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# New Frontiers: Moving Beyond Cyberbullying to Define Online Harassment

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**Abstract.** Research on online harassment has become increasingly important as more aspects of daily life rely on the internet. Currently, large gaps in knowledge of how online harassment affects adults exist, in part because of the difficulties inherent in defining and measuring online harassment. This review traces the history of the definition of online harassment in order to suggest more useful approaches. The historical analysis reveals that portions of bullying definitions that have been carried over to online harassment definitions should be discarded. Instead, the workplace and sexual harassment literatures provide a better model to evaluate and compare existing measures and definitions of online harassment. Therefore, we propose the definition of online harassment as “interpersonal aggression or offensive behavior(s) that is communicated over the internet or through other electronic media.” We also examine the benefits of different measurement time frames as well as the use of direct query or behavioral checklists. Finally, we present a new measure of online harassment, the Online Harassment Experience Questionnaire (OHEQ). The OHEQ is composed of eight online harassment items, categorized based on traumatic stress theory and selected after a review of the current online harassment literature. Each item’s frequency is measured on a 6-point Likert scale.

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## 1 Introduction

As education, occupation, and entertainment have increasingly moved online, aggression has kept pace and also moved online (Duggan 2017; Lenhart et al. 2016; Staude-Müller, Hansen, and Voss 2012). Studies of online harassment among American internet users (ages ranging from 15 and older and 18 and older) suggest that between 41–47% have experienced aggression online. However, despite the high rate of online aggression, large gaps in knowledge of the psychological impact of online harassment exist. These gaps exist because inconsistent definitions, measurement tools, and approaches have been utilized.

Researchers studying online harassment have varied definitions of the concept. The broadest views of online harassment define it as an aggressive behavior that occurs via electronic media (Duggan 2017; Lenhart et al. 2016; Staude-Müller, Hansen, and

Voss 2012). Other definitions limit online harassment to aggressive behaviors that occur via electronic media that include a power imbalance between the victim and perpetrator (Rodríguez-Darias and Aguilera-Ávila 2018; Laer 2014), the perpetrator's intent to cause harm (Ford 2013; Timo T. Ojanen et al. 2014; Laer 2014), repeated behaviors (Penza 2018), or isolated behaviors (Rodríguez-Darias and Aguilera-Ávila 2018). Measurement tools used to examine online harassment also vary widely, from single, direct questions asking participants if they have experienced online harassment (Kim, Boyle, and Georgiades 2017; Näsi et al. 2014; Näsi et al. 2017) to lists of specific aggressive behaviors that include between one and 20 different types of online harassment (Ford 2013; Lenhart et al. 2016).

The variety of online harassment definitions and measurement approaches obscure the impact and effects of online harassment, as the defined phenomenon and how it is measured varies too widely for conclusions to be aggregated and generalized. With respect to definitions, the conclusions drawn from a study using a specific definition of online harassment (e.g., repeated behavior in which the perpetrator intends to cause harm and there is a power imbalance between the victim and perpetrator) cannot easily be understood in the context of the conclusions of a study that defines online harassment more broadly (any aggressive behavior online). Similarly, with respect to methodology, prevalence studies using different methodologies (a single question about a person's experience of online harassment and a 20-item checklist of specific aggressive behaviors) cannot be used to compare prevalence in two different populations, as the differences in measurement approach may obscure or amplify actual differences between the populations.

Definitional confusion in the online harassment literature may be partially attributable to a heavy reliance on the adolescent and bullying literature for research definitions of online harassment that do not always readily apply to online mediums or adults (Dooley, Pyżalski, and Cross 2009; Gibb and Devereux 2016; Kim, Boyle, and Georgiades 2017; Laer 2014). Methodological confusion is attributable largely to the wide variety of harassment measurement tools and methodologies used in existing studies.<sup>1</sup>

In the following review, we address the definitional problems in the current online harassment literature by (1) tracing the origin of current online harassment definitions, (2) presenting an argument for abandoning components of the bullying definition sometimes used in definitions of online harassment, (3) examining the utility of basing a definition of online harassment on widely accepted definitions of workplace and sexual harassment, and (4) proposing the flexible definition of online harassment as interpersonal aggression or offensive behavior(s) that is communicated over the internet or through other electronic media.”

After defining online harassment, we examine appropriate ways to measure online harassment by reviewing the current time frames, methods, and specific items used in studies of online harassment and comparing these methods to practices in the sexual and workplace harassment research. Finally, we propose a new measure for online harassment based on sound methodological practices outlined by the existing workplace and sexual harassment literature. The Online Harassment Experience Questionnaire (OHEQ) is an eight-item behavioral checklist of online harassment experienced over the past year. Each OHEQ item was selected based on a review of the online harassment literature and designed to minimize category overlap. Items were then classified as either a non-traumatic or potentially traumatic form of online harassment. The frequency of each item is measured on a 6-point Likert scale (0 – *never*; 5 – *multiple times a day*).

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1. e.g., (Brack and Caltabiano 2014; Duggan 2017; Ford 2013; Staude-Müller, Hansen, and Voss 2012; Wang et al. 2019)

By improving definitions and measurement strategies, the accuracy of our knowledge about online harassment among adults will increase and improve intervention and prevention efforts.

## 2 Defining Online Harassment Using Bullying Criteria

Largely, definitions of online harassment draw from the bullying literature, likely in part because the first online harassment studies focused on bullying behaviors among school-age peers that had moved from in-person to online (Dooley, Pyżalski, and Cross 2009; Patchin and Hinduja 2006; Vandebosch 2000). Researchers largely agree that bullying consists of the following components: (1) the perpetrator intends to harm the victim (Aoyama and Talbert 2010; Dooley, Pyżalski, and Cross 2009; Einarsen et al. 2011; Gibb and Devereux 2016; Jones, Mitchell, and Finkelhor 2013; Kim, Boyle, and Georgiades 2017; Patchin and Hinduja 2006; Šléglová and Cerna 2011; Vandebosch 2000), (2) it is a repeated pattern (Aoyama and Talbert 2010; Dooley, Pyżalski, and Cross 2009; Einarsen et al. 2011; Gibb and Devereux 2016; Kim, Boyle, and Georgiades 2017; Šléglová and Cerna 2011; Vandebosch 2000), and (3) it involves a power imbalance between the perpetrator and the victim (Dooley, Pyżalski, and Cross 2009; Einarsen et al. 2011; Gibb and Devereux 2016; Kim, Boyle, and Georgiades 2017; Mitchell et al. 2016; Patchin and Hinduja 2006; Šléglová and Cerna 2011; Vandebosch 2000). These definitional components can be seen in Table 1 on the following page, which shows the six online harassment definitions that define online harassment as more than aggressive behavior that occurs via electronic media. These definitions were found through a literature search of “online harassment” in EBSCOhost and Google Scholar. Five of the definitions of online harassment include components of bullying.

