

MASOC PRACTICE UPDATE: Prevention and Progress



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Online Sexual Harassment: Gender Differences and the Emotional Impact of Online Victimization

BOTTOM LINE

Females experienced significantly higher levels of online sexual harassment than males and the emotional impact was significantly more upsetting as well.

RESEARCH

Sexual harassment is a significant problem across multiple environments. It is well documented in the work environment as well as in college and among high school students all reporting significant levels of sexual harassment and significant levels of negative mental health outcomes resulting from sexual harassment.

This study by Niall Buchanan and Adam Mahoney focused their research at online sexual harassment. The purpose of the study was to develop a tool to measure OSH victimization and also explore the potential gender differences in victimization and impact of OSH. They suggest that although there are many similarities between offline and online harassment, there are unique aspects to the online environment. For example, the online environment offers greater anonymity and invisibility where people may feel freer to express hostile views or engage in more deviant behaviors. Furthermore, there appears to be a gender imbalance in sexual harassment online (and offline) with mostly males targeting females for harassment. Other studies have noted that the victimization experience is not always the same in both environments or by gender.

The study found that female students experienced significantly higher levels of gender harassment and unwanted sexual attention than males. Gender differences also appear to apply to the emotional impact of OSH with females rating technology facilitated sexual and gender harassment as more upsetting than men. An outcome worth noting from this study was the high levels of reported OSH victimization with 88% of females and 64% of males experiencing at least one form of OSH.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROFESSIONALS

As the study notes, professionals at the front lines of assessment and treatment will wish to remember that online behaviors can differ from those that take place offline. The behaviors themselves may differ (with increases in hostility and unacceptable behaviors noted online in this study), and the nature of harm may also vary from one situation into the next and the impact may be felt very differently by gender. For practitioners who did not grow up with frequent online activity, this study's findings will be quite instructive in that they provide a window into the experiences younger people online. This is particularly the case for those whose professional experience may have involved treating behaviors that took place exclusively offline.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FIELD

It behooves us all to remember that the best distinction is not the "digital world versus real world" dichotomy as many practitioners often think. This implies that that what happens online is somehow less real. Instead, we can think in terms of online and offline since these domains often overlap. This study is enormously useful in confirming what many had suspected was happening online and the potential impact on those who are harassed. It helps our field to better understand the impact of online sexual and gender-based harassment, how that can be perceived differently by gender and also whether it is done in person or through the anonymity of the online world. Most importantly, this information can be invaluable to your work helping young people understand the impact of their actions. This study can also serve as an effective starting point for those who wish to understand the experiences of those who experience online sexual and gender harassment.

CITATION:

Buchanan, N., & Mahoney, A. (2021). Development of a scale measuring online sexual harassment: Examining gender differences and the emotional impact of sexual harassment victimization online. *Legal and Criminological Psychology*.

ABSTRACT

Purpose

This study aimed to outline the construct of online sexual harassment (OSH) to ensure its accurate measurement and to develop a tool to measure OSH victimization in adults. Secondary aims were to explore potential gender differences in victimization and the emotional impact of OSH.

Methods

A systematic process was used to develop The Online Sexual Harassment Scale (OSHS) to measure OSH victimization. This included a systematic review of current literature, content analysis of online posts from the Everyday Sexism Website, exploratory factor analysis of a pilot scale, then a subsequent confirmatory factor analysis to confirm scale items, structure and ensure scale reliability. Finally, an online survey using the OSHS explored the emotional impact of OSH.

Results

Two types of OSH, gender harassment and unwanted sexual attention were identified. The OSHS reliably measured both types of harassment, $\omega = .95$. The most frequent type of OSH found for male and female

participants was unwanted sexual attention. Univariate analysis found that females ($M = 0.83$) experienced significantly higher levels of OSH than males ($M = 0.56$). Further analysis found that the emotional impact of OSH was significantly more upsetting for females for both types of OSH.

Conclusions

This study contributes a valid and reliable way to measure OSH in adult victims. The development of the OSHS would benefit from further testing using a larger and more diverse sample, which should include non-student populations.