Digital Harassment and Abuse of Adult Australians:

A Summary Report

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Key Survey Findings

- Overall, men and women were just as likely to report experiencing digital harassment and abuse
- Women were more likely than men to report experiencing *sexual* harassment
- Young adults aged 18 to 24 were more likely than other age groups to experience digital harassment and abuse
- Non-heterosexual identifying adults were significantly more likely to report being the target of both *gender* and *sexuality* based harassment
- 1 in 10 Australians reported that someone had posted online or sent onto others a *nude* or *semi-nude image* of them without their permission
- Women overwhelmingly experienced digital harassment and abuse from male perpetrators
- Men experienced digital harassment and abuse *equally* from males and females
- Women were significantly more likely than men to be 'very or extremely upset' by the digital harassment and abuse they experienced
- More women than men reported that they told the person to stop, changed their online details or profile settings, left the site or turned off their device, as a result of their experience

What is digital harassment and abuse?

Digital harassment and abuse refers to a range of harmful behaviours experienced via the Internet, as well as mobile phone and other electronic communication devices (including tablets and online gaming consoles). While much existing research has focused on the experiences of children and young people (including 'cyberbullying', sexual exploitation and 'sexting'), there have been few international studies on adult experiences of digital harassment and abuse, and even fewer in Australia.[2]

As such, little is currently known about the extent, nature and impacts of digital harassment and abuse on adult victims. In particular, there exists a real gap in current research into *sexual, gender* and *sexuality* based digital harassment and abuse.

Digital harassment and abuse can range from behaviours such as naming-calling, social embarrassment and offensive language, through to sexual harassment, unwanted sexual behaviours, exploitation or abuse (such as by taking or distributing intimate or sexually explicit images without permission), as well as threats and cyberstalking.[3] Some international studies have sought to measure the extent of digital harassment and abuse among adult populations. In the United States, for example, a survey of 2,849 adult internet users found that overall 40% had experienced some kind of digital harassment or abuse. The rates were similar for men and women, but much higher for young adults, with 70% of those aged 18 to 24 years reporting experiencing at least one form of digital harassment. The same study found that men and women differed in the types of abuse they experienced online, with women reporting higher rates of *sexual* harassment in particular.[4]

About the study

This report forms part of a larger research project conducted by Dr Powell (RMIT University) and Dr Henry (La Trobe University), with funding from the Australian Research Council. The larger project examines the extent, nature and impacts of digital harassment and abuse, as well as what we call *technology-facilitated sexual violence and harassment.*

We surveyed 3,000 Australian adults (aged 18 to 54) about their experiences of digital harassment and abuse. The survey asked people about their technology use, their experiences of digital harassment, experiences of sexual harassment, and the impacts of these experiences. We also asked people to describe their most recent experience of digital harassment and abuse, and to tell us about the people who were involved.

Our method controlled for age and gender, using census estimates provided by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), to ensure that the survey sample was broadly representative of the Australian adult (18 to 54) population. The final results analysed here[5] include 1481 women (50.1%), 1451 men (49.1%), and 24 (0.8%) Australian adults who described themselves as having a non-binary gender identity.

We also interviewed 30 experts across law enforcement, legal services, as well as sexual and domestic violence support services, to find out more about adult Australians who were seeking advice and support in relation to digital harassment and abuse. We asked these experts about the kinds of situations Australians were experiencing and how our current laws and services were able to respond.

	lifetime prevalence	
	n	%
Offensive language directed at you online	1274	44.2
Malicious rumours or lies spread about you online	1070	37.1
Unwanted sexually explicit images, comments, emails or text messages	829	29.0
Embarrassing images of you posted online without permission	825	28.7
Physically violent threats	738	25.7
Repeated and/or unwanted sexual requests online or via email or text message	610	21.3
Sexually harassed you	563	20.0
Gender-based offensive and/or degrading messages, comments or other content	547	19.5
Race-based offensive and/or degrading messages, comments or other content	515	17.9
Sexuality-based offensive and/or degrading messages, comments or other content	460	16.4
Publicly posted online an offensive sexual comment about you	387	13.6
Described or visually represented unwanted sexual act against you using an online/email/messages	373	13.1
Nude or semi-nude image taken without permission	305	10.7
Sexually violent threats	293	10.4
Nude or semi-nude image threat to post online/send onto others	273	9.6
Nude or semi-nude image posted online/sent onto others without permission	262	9.3