Many scholars define cyberbullying as intentional aggression designed to harm someone in a marginalized group from someone outside that group that occurs via electronic media (Dooley, Pyżalski, and Cross 2009). Some researchers consider online harassment to be a subset of cyberbullying (Smith, Barrio, and Tokunaga 2013), while others have conceptualized online harassment as the umbrella term (Marwick 2021). While using cyberbullying as the umbrella term helps build a taxonomy that includes both harassment and bullying, the requirements for (1) intent to harm (discussed later in this section) and (2) the harassment to be targeted at a marginalized group from someone outside of that group pose many conceptual and methodological challenges. It may be impossible to verify motives and group membership in an online context. Tokunaga (2010) reviewed definitions of cyberbullying in the context of children and adolescents and concluded the term “cyberbullying” is an umbrella term that includes online bullying, electronic bullying, and internet harassment. While again helpful for building a taxonomy of terms, the review does not aid in defining online harassment or in applying a definition of online harassment to adults, rather than children and adolescent populations. Therefore, while bullying definitional components can be found in definitions of online harassment, using bullying to define online harassment is inappropriate for researchers who desire to understand and accurately measure online harassment in its impact. Instead, at most, cyberbullying may be considered a subset of online harassment (Marwick 2021), allowing researchers to study the broader phenomenon of aggression that occurs online. The following sections explore how bullying definitions have influenced researchers’ understanding of online harassment, and why this influence is not productive.

Table 1: Online Harassment Definitions by Discipline

Online Harassment Definition	Bullying Component	Type of Journal	Reference
"[Computer-mediated communication in the form of] interpersonal behavior aimed at intentionally harming another employee in the workplace" (409)	Intended harm	Industrial-Organizational Psychology	Ford (2013)
"All types of intentional behaviors to harm others through the Internet or mobile" (1097)	Intended harm	Multidisciplinary	Ojanen et al. (2014)
"A course of action in which an adult individual or groups of individuals use digital media to cause another individual to suffer emotional distress" (87)	Intended harm Power imbalance	Business	Van Laer (2014)
"Repeated online expression amounting to a 'course of conduct' targeted at a particular person that causes the targeted individual substantial emotional distress and/or the fear of bodily harm" (303)	Repeated	Law	Penza (2018)
"Isolated instances of online violence or aggression where the victim and perpetrator do not know each other or where the aggression is not specifically addressed to an individual or group, encompassing communications of rude, threatening, inappropriate or offensive content" (64)	Not repeated Power imbalance	Women's Studies	Rodríguez-Darias and Aguilera-Ávila (2018)
"A form of cyberviolence and can be perceived as a type of interpersonal victimization that can lead victims to feel fear or distress in much the same manner as real-world stalking and harassment" (502)		Sociology	Bossler et al. (2012)

## 2.1 Intent to Harm

Since the 1990s, intent to harm has been included in the bullying framework (Arora 1996; Olweus 1997; Vivolo-Kantor et al. 2014) to better distinguish "bullying" from other forms of aggression (Langos 2012; Olweus 1997). The distinction between types of aggression is accomplished in part by distinguishing between adolescent bullying and adolescent teasing, which often has a "playful and relatively friendly nature" (Olweus 1997, p. 469). According to bullying definitions, a behavior the perpetrator intends to be innocuous is never an example of bullying, regardless of how the victim interprets the behavior (Ford 2013; Timo T. Ojanen et al. 2014; Laer 2014). Importantly, the emphasis on intent nullifies the victims' experience, as the amount of harm experienced is irrelevant in how the behavior is defined. Furthermore, using this criterion to define online harassment would require researchers to ascertain not only what behavior took place, but also how the perpetrator intended the behavior to be perceived—a task that may be impossible in any context but especially in an anonymous online environment (Dooley, Pyżalski, and Cross 2009; Gibb and Devereux 2016).

Notably, researchers often ignore intentionality definitional components when measuring bullying, as it is difficult to verify the presence of intent (Einarsen et al. 2011;

Langos 2012). In a review of 69 strategies for measuring bullying (Vivolo-Kantor et al. 2014), all measures that studied intentionality did so by querying participants about their aggressive behaviors.<sup>2</sup> Importantly, questions like “Have you spread rumors about a kid?” (Fitzpatrick and Bussey 2011) fail to establish aggressive intent, as spreading rumors may in some cases be a form of teasing. No studies compared the intent of the perpetrator of a behavior with the experience of the victim. Researchers who wish to examine intent must either complete the difficult task of gathering data from both victims and their perpetrators or examine perpetrator behavior without considering victim reactions.

## 2.2 Behavior Frequency

The standard operational definition of bullying requires multiple negative behaviors, given that repeated aggression (rather than a single aggressive act) is more likely to result in fear and psychological harm (Aoyama and Talbert 2010; Arora 1996; Dooley, Pyżalski, and Cross 2009; Gibb and Devereux 2016; Šléglová and Cerna 2011; Vandebosch 2000). Frequency requirements again appropriately limit the range of behaviors that meet the criteria of bullying (Langos 2012; Olweus 1997). However, researchers have noted that not all types of bullying have the same impact—the impact of being called a hurtful name is different from the impact of being pushed into a locker (Dooley, Pyżalski, and Cross 2009; Smith et al. 2008). Perhaps, for this reason, research on bullying and aggression in adults often classifies single-incident events as bullying, but consider repeated events to be more severe (Arafa and Senosy 2017; Brack and Caltabiano 2014; Butterworth, Leach, and Kiely 2016; Cénat et al. 2019; Duggan 2017; Kim, Boyle, and Georgiades 2017; Lee 2017; Wang et al. 2019). Importantly, however, the distinction between single-incident and repeated events is not always a useful and accurate proxy for severity (Dooley, Pyżalski, and Cross 2009; Smith et al. 2008). Notably, a definition of online harassment that includes frequency may fail to capture high-impact, single-incident events, potentially missing salient online experiences.

