electronic mail or other computer-based communication, and creating fear or concern for safety (Fisher et al., 2000; U.S. Department of Justice, 2000). Other studies have used two separate categories: "e-mail stalking," which involves direct communication with the victim; and "Internet stalking," which uses other aspects of the Internet such as listservs and newsgroups to slander or otherwise endanger a person (Gani, 2002). In the present study, the terms "threatened," "insulted," and "harassed" were not defined. The study also did not ask the extent to which students felt in fear for their safety as a result of the messages. Thus, the study does not provide evi-

dence of cyberstalking. Rather, it reflects conditions associated with cyberstalking and conditions that might create a hostile online environment.

Another area that needs clarification is whether the messages were personally targeted or were received as part of a larger distribution list. Messages from acquaintances, friends, and significant others can be assumed to be personally targeted. It is not clear, however, whether messages from strangers were sent to specific individuals or to a wider distribution list. This issue needs to be differentiated in future studies. In addition, the study asked students how many times they received harassing messages, but it is not clear whether the reported incidents were from one or a variety of sources. For example, if a student checked "3-5 times," it is not clear whether those were from the same individual or from several individuals. Dimensions of online harassment need to be separated and investigated, including the frequency of the communication, the source of the communication, the process of the communications, and the perceived threat of the communication. Conceptual clarity should then lead to the development of a valid and reliable instrument that can be used across college campuses.

Pornography as Online Harassment

This study did not address the source of pornographic messages or the extent to which they are problematic for students. It may be that some students willingly visited pornographic sites on occasion and were later placed on distribution lists for advertisements or other materials. This is common practice at some Web sites, where one's e-mail address can be captured if the site is visited. A weakness of the study relates to the lack of identification of the source of the pornography or the extent to which it was personally targeted. It is not clear whether these messages were part of a mass mailing or a more personal attempt to harass a specific victim. Because the majority of students reported receiving pornographic messages, further research is needed using both quantitative and qualitative methods to better understand the circumstances and experiences of those who receive online pornography and the extent to which this reflects online harassment or cyberstalking.

Gender Differences

In this study, men were as likely to experience e-mail harassment as women. These results are consistent with the Rutgers study finding that men were 42% of the stalking victims and with reports from other campuses that the incidence of stalking is not different by gender (Brownstein, 2000). Without additional research to determine how fearful the subjects were, it is hard

to know whether the male and female respondents were talking about the same experiences. Much research is needed to further document gender differences in the extent and impact of stalking and online harassment on college campuses.

GLBT Issues

This study raises the possibility that GLBT students experience e-mail harassment to a greater extent than other students. Students who identified themselves as GLBT were twice as likely to experience cyberstalking or e-mail harassment from a stranger as were students who identified themselves as heterosexual. Previous research has not addressed online harassment of GLBT students. Online harassment may be a reflection of a broader hostile campus environment. Further research is needed to better understand the similarities and differences in the extent and nature of online harassment targeted at GLBT students. Colleges should be clear that harassment related to sexual identity of any kind is not acceptable and will not be tolerated, and if these results are replicated, prevention and education efforts should also address online harassment related to GLBT students.

Stalking Versus Cyberstalking

This study did not address the relationship between stalking and online harassment or cyberstalking. Further research is needed to understand the similarities and differences between stalking and cyberstalking. Research should focus on the characteristics and behaviors of both victims and perpetrators. In addition, research in this area is needed to examine the relationship between real-world stalking and cyberstalking. Research should include examination of the frequency and under what circumstances one leads to the other. Furthermore, research is needed to document the relationship between online harassment or cyberstalking and other forms of interpersonal violence.

Qualitative Approaches

Surveys are very limited in their ability to capture the phenomenological experience of those receiving online harassment. In-depth interviews are needed to better understand the personal experiences of victims, including the psychosocial impact of online harassment or cyberstalking, the coping mechanisms used by victims, the decision-making processes related to reporting the events, the effectiveness of campus resources in helping victims,

and the long-term effects of the experience. In-depth interviews with perpetrators of online harassment and cyberstalking are also needed to better understand their personality characteristics, cognitive processes, motivation, and social environment.

Institutional Practices

Little is known about the policies and practices that colleges and universities have with regard to online harassment. This study suggests that some students do not know what to do about online harassment, and many were not aware of their rights related to publication of online personal information. Research is needed to identify institutional policies, practices, and interventions related to online harassment and to establish the relationship between these practices and outcomes for students. This research should lead to the development of model policies, protocols, educational programs, and interventions.

CONCLUSION

This study suggests that there is online harassment through Internet communication on college campuses. As electronic communication becomes increasingly integrated into student life, new social problems related to cyberstalking and online harassment will likely become more common. Colleges and universities will need to educate students about these issues, create policies that include guidelines for online communications, establish an infrastructure that promotes safety, and provide intervention when needed. This will require well-conceived and comprehensive research efforts to define, measure, and examine online harassment to inform prevention and intervention programs.

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