Overall, men and women were just as likely to report experiencing digital harassment and abuse

Of Australian adults surveyed, just over 60% (both males and females), reported that they had experienced some form of digital harassment and abuse in their lifetime. Comparable to related research in the United States, most common was offensive language, as well as embarrassing and/or malicious content. This was followed by sexually harassing behaviours, including unwanted sexuality explicit images, comments and sexual requests. Gender, race and sexuality based harassment were also notably common, with approximately 1 in 6 adults reporting that they had experienced each of these behaviours.

Women were more likely than men to report experiencing sexual harassment

1 in 5 women (21.8%) reported that someone had sexually *harassed* them online, via mobile phone or other electronic devices, compared with 17.7% of men. Women (29.1%) and men (28.8%) also reported similar rates of 'receiving unwanted sexually explicit images, comments, emails or text messages'. When describing these experiences, more men reported receiving pornographic material (including advertising and 'spam' emails), while women were more likely to report receiving unsolicited sexually explicit images (such as 'dick pics') and personal sexual requests. This suggests that exposure to sexual content in online and digital communications is likely to differ for men and women, despite the finding that they both experience similar proportions of unwanted messages of a sexual nature.

Young adults aged 18 to 24 were more likely than other age groups to experience digital harassment and abuse

Young women aged 18 to 19 years were particularly likely to report experiencing offensive or degrading comments about their *gender* (38%), as well as someone *sexually harassing* them (37%). 1 in 4 young women (18 to 19 years) reported experiencing repeated and/or unwanted *sexual requests* (25%). This finding is consistent with overall trends in sexual harassment and sexual violence victimisation in 'offline' contexts, in which young people are routinely overrepresented as victims.[6] Young men, while less likely to experience sexual harassment than young women, also reported higher rates of these experiences than other age groups. For instance, 1 in 4 young men (aged 18 to 19) reported that someone had sexually harassed them, and 18% reported experiencing repeated and/or unwanted sexual requests.

Non-heterosexual identifying adults were significantly more likely to report being the target of gender and sexuality-based harassment

Non-heterosexual identifying respondents were significantly more likely than heterosexual identifying respondents to report experiencing online sexual harassment, as well as offensive messages about their gender and sexuality. This is perhaps unsurprising in light of previous research finding that sexuality-based harassment in particular constitutes a large proportion of young adults' exposure to online hate.[7] Nonetheless, it is extremely concerning that Australian adults are experiencing digital harassment and abuse that is directed at them on the basis of their sexuality or sexual identity.

1 in 10 Australian adults said a nude or semi-nude image of them was sent onto to others without their permission

Of Australian adults surveyed, 1 in 10 reported experiences relating to non-consensual images with 10.7% reporting that someone had *taken* a nude or semi-nude image of them without their permission; 9.3% reported that someone had *posted* such images online or sent them onto others; and 9.6% reported that someone has *threatened* to post nude or semi-nude images of them online or send them onto others. As our research was not focused on 'revenge pornography' in particular, our survey did not explore further the context in which nude or semi-nude images were shared without permission. For example, we do not know whether the images were shared by a partner or former partner, family member, friend, acquaintance, or person/s unknown; whether they were shared with malicious intent; and/or whether the images were accompanied by personal or identifying information in order to shame, humiliate or solicit others to harass the victim. While sharing any nude or semi-nude image without permission of the person depicted can be considered a harmful behaviour, the context surrounding the image itself and the circumstances in which it is shared can increase the severity of the harm and the impact on the victim. This is an important consideration for future research into seeking to understand the prevalence and nature of the harm of image-based sexual exploitation.