Additionally, measuring the frequency of aggressive behaviors communicated via electronic media is complicated by the internet’s ability to perpetuate a single piece of information via sharing, screenshotting, and other viral means. Researchers must consider the impact of online harassment perpetrated by multiple individuals and consider whether such harassment is repeated because the victim experiences the harassment multiple times, or isolated if each individual perpetrator perpetrates a single aggressive act. Additionally, if a single aggressive behavior is shared multiple times on a social media platform, is that act repeated because the victim is exposed to it multiple times or isolated because each instance is a copy of the original aggressive act? A definition of online harassment meant to capture all salient experiences must be flexible enough to accommodate a wide variety of experiences, and therefore may be most effective if it is broad enough to include aggressive behaviors considered to be isolated, repeated, or even both isolated and repeated.

## 2.3 Perpetrator Characteristics and Power Imbalances

The operationalized definition of bullying requires a power imbalance between perpetrator and victim, since bullying is expected to occur between young peers (Dooley, Pyżalski,

2. e.g., “My classmates probably think that I make fun of people,” “Have you spread rumors about a kid?”; (Bandyopadhyay, Cornell, and Konold 2009; Fitzpatrick and Bussey 2011; Gable et al. 2011; Gottheil and Dubow 2001; Hinduja and Patchin 2010; Orpinas, Horne, and Staniszewski 2003; Peters and Bain 2011; Raine et al. 2006; Swearer and Cary 2003; Vernberg, Jacobs, and Hershberger 1999; Walsh-Childers, Jean, and Herzog 1996)

and Cross 2009; Einarsen et al. 2011; Gibb and Devereux 2016; Kim, Boyle, and Georgiades 2017; Mitchell et al. 2016; Patchin and Hinduja 2006; Šléglová and Cerna 2011; Vandebosch 2000). Power imbalance criteria decrease the number of behaviors that meet the definition of bullying, especially limiting behaviors to events that are more likely to be high impact (Dooley, Pyżalski, and Cross 2009; Olweus 1997). However, some researchers studying online harassment among children and teenagers no longer require a power imbalance (Dooley, Pyżalski, and Cross 2009; Wolak, Mitchell, and Finkelhor 2007). Because online interactions are difficult to avoid or eliminate, they automatically include a power imbalance regardless of the perpetrator's and victim's identities (Dooley, Pyżalski, and Cross 2009; Smith et al. 2008). Citron (2014) discusses how online harassment creates a power imbalance by noting that while a woman who is sexually harassed offline by a stranger may be able to leave the area and never reexperience the harassment, a woman experiencing online harassment will have more difficulty removing their presence. Additionally, online harassment can remain visible to the public through search engines and social media for years, making it much more difficult to escape. Because the prevalence and pervasiveness of electronic media naturally create a power imbalance, the inclusion of a power imbalance in an online harassment definition is not necessary (Dooley, Pyżalski, and Cross 2009; Smith et al. 2008).

### **3 Defining Online Harassment Using Workplace and Sexual Harassment Definitions**

Instead of conceptualizing online harassment as a form of bullying, conceptualizing online harassment as a form of workplace online harassment (Ford 2013; Nilsson, Monica, and Örnebring 2016), including sexual harassment (Duggan 2017; Lenhart et al. 2016), may be helpful. Definitions of workplace and sexual harassment include fewer behavioral criteria than bullying. Specifically, workplace harassment is typically defined as a behavior(s) that is perceived by the victim to create an unwelcome or hostile work environment (Einarsen, Hoel, and Notelaers 2009; Rospenda, Richman, and Shannon 2009). Similarly, sexual harassment is typically defined as a behavior(s) that is perceived by the victim to create an unwelcome or hostile environment based on a person's gender (Fitzgerald, Gelfand, and Drasgow 1995; Gelfand, Fitzgerald, and Drasgow 1995; Pryor and Fitzgerald 2003). In these harassment definitions, harassment is defined as the presence of an offensive behavior in a specific context (e.g., about gender, in the workplace).

Unlike operationalized bullying definitions, operationalized harassment definitions specifically do not require perpetrator intent, repeated behaviors, or power imbalances. Notably, US legal definitions of workplace and sexual harassment focus on a behaviors' consequences rather than the intent of the behavior (v 1993; Marwick and Caplan 2018; Pryor and Fitzgerald 2003). These definitions often require a behavior be "considered offensive or abusive by a reasonable person who shares the perspective of the victim" (Pryor and Fitzgerald 2003, p. 81), further supporting a definition that does not include intent (DOL 2012).

### **4 A Working Definition of Online Harassment**

Definitions of online harassment that require intended harm, repeated frequency, specific perpetrator ages, and power differentials between perpetrators and victims come from the bullying literature. However, these requirements (1) are difficult to operationalize, (2) fail to clearly distinguish behavior severity, and (3) do not apply to internet communications (Dooley, Pyżalski, and Cross 2009; Duggan 2017; Smith et al. 2008; Vivolo-Kantor

et al. 2014). Additionally, in one study of 1,500 adolescents, only 21–25% of online aggressive acts met the definitional requirements of bullying (Wolak, Mitchell, and Finkelhor 2007). Therefore, frequency, perpetrator ages, and power differentials between perpetrators and victims should not be included in a definition of online harassment, as these definitional requirements do not adequately apply to complex online situations and severely limit the number of aggressive acts captured by measurement tools. Notably, events not captured by bullying definitions, such as a stranger sending a victim a single unsolicited illicit image, can still lead to distress in victims and are important aspects of online harassment (Chadha et al. 2020). Therefore, a definition is needed that more closely aligns with workplace and sexual harassment definitions by requiring online harassment consist only of: (1) interpersonal aggression or offensive behavior (Bossler, Holt, and May 2012; Ford 2013; Timo T. Ojanen et al. 2014; Rodríguez-Darias and Aguilera-Ávila 2018) that (2) is communicated over the internet or through other electronic media (Ford 2013; Timo T. Ojanen et al. 2014; Laer 2014). We propose the following flexible and appropriate definition of online harassment: interpersonal aggression or offensive behavior(s) that is communicated over the internet or through other electronic media.

## 5 Measuring Online Harassment

Just as definitions of online harassment rely on conceptualizations of similar phenomena, without clearly acknowledging the role of bullying definitions, the operationalization and measurement of online harassment have borrowed from a variety of different measurement approaches, often without acknowledging the original sources. Many measurement approaches used to examine online harassment have been used by workplace and sexual harassment researchers, whose findings can be used to inform the methodologies of online harassment studies. Table 2 on the next page includes 19 studies of online harassment among adults identified through a literature search of EBSCOhost databases and Google Scholar for the terms “adult” with the terms “online harassment,” “cyberbullying,” “online aggression,” or “online victimization.” Notably, four of the 19 studies are industry reports rather than scientific journal publications (Amnesty International 2018; Duggan 2017; Lenhart et al. 2016; Institute 2019), suggesting the term “online harassment” has not been largely applied to adults in the scientific literature. Perhaps different search terms would have captured a larger number of scientific articles. It is also possible that aggression occurring online has not yet been thoroughly studied in adult populations.

The measures in Table 2 differ in three notable ways: (1) the time frame studied (Arafa and Senosy 2017; Ford 2013; Wang et al. 2019); (2) the measurement approach (direct query or behavioral checklist; (Ford 2013; Lenhart et al. 2016; Wang et al. 2019) and when applicable, (3) the type/length of the checklist used (Arafa and Senosy 2017; Brack and Caltabiano 2014; Duggan 2017; Lenhart et al. 2016; Timo Tapani Ojanen et al. 2015; Staude-Müller, Hansen, and Voss 2012). Further discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of the studied time frames and methodology types is provided below.

## 6 Time Frames

Time frames used in online harassment studies vary considerably. Of the 19 online harassment studies listed in Table 2, ten examined lifetime prevalence, five examined the 12-month prevalence, and other time frames varied from 6 months to 2 years (Arafa

Table 2: Studies Using Behavioral Checklists and Direct Query (e.g., Single Question) Methods to Examine Online Harassment, Listed in Order of Items

Study time frame	Measurement approach	Sample	Reference
Lifetime	20-item checklist	American internet users	Lenhart et al. (2016)
Lifetime	12-item checklist	Australian internet users	TAI (2019)
Lifetime	8-item checklist	German internet users (ages 10–50)	Staude-Müller et al. (2012)
Lifetime	6-item checklist	American internet users	Duggan (2017)
Lifetime	5-item checklist	Women from eight countries	Amnesty International (2018)
Lifetime	5-item checklist	American undergraduate students	Finn (2004)
Lifetime	Direct query	German young adult (ages 15–30)	Näsi, Räsänen, Kaakinen, Keipi, and Oksanen (2017)
Lifetime	Direct query	British young adult (ages 15–30)	Näsi et al. (2017)
Lifetime	Direct query	Finish young adult (ages 15–30)	Näsi et al. (2014)
Lifetime	Direct query	American young adult (ages 15–30)	Näsi et al. (2014)
Lifetime	Direct query	New Zealand internet users	Wang et al. (2019)
5 years	3-item checklist and direct query	Canadian adults	Kim et al. (2017)
2 years	Unclear	American undergraduate students	Lindsay et al. (2016)
12 months	14-item checklist	Australian young adults (ages 17–25)	Brack and Caltabiano (2014)
12 months	12-item checklist	Thai young adults who are out of school (ages 15–24)	Ojanen et al. (2015)
12 months	9-item checklist	American university students (ages 18–25)	Na et al. (2015)
12 months	2-item checklist	French undergraduate students	Cénat et al. (2019)
12 months	1-item checklist	Majority American and Canadian employees	Ford (2013)
6 months	6-item checklist	Egyptian university students (ages 18–24)	Arafa and Senosy (2017)



and Senosy 2017; Brack and Caltabiano 2014; Cénat et al. 2019; Duggan 2017; Finn 2004; Kim, Boyle, and Georgiades 2017; Lenhart et al. 2016; Lindsay et al. 2016; Na, Dancy, and Park 2015; Näsi et al. 2017; Timo Tapani Ojanen et al. 2015; Staude-Müller, Hansen, and Voss 2012; Institute 2019; Wang et al. 2019). The wide range of time frames studied by online harassment researchers hampers the comparison of prevalence rates across studies.

Because long reference periods can result in poor recall (Cavanaugh et al. 2000; Lengnick-Hall 1995; Neall and Tuckey 2014; Widom 1989; Yarrow, Campbell, and Burton 1970), leading to inaccurate prevalence estimates when examining workplace and sexual harassment (Cavanaugh et al. 2000; Lengnick-Hall 1995; Neall and Tuckey 2014; Widom 1989; Yarrow, Campbell, and Burton 1970), it is recommended researchers use a time frame criteria of 12 months or less (Arvey and Cavanaugh 1995; Sudman and Bradburn 1974). This 12-month or less recommendation appears appropriate as well for online harassment for most investigations. Of the 19 studies located, seven meet this criterion.

Expanded time frames lead to a less accurate recall of behaviors than shorter time frames (Arvey, n.d.; Arvey and Cavanaugh 1995; Lengnick-Hall 1995; Neall and Tuckey 2014; Widom 1989; Yarrow, Campbell, and Burton 1970). In their review of the methodological problems found in the sexual harassment literature, Lengnick-Hall (1995, p. 849) suggested that shorter time frames, when compared to longer time frames, “will provide both lower and more accurate estimates of the incidences of sexual harassment.” As the time frame examined widens, respondents are more likely to misremember past experiences or redefine behaviors to match their current context (Arvey and Cavanaugh 1995; Widom 1989). For example, as cultural movements such as #MeToo change how the public defines sexual harassment, individuals may redefine past experiences originally viewed as non-harassing as sexual harassment (Thomas 2018; Welsh et al. 2006).