Women overwhelmingly experienced digital harassment and abuse from male perpetrators

Overall, perpetrators of digital harassment and abuse were twice as likely to be male than female. Half of our survey respondents (50.4%) reported that the perpetrator/s were male/s only, 21.9% reported that the perpetrator/s were female/s only, and 15.2% reported that the perpetrator/s comprised a mixed group of both males and females.

Females (68%) were significantly more likely than males (32%) to report digital harassment and abuse from males only. As such, female victims were more than twice as likely to have been targeted by a male perpetrator than were male victims. Men meanwhile experienced digital harassment and abuse *equally* from males, females and others (including unknown perpetrators and mixed groups of both males and females).

Sex of Perpetrator Victims

Male Victims

Female Victims

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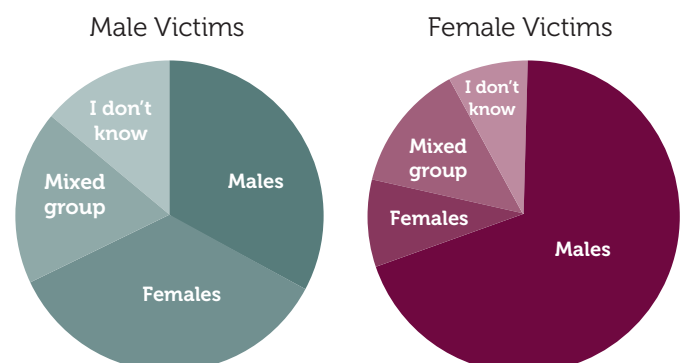
[6] Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) (2012). *Personal Safety Survey*. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia; Australian Human Rights Commission (2012). Working Without Fear: Results of the Sexual Harassment National Telephone Survey 2012. Sydney: Australian Human Rights Commission.

[7] Oksanen, A., Hawdon, J., Holkeri, E., Näsi, M., & Räsänen, P. (2014). Exposure to Online Hate Among Young Social Media Users. *Soul of Society: A Focus on the Lives of Children & Youth (Sociological Studies of Children & Youth, volume 18)*, 253-273.

Overall, both men and women were most likely to report being harassed by others unknown to them.

Respondents were asked about their connection or relationship, if any, to the people who had harassed or abuse them online or via a mobile phone in their lifetime.[8] Overall, both men and women were most likely to say that the people who had ever harassed them were: strangers (28.2%), friends they knew face-to-face (21.8%), or someone whose identity was unknown to them (16.6%). This was followed by current, past or potential sexual partners (14.4%), acquaintances (13.1%), family members (8.4%), work colleagues (8.0%), and intimate partners (7.4%). Men were significantly more likely than women to report that the perpetrators were friends they knew online only (m=16.7%, f=9.0), and/or family members (m=11.5%, f=4.9%). More women (30.8%) than men (25.9%) reported experiencing digital harassment and abuse from strangers, or that they did not know the identity of the people involved (f=18.1%, m=15.1).

These findings highlight the different dynamics that are involved in digital harassment and abuse, whereby victims may be targeted by multiple people who are strangers, whose identity is unknown to them, or who they know only through their online networks.
This compares with more traditional forms of 'offline' bullying, harassment and abuse, which is overwhelmingly perpetrated by others known to the victims, such as colleagues, friends, family, and sexual or intimate partners. Further research is needed to understand how this relationship to the perpetrator might differ for particular types of digital harassment and abuse, such as sexual harassment and non-consensual images for example.