However, the use of lifetime time frames in online harassment studies does provide one major advantage over shorter time frames (Duggan 2017; Ferrier 2018; Lenhart et al. 2016; Näsi et al. 2014; Näsi et al. 2017; Staude-Müller, Hansen, and Voss 2012; Wang et al. 2019). Longer time frames aid in assessing harassment behaviors with low base rates (Schwarz 2001). Additionally, certain types of online harassment have demonstrated low base rates. For example, in a study of the lifetime prevalence of online harassment among a representative sample of American adults ( $n = 4248$ ), only 7% of respondents reported being stalked online and 6% reported being sexually harassed online (neither stalking nor sexual harassment were clearly defined in the study; (Duggan 2017). These percentages likely would have been smaller if the study had a more constrained, 12-month time frame.

While longer time frames may allow researchers to better capture examples of online harassment with low base rates, it is not yet clear that such an approach is necessary for online harassment. The prevalence rates of online harassment types are still poorly understood due to large variability in types of harassment examined by different researchers and how these types are defined (Arafa and Senosy 2017; Brack and Caltabiano 2014; Duggan 2017; Ford 2013; Lenhart et al. 2016; Na, Dancy, and Park 2015; Timo Tapani Ojanen et al. 2015; Staude-Müller, Hansen, and Voss 2012). In addition, long time frames lead to less accurate responses, a complication that hampers the generalizability of collected data beyond the difficulties caused by small sample sizes. Moving forward, studies of online harassment might consider shorter time frames (12 months) with sample sizes as large as possible. Such an approach minimizes errors and maximizes generalizability.

### 6.1 Direct Query

In the direct query method of studying online harassment, participants are directly asked if they have experienced online harassment (Lengnick–Hall 1995). While the exact phrasing of online harassment varies across studies, the participant is asked to label and interpret the situation as harassment. Of the reviewed 19 online harassment studies, six used a direct query method, of which two provided participants with a definition of online harassment. Wang et al. (2019, p. 297) asked participants if they experienced online harassment defined as the use of “the Internet, a mobile phone, or a digital camera to hurt, intimidate, or embarrass [them].” Similarly, Kim, Boyle, and Georgiades (2017, p. 469) asked participants if they had experienced “the use of the Internet to embarrass, intimidate, or threaten [them].” In contrast, as part of one larger study Näsi et al. (2014) and Näsi et al. (2017, p. 6) asked four groups of participants if “in [their] own opinion, [they had] been a target of harassment online” (6) without providing participants with a definition of “harassment online.”

Clearly, a direct query method is short and easy to implement, requiring only one item. Direct query approaches may have greater predictive validity in explaining personal responses to harassment than checklists of individual behaviors because they measure an individual’s subjective experience rather than measuring behaviors a person may not view as inappropriate (Lengnick–Hall 1995). However, this increase in predictive validity sacrifices generalizability. Studying a construct that has different boundary conditions for each person prevents the creation of knowledge that can be used to define and identify online harassment as a phenomenon (Berdahl and Raver 2011; Butterworth, Leach, and Kiely 2016; Neall and Tuckey 2014; Nieborg and Foxman 2018; Nielsen, Matthiesen, and Einarsen 2010; Notelaers and Heijden 2019)

Because of concerns about generalizability, at least two research teams recommend that researchers use specific, clearly defined behaviors (e.g., “pornographic material sent electronically”) in measures and questionnaires rather than the term “harassment” often used in direct queries (Arvey and Cavanaugh 1995; Fitzgerald and Shullman 1993). Differences between a direct query method and the use of behavioral checklists are seen in Duggan (2017)’s study of six specific online behaviors: 37% of those who endorsed one of the online behaviors reported they did not think their experience was online harassment and 27% were unsure if they had experienced online harassment. In addition to concerns about generalizability, the direct query method also does not allow researchers to examine specific harassment behaviors (Lengnick–Hall 1995; Notelaers and Heijden 2019).

### 6.2 Behavioral Checklists

In contrast to direct query methods, behavioral checklists ask participants if they have had specific experiences the researchers preconceptualized as examples of online harassment. Lists vary in length, ranging from questions about one specific behavior—“email or instant messages from a subordinate, coworkers, or a supervisor that you would describe as hostile towards you” (Ford 2013)—to questions about 20 separate behaviors (Lenhart et al. 2016). We reviewed the 12 checklists identified in Table 2 and identified three main differences: (1) the behavioral categories used, (2) the subcategories used, and (3) item selection strategies. We explore each type of variation in detail below. Author names are predominantly used to differentiate between checklists, as the majority of publications did not provide a name for their measurement tool, and no checklist reviewed was used in more than one study (Arafa and Senosy 2017; Brack and Caltabiano 2014; Cénat et al. 2019; Duggan 2017; Kim, Boyle, and Georgiades 2017; Lenhart et al. 2016; Na, Dancy, and Park 2015; Timo Tapani Ojanen et al. 2015; Staude-Müller, Hansen, and Voss

2012; Institute 2019).

### 6.2.1 Behavioral Categories

Checklists vary in their use of broad terms that can include several different but related behaviors and the use of narrow, very specific harassing behaviors. Some checklists utilize terms such as “stalking” and “sexual harassment” that are themselves often poorly defined. For example, three studies identified in Table 2 include “sexual harassment” as a checklist item, but do not define “sexual harassment” (Duggan 2017; Lenhart et al. 2016; Staude-Müller, Hansen, and Voss 2012). In contrast, Timo Tapani Ojanen et al. (2015)’s checklist includes four specific behaviors, all of which fall under the general definition of sexual harassment: (1) pressured to have sex or make a sexual performance over a webcam, (2) being covertly photographed/video recorded engaging in sexual activities, (3) distributing a video or photograph meant to make the victim look gay, and (4) distributing a video or photograph of the victim and another woman slapping each other. Similarly, three online harassment checklists use one behavioral item for a wide array of name-calling/insults (Duggan 2017; Lenhart et al. 2016; Nilsson, Monica, and Örnebring 2016), while Institute (2019) distinguishes among abusive language about religious or ethnic background, abusive language about political beliefs, and other abusive language. Amnesty International (2018) also differentiates between “sexist or misogynist comments” and “generally abusive language or comments.” Hence, both broad and narrow behavioral types are used in checklists assessing online harassment (Duggan 2017; Lenhart et al. 2016; Timo Tapani Ojanen et al. 2015; Staude-Müller, Hansen, and Voss 2012).

Checklists that utilize broad behavioral types have two main advantages over those with narrower harassment types. Checklists decrease the number of items required to measure online harassment and ensure harassing behaviors that researchers have not directly described are still captured. However, one disadvantage of checklists is that a person’s experience may fit more than one item and be counted as separate experiences. Overlapping definitions prevent items from being independent, creating difficulty in generalizing prevalence rates and conducting statistical analyses. For example, the three online harassment checklists with “sexual harassment” also include “insults” and “name-calling,” which can be sexual (Duggan 2017; Lenhart et al. 2016; Staude-Müller, Hansen, and Voss 2012). The overlap may result in one aggressive event being double counted, as both an insult and sexual harassment. It may also result in an artificial deflation of sexual harassment reports if instances of sexual harassment are only labeled as insults. Other examples of overlapping harassment types include Lenhart et al. (2016)’s “a romantic partner purposefully hurting their partner emotionally or psychologically” and “someone being called offensive names.” Staude-Müller, Hansen, and Voss (2012) have overlapping types for insults and for “nasty answers to [online] contributions.” Similarly, in Arafa and Senosy (2017)’s six-item checklist, participants could endorse experiencing unsolicited communication as well as experiencing hurtful statements. Any unsolicited hurtful statement falls into both categories. Na, Dancy, and Park (2015) used four overlapping types: “disrespected by others,” “called names by others,” “picked on by others,” and “made fun of by others.” Institute (2019) included the overlapping types “abusive language directed at you,” “abusive language about your political beliefs and values,” and “abusive language about your religious or ethnic background.” Similarly, Amnesty International (2018) differentiated between “sexist or misogynist comments” and “generally abusive language or comments.”

Online harassment checklists with narrow behavior types tend to be longer than those with broad behavior types and fail to capture behaviors not specifically described by the researchers. However, online harassment checklists with broad behavior types introduce

a subjective element to the checklists (e.g., differences in how respondents define “sexual harassment”). Additionally, when online harassment checklists use broad types, they may also overlap with each other—further confounding the data. Any newly designed checklists might utilize broad types to capture a wide range of harassing behaviors, while also carefully selecting categories in a way that minimizes or eliminates overlap and vague terminology.

### 6.2.2 Categories of Online Harassment

Checklists vary in how and if they aggregate online harassment types into larger categories to simplify the data. Specifically, two of the checklists in Table 2 classified behaviors as either “severe” or “non/less severe.” Duggan (2017)’s six-item checklist used a conceptual, a priori approach to classify physical threats, sustained harassment, sexual harassment, and stalking as severe harassment and offensive name-calling and purposeful embarrassment as non-severe harassment. In Staude-Müller, Hansen, and Voss (2012)’s eight-item checklist, researchers used reported levels of subjective distress (measured using 10 items on a 5-point Likert scale) to post hoc, empirically classify each type of online harassment as either less serious (e.g., repeated insults, sexual harassment, nasty answers to the victim’s internet contribution) or more serious (e.g., stalking, spreading lies, use of a victim’s name to put them “in a bad position,” distribution of embarrassing material, and social exclusion). This classification system defined severity using distress outcomes—making the system a tautology if used to predict emotional response and therefore decreasing its conceptual utility. In contrast, Lenhart et al. (2016) organized 20 harassing behaviors into three categories: direct harassment (behaviors people do directly to each other; e.g., offensive name-calling), invasion of privacy (harm is done through unauthorized access or exposure of a person’s personal accounts or information; e.g., being impersonated), and denial of access (the use of technology to prevent someone from accessing digital tools or platforms; e.g., a technical attack that prevents access to a site, server, or platform). These categories were created based on behavioral types and make no reference to emotional impact. Lenhart et al. (2016) also asked participants if they considered their experiences to be “harassment or abuse,” creating three post hoc categories based on the percentage of internet users who experienced a form of online harassment and classified the experience as such. In total, 80% or more of those who experienced cyberstalking, sexual harassment, and harassment over a long period labeled the experience as harassment or abuse. Between 62% and 68% of those who experienced physical threats, denial of service attacks, exposure of personal information, or a romantic partner hurting them emotionally or psychologically labeled the experience as harassment or abuse. Between 51% and 58% of those who experienced unwanted tracking, offensive name-calling, account monitoring, embarrassment, or account hacking labeled the experience as harassment or abuse. These categories broadly follow the pattern of severe/non-severe online harassment seen in Duggan (2017), with repeated harassment, sexual harassment, and threats viewed as more severe than offensive name-calling or embarrassment.

The distinction between “severe” and “less severe” types of online harassment is similar to the “traumatic” and “non-traumatic” distinction within the stress and traumatic stress literature (Association 2013; Brewin, Andrews, and Valentine 2000; Lazarus 2006). Stressors vary across a wide variety of dimensions, including frequency, duration, and type of exposure (Green 1990; Rosen and Lilienfeld 2008; Spitzer, First, and Wakefield 2007; Weathers and Keane 2007). In the psychology literature, classifying stressors as traumatic or non-traumatic allows researchers to distinguish between distinct categories of stressors. While the exact definition of traumatic stress has changed with each edition of *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM), the underlying dis-

inction between a traumatic stressor (one that involves severe physical harm or a bodily threat) and a non-traumatic stressor (one that does not involve severe physical harm or a bodily threat) has remained consistent (Green 1990; McHugh and Treisman 2007; North 2016; Rosen and Lilienfeld 2008; Spitzer, First, and Wakefield 2007; Weathers and Keane 2007). The current DSM-5 criteria define a traumatic stressor as one that occurs when a person experiences, witnesses, or learns of an event that happened to a loved one that involved actual or threatened death, physical injury, or sexual violence (Association 2013). Exposure to traumatic stress may result in an array of negative psychological outcomes, including post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, and alcohol misuse (Kessler et al. 1995).