Women were significantly more likely than males to be 'very or extremely upset', by the digital harassment and abuse they experienced

It is notable that women (56%) were significantly more likely than men (36%) to report their experience as 'moderately', 'very' or 'extremely' upsetting. Women's reported experience of digital harassment and abuse as 'moderately to extremely upsetting' may in turn reflect their differential status in society relative to men. For example, as noted by other scholars, for women who have experienced past violence (such as sexual violence, intimate partner violence or offline harassment), online sexual violence and harassment may cause additional distress.[9] Moreover, the impacts of some abusive behaviours, such as sexual harassment or 'revenge pornography' for example, may be particularly adverse for women due to the sexual double standards that continue to exist regarding female and male sexuality and sexual expression. In short, women victims of sexual violence and harassment are often blamed, shamed and humiliated; responses which extend the harm of the original violation.[10]

Significantly more female than male respondents reported that they: told the person to stop (f=42%, m=33%), changed their online details or profile settings (f=24%, m=16%), left the site or turned off their device (f=24%, m=17%), as a result of their experience. This finding suggests that women may bear greater consequences for their continued participation in online settings as a result of digital harassment and abuse.

Non-consensual sexual imagery

While the findings from our survey of Australian adults shed particular light on the extent and nature of digital harassment and abuse, further detail on its impacts and responses can be found from our interviews with key experts from across law enforcement, legal services, as well as the sexual and domestic violence services sector. In our interviews with police and sexual assault services in particular, we encountered three highly concerning trends in adult victims' experiences of *non-consensual sexual imagery*.[11]
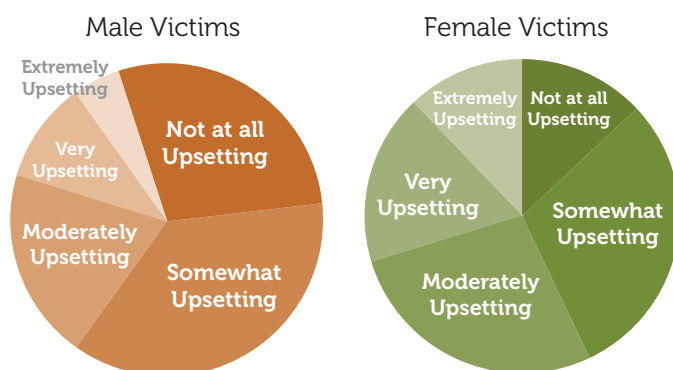
The first of these is where photos or videos are taken during a sexual assault, which may then be used to intimate, harass or silence the victim. Police and sexual assault counselor-advocates told us how the taking of that image can serve to extend and exacerbate the trauma to victim-survivors of sexual violence. This reflects the nature of communications technologies, which by enabling ease of communication and distribution of content also provide a mechanism through which the impacts of violence and abuse can be substantially increased. The second trend concerns the use of sexual images as a threat to coerce a victim into unwanted sexual contact. In other words, the image enables a kind of 'sextortion', whereby victims are subsequently sexually assaulted. The third trend is where current or former intimate partners post online or threaten to distribute sexual or intimate images as a tool for shaming and humiliating victims (also known as 'revenge pornography'). According to our interviews, victims are immensely aware that once distributed online, the erasure of these images cannot ever be guaranteed.

While our research cannot indicate how common these experiences may be, we know from national crime statistics that 1 in 5 Australian women has experienced sexual violence in her lifetime, and 1 in 6 has experienced physical or sexual violence from a current or former partner since the age of 15.[12] That sexual images, and the threat of their distribution, may play a role in shaming, humiliating and extending the harm of sexual and intimate partner violence is a cause for concern, and further highlights the need to ensure effective legal and support responses for victims of these harms.

Domestic violence, digital harassment and abuse

With domestic violence affecting 1 in 6 Australian women, it is hardly surprising that communications technology are being misused by current or former intimate partners to stalk, threaten, monitor and harass victims. In our interviews with legal services and domestic violence support workers, many expressed their view that technology-facilitated abuse was increasing, and that the capacity for perpetrators to harass victims 24/7 made the abuse all the more intrusive. Examples of how digital harassment and abuse was being used as a tool in domestic violence contexts include: persistent unwanted contact via mobile messaging, email and social media (such as posts to Facebook), location monitoring (such as via GPS information provided through a victims social media posts or photo meta-data, or scrapped surreptitiously via so-called 'stalking apps'), as well as bombarding victims with threats and/or threatening language and imagery.

How upsetting was your experience

Male Victims

Extremely Upsetting
Very Upsetting
Moderately Upsetting
Not at all Upsetting
Somewhat Upsetting

Female Victims

Extremely Upsetting
Very Upsetting
Moderately Upsetting
Not at all Upsetting
Somewhat Upsetting

[8] As this was a multiple-response question, asking about multiple perpetrators of digital harassment and abuse in their lifetime, the percentages refer to the proportion of the sample who selected each item, and do not add up to 100%.
[9] Lindsay, M., Booth, J. M., Messing, J. T., & Thaller, J. (2015). Experiences of Online Harassment Among Emerging Adults Emotional Reactions and the Mediating Role of Fear. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*. OnlineFirst, p.16.
[10] Powell, A. (2010). Configuring Consent: Emerging Technologies, Unauthorized Sexual Images and Sexual Assault. *Australian & New Zealand Journal of Criminology*, 43(1), 76-90.
[11] Powell, A. & Henry, N. (2013). 'Beyond the Sext: Technology-Facilitated Sexual Violence and Harassment', Seminar presented at Women's Health Victoria. Recording available at: http://whv.org.au/publications-resources/publications-resources-by-topic/post/beyond-the-sext-technology-facilitated-violence-and-harassment-against-women-audio-recording/
[12] See Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS). (2012). *Personal Safety Survey*. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia.

The expert view of domestic violence services that technology is rapidly emerging as a tool for abuse is further supported by recent research conducted by the Domestic Violence Resource Centre Victoria (DVRCV). In a survey of 152 Victorian domestic violence workers, their research found that smartphones, mobile phones and social media were the most common tools for intimate partner stalking, followed by email and location information.[13] Workers described examples of the types and impacts technology-facilitated abuse, which included a range of unwanted contact, threats and location monitoring. Legal services have also variously reported this escalating issue, including the Women's Legal Service in New South Wales,[14] who are now embarking on a joint project with DVRCV and WESNET, and in partnership with the Australian Communications Consumer Action Network ('ACCAN'), to provide information and resources for women experiencing technology-facilitated domestic violence.[15]

Changes needed to Australian laws

Overall, legal services and law enforcement expressed support for changes to the law, so as to provide a clearer pathway towards justice for victims of digital harassment and abuse. In particular police members we spoke to identified gaps in our current laws addressing 'revenge pornography' – or the distribution of a sexual or intimate image without a person's consent. While many acknowledged that existing federal laws[16] could be applied to such situations, they expressed concern that the laws had not kept pace with changes in technology-facilitated forms of abuse, and required clarification to ensure victims were not left unprotected.

These views are supported by our continuing research into Australian criminal and civil laws for responding to image-based sexual exploitation, as well as other forms of digital harassment and abuse. In short, Australian law has not sufficiently kept pace with evolving behaviours where technology is used to perpetrate these harms. We recommend a range of civil and criminal law remedies for responding to 'revenge pornography' and other harmful digital behaviours in Australia.[17] Importantly, there is a need for consistency between state, territory and Commonwealth laws, so that victims do not fall through the gaps depending on where they or their perpetrator are located.

Bystander action and 'counter-speech'

The law is not, however, the only response or solution to the problems of digital harassment and abuse. Certainly there are gaps, and these need to be addressed to protect victims of targeted abuse and of revenge pornography. We also need to utilise the laws we already have in place to respond more effectively to gender, race and sexuality based harassment (which can readily be understood to 'menace, threaten or harass' its victims), and to ensure that victims of intimate partner violence and stalking are supported to seek justice.