The distinction between traumatic and non-traumatic stressors has been well established and tested in the traumatic stress literature and has been used to describe sexual and workplace harassment (Association 2013; Avina and O'Donohue 2002; Einarsen, Hoel, and Notelaers 2009; Fitzgerald, Gelfand, and Drasgow 1995; Fitzgerald et al. 1999; Mazzeo et al. 2001; Nielsen and Einarsen 2012). A similar classification system, consisting of two categories of online harassment (those behaviors that are potentially traumatic and those that are not traumatic) can also be applied when studying the impact of different types of online harassment. Notably, there is limited evidence for distinguishing between traumatic and non-traumatic stressors in the current online harassment literature, as potentially traumatic forms of online harassment (e.g., sexual harassment, physical threats) have been previously classified as "severe," while nontraumatic forms of online harassment (e.g., name-calling and distribution of embarrassing material) were classified as "less severe" (Duggan 2017; Staude-Müller, Hansen, and Voss 2012). Additionally, one study found that potentially traumatic sexual harassment results in more psychological distress than the nontraumatic distribution of embarrassing material (Staude-Müller, Hansen, and Voss 2012).

In existing online harassment checklists, assessment of online harassment is obscured by mixing online harassment types and categories<sup>3</sup> with online harassment frequency<sup>4</sup>. A meta-analysis of 99 sexual harassment studies found that low-frequency, high-intensity harassment experiences (e.g., sexual coercion and unwanted sexual attention) had similar negative effects on well-being as high-frequency, low-intensity harassment experiences (e.g., gender harassment, sexist discrimination, sexist organizational climate, and organizational tolerance of sexual harassment) (Sojo, Wood, and Genat 2016). As both behavioral types and frequency influence the outcomes of sexual harassment, the two should be separated to study the effects of each. Yet, five of the online harassment checklists include behavioral types with frequency specifications (Duggan 2017; Finn 2004; Lenhart et al. 2016; Timo Tapani Ojanen et al. 2015; Staude-Müller, Hansen, and Voss 2012). For example, in Timo Tapani Ojanen et al. (2015)'s checklist of 12 online behaviors, items included "repeatedly receiving offensive messages" and being pressured to "make a sexual performance." This wording prevents researchers from studying the relationship between a single offensive message and a single forced sexual performance. A new checklist of online harassment might contain categories classifying behaviors based on their type and category (non-traumatic or potentially traumatic) and separately examine harassment frequency.

### 6.2.3 Inconsistent Item Selection Strategy

Checklists vary in the types of behaviors they include and the reasons for such inclusion and exclusion. Online harassment researchers often fail to reference primary or

3. e.g., sexual harassment; (Duggan 2017)

4. e.g., sustained harassment; (Duggan 2017)

secondary sources for their items. Eight of the identified online harassment studies utilizing checklists did not explain how items were selected (Amnesty International 2018; Arafa and Senosy 2017; Cénat et al. 2019; Duggan 2017; Ford 2013; Kim, Boyle, and Georgiades 2017; Lenhart et al. 2016; Institute 2019). Four studies did provide some explanation. However, no study provided a rationale for item self-selection. In addition to relying on secondary rather than primary sources, checklists with defined inclusion criteria also (1) are overly specific (Timo Tapani Ojanen et al. 2015; Brack and Caltabiano 2014), (2) have items that overlap (Na, Dancy, and Park 2015), and (3) mix frequency and behavioral terms (Timo Tapani Ojanen et al. 2015; Staude-Müller, Hansen, and Voss 2012).

## 7 Conclusions and Checklist Development

Checklists may allow researchers to (1) examine different types of online harassment, (2) identify harassment severities, and (3) compare results across studies when the same checklist is used with multiple samples (Berdahl and Raver 2011; Butterworth, Leach, and Kiely 2016; Lengnick–Hall 1995; Neall and Tuckey 2014; Nieborg and Foxman 2018; Nielsen, Matthiesen, and Einarsen 2010; Notelaers and Heijden 2019). However, checklists may have less predictive validity for personal responses to harassment than direct query methods (Lengnick–Hall 1995). Additionally, the current use of unstandardized checklists introduces difficulties. Time frames and domains of harassment are not consistent across checklists, leading to difficulty comparing study results (Gelfand, Fitzgerald, and Drasgow 1995; Sojo, Wood, and Genat 2016). Furthermore, checklists that include overlapping behavioral terms may inflate prevalence rates and confound comparisons of harassment types. A similar problem exists for checklists that mix behavioral and frequency terms. Additionally, no online harassment studies have conceptualized online harassment as a potentially traumatic stressor (Duggan 2017; Lazarus 2006; Staude-Müller, Hansen, and Voss 2012).

To address the variety and generalizability problems in current online harassment measures, we compiled a unique set of checklist items to pilot the feasibility of creating an improved checklist tool. First, we examined items used in previous online harassment measures. We reviewed and compared the checklists in Table 2 to identify generally agreed upon examples of online harassment. Second, we considered emerging items that other authors considered but did not include in their checklists. For example, we considered five additional items discussed by Duggan (2017) but not included in their checklist: (1) receiving unsolicited sexual imagery, (2) sexual images shared without consent, (3) false information posted online, (4) illegally accessing accounts (hacking), and (5) personal information shared online without consent (doxing). However, these behaviors were queried separately from the six-item behavioral checklist because of their status as “emerging” rather than behaviors that were already well-established types of online harassment at the time of publication. In total, nine types of online harassment were included in two or more publications. They are listed in Table 3 on the next page.