But ultimately, we are all members of digital society and we all have a role to play in ensuring that our social experiences are *equal and inclusive* – whether occurring online or offline. We can do our part to prevent abuse, harassment and inequality by calling on internet and social media service providers to be *ethical digital corporate citizens*, by setting clear community conduct and service standards, and being prepared to enforce them against those whose behaviour violates these standards. Indeed, we can all promote inclusive and ethical digital citizenship by reporting community standards' violations as well as participating in counter-speech.[18] Counter-speech refers to bystanders and witnesses speaking up and challenging the harassing and abusive behaviours of others, or stepping-in to express support for the victim. Such measures can be more effective than the law alone to address many of the more common forms of digital harassment and abuse that Australians are experiencing.

Conclusion and next steps

Overall, the findings of our study are consistent with emerging findings in the international literature on digital forms of harassment and abuse. In short, while lifetime experience of digital harassment and abuse is similar for males and females, the nature and impacts of such abuses differ in *particular gendered ways*. Women surveyed report significantly higher rates of digital sexual harassment, are significantly more likely to report experiencing negative impacts as a result of victimisation, and are overwhelmingly targeted by male perpetrators.

It is also clear from our study that the image-based sexual exploitation of adults, more often referred to in public and media debates as 'revenge pornography', is an important issue for further research. That 1 in 10 Australians, both women and men, reported that a nude or semi-nude image of them had been distributed without their permission is a highly significant finding. Previous research has already explored image-based sexual exploitation and abuse of children and young people. But we need to know more about the extent, nature and impacts of a whole range of ways in which nude, sexually explicit and/or 'intimate' images are being used to harass or abuse adults – and how our laws and support services might need to better respond to these harms.

Our research also highlights the disturbing uses of digital communications technologies to perpetrate and extend the harms of sexual and domestic violence. Our interviews with law enforcement, legal services, as well as sexual and domestic violence services, revealed the ways that perpetrators of domestic violence in particular are using the threat and/or distribution of a sexual image as a means to abuse, exploit and control victims. While our research cannot indicate how common these experiences may be, or how far they extend into the diverse Australian community, it is clear that such image-based sexual exploitation and abuse is problematic and that victims need support if they are to feel confident in reporting these abuses to police.

As we continue our research we will further examine the extent, nature and impacts of *sexual, gender and sexuality* based harassment in particular. While men and women were just as likely to report experiencing digital harassment and abuse, clearly there are some important gender differences in the nature and impacts of these harms. Further research is needed to fully understand these differences and to continue to inform legal and support responses.

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[13] Woodlock, D. (2015). The Abuse of Technology in Domestic *Violence and Stalking*. *Violence Against Women*, OnlineFirst. Available at: http://www.smartsafe.org.au/sites/default/files/The-Abuse-of-Technology-in-Domestic-Violence-and-Stalking.pdf

[14] See Sun, C. (2015). Technology-Facilitated Stalking and Abuse: Putting our legal framework to the test. Available at: http://www.wlsnsw.org.au/wp-content/uploads/LSJ-Article-Charissa-Sun-June-2015-LSJ.pdf

[15] Updates on the project, titled Recharge: *Women's Technology Safety* can be found at: http://smartsafe.org.au/projects/recharge-women%E2%80%99s-technology-safety

[16] Such as telecommunications offences under the *Criminal Code Act 1995* (Cth) including s.474.17: 'Using a carriage service to menace, harass or cause offence'. 'Carriage service' means any communications service including the internet, emails, mobile and fixed telephones, faxes, radio and television.

[17] Henry, N., Powell, A., & Flynn, A. (2015). Submission to the NSW Standing Committee on Law and Justice Inquiry into Remedies for the Serious Invasion of Privacy in New South Wales.

[18] Henry, N., & Powell, A. (2014b). The Dark Side of the Virtual World. In N. Henry & A. Powell (Eds.). *Preventing Sexual Violence: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Overcoming a Rape Culture* (pp. 84-104). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.