We then examined the nine identified types of online harassment and modified them to minimize item overlap. As a result, “a perpetrator embarrasses a victim” was not included in the development of the new checklist, because behaviors in this category were likely to also fall into the categories of “spreading false information” or “impersonation.” However, after this modification, we noted that not all types of embarrassment (e.g., being called an embarrassing nickname) fell into an existing category. To maximize the likelihood of capturing all embarrassing interactions the category, “posts offensive or hurtful comments” was expanded to “posts offensive or hurtful comments/name-calling

Table 3: Ten Online Harassment Behaviors Used in Two or More Behavioral Checklists

Harassing Behavior	Category	References
A perpetrator impersonates the victim	Non-traumatic	Lenhart et al. (2016); Ojanen et al. (2015); Staude-Müller et al. (2012); TAI (2019)
Personal information about the victim is posted online	Potentially traumatic	Amnesty International (2018); Arafa and Senosy (2017); Duggan (2017); Lenhart et al. (2016); Ojanen et al. (2015); TAI (2019)
A victim is purposefully excluded from an online group	Non-traumatic	Arafa and Senosy (2017); Staude-Müller et al. (2012)
A perpetrator posts offensive or hurtful comments	Non-traumatic	Amnesty International (2018); Arafa and Senosy, (2017); Duggan (2017); Lenhart et al. (2016); Staude-Müller et al. (2012); TAI (2019)
A perpetrator embarrasses a victim	Non-traumatic	Duggan (2017); Lenhart et al. (2016); Ojanen et al. (2015); Staude-Müller et al. (2012)
A perpetrator threatens to harm a victim	Potentially traumatic	Amnesty International (2019); Duggan (2017); Finn (2014); Lenhart et al. (2016); Na et al. (2015); Ojanen et al. (2015); TAI (2019)
A perpetrator commits sexual harassment	Potentially traumatic	Amnesty International (2018); Duggan (2017); Finn (2014); Lenhart et al. (2016); Ojanen et al. (2015); Staude-Müller et al. (2012); TAI (2019)
A perpetrator spreads untrue information about a victim	Non-traumatic	Duggan (2017); Ojanen et al. (2015); Na et al. (2015); Staude-Müller et al. (2012)
A perpetrator hacks, steals, or otherwise gains access to a victim's online account(s) without permission	Potentially traumatic	Brack and Caltabiano (2014); Lenhart et al. (2016)

or insults.” Similarly, “sexual harassment” was replaced with “unwanted sexual attention” to minimize overlap between the “sexual harassment” category and the categories of “threats” and “offensive or hurtful comments/name-calling or insults.” The term “sexual harassment” was also replaced because it may result in under- or overreporting, as individuals interpret the term “sexual harassment” through their own culture and experiences. The final included items distinguish between the categories of online harassment experienced and the frequency of online harassment, maximizing the likelihood of capturing an aggressive online act, reducing the possibility of inflated prevalence rates caused by overlapping items, and allowing for an easy comparison of online harassment behaviors. Items were then categorized based on traumatic stress theory and its use in the sexual harassment literature.<sup>5</sup>

Table 4: The Proposed Online Harassment Experience Questionnaire and Corresponding Item Subscales

*How often during the last 12 months have you experienced the following online?*

Classification	Item
Non-traumatic	I was impersonated by someone.
Non-traumatic	I was excluded from an online group.
Non-traumatic	Offensive or hurtful comments were directed at me or posted about me or I was insulted/called names.
Non-traumatic	Someone spread untrue rumors about me.
Potentially traumatic	Someone threatened to harm me.
Potentially traumatic	I experienced unwanted sexual attention.
Potentially traumatic	My personal information was posted online where others could access it.
Potentially traumatic	Someone hacked, stole, or otherwise gained access to my online account(s) without my permission.

*Note. Items measured on a 6-point Likert scale: 0 – never, 1 – less than once a month, 2 – 2 to 4 times a month, 3 – 2 to 4 times a week, 4 – daily, 5 – multiple times a day.*

The types of online harassment that might lead victims to fear for their physical safety, the physical safety of someone they care about, and/or the sexual safety of themselves or someone they care about were categorized as “potentially traumatic.” The other items were classified as “non-traumatic.” A 0–5 frequency scale was applied to the final proposed measure, the Online Harassment Experience Questionnaire (OHEQ, See Table 4).

The newly proposed OHEQ is an example of an online harassment measurement tool that may be useful for future use in social science research. Based on a definition of online harassment derived from the workplace and sexual harassment literature, the OHEQ allows for online harassment data to be easily integrated into the existing social sciences while also allowing researchers to (1) distinguish between the categories of online harassment experienced and the frequency of online harassment, (2) attempt to maximize the likelihood of capturing an aggressive online act, (3) reduce the possibility of inflated prevalence rates caused by overlapping items, and (4) allow for an easy comparison of online harassment behaviors.

The OHEQ needs to undergo further development to see if it is viable, but at minimum it offers a model of the factors to be considered in developing an assessment or survey of adult online harassment. If researchers identify that the type of electronic media used

5. see Table 4; (Avina and O’Donohue 2002)



to perpetrate online harassment impacts factors of interest to researchers, the OHEQ should be modified to ask about each type of harassment received through different media (e.g., public social media post, email, direct messaging). Similarly, the OHEQ can be modified to meet the needs of specific populations and to provide more clear information about unique features of online harassment (e.g., the number of people who may be involved) by adding additional questions (e.g., “What would you describe as your worst experience of online harassment?” “About how many individuals/online accounts were involved in that experience?”). The instructions of the OHEQ may be modified to help researchers better understand frequency. For example, each question can be asked twice, once with instructions to report how many times the individual experienced unique examples of the online harassment and once with instructions to report how many times the individual was confronted with the single most distressing experience of that type of harassment (e.g., seeing the same insult shared multiple times on social media.) The OHEQ can also be used in tandem with measures that ask participants to consider their most distressing experience and answer questions about that specific experience (e.g., “how many perpetrators were involved?”). Overall, future researchers examining online harassment should carefully consider how online harassment is defined and measured to maximize the information learned from online harassment studies and allow for clearer communication among researchers about what aspects of the phenomenon are being studied and why they are important. Additionally, improved measurement and definitional tools will aid in improved design and implementation of online harassment prevention and intervention strategies.

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## **Acknowledgments**

We thank Dr. Bradley Brummel, Dr. Michelle Ferrier, and Dr. Joanne Davis for helping to shape this research while serving on Autumn Slaughter's dissertation committee.

## **Data Availability Statement**

There is no data set associated with this research article.

## **Funding Statement**

The research was funded through a student research grant provided by the University of Tulsa.

## **Ethical Standards**

This research was approved as part of a larger dissertation study after an exemption review by the University of Tulsa IRB Board (Protocol No. 20-50).

## **Keywords**

Online harassment, harassment, online aggression, cyberbullying

## **Conflict of Interest**

Not applicable.