Help, I Am Losing Control! Examining the Reporting of Sexual Harassment by Adolescents to Social Networking Sites

# Details

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## Sample

1,015 pupils (51% boys and 49% girls), aged between 11 and 19 years from 11 secondary schools in Flanders, Belgium. To adjust for over- and underrepresentation of some subgroups (according to gender, age, and education level), weight procedures were applied to the data to represent the actual school population.

## Implications For Policy Makers About

Stepping up awareness and empowerment

## Implications For Stakeholders About

Industry

# Abstract

Sexual harassment is often encountered by adolescents on social networking sites (SNS). One option to cope
with a situation of harassment on SNS is to alarm the provider by reporting the transgressive content. It is yet
unclear what the determinants of reporting a sexual harassment situation on SNS are, as well as the subsequent
actions to these reports from the part of the SNS provider. In this article, we seek to address these gaps, and in
particular examine whether control-by-the-self over the situation and negative emotions play a role in the
reporting of sexual harassment on SNS. Findings indicate that a low situational control-by-the-self, indirectly
(namely through a higher experience of negative emotions such as anger and shame) increases the reporting of
sexual harassment by the victim. Public visibility of the incident and the impossibility to remove the content
reduce the situational control-by-the-self. Results further suggest that SNS providers often ignore reported
situations of sexual harassment. The study concludes with suggestions for responses to reported harassment on
SNS, which should be directed toward increasing behavioral control and thereby alleviating negative emotions.

# Outcome

"Perceived behavioral control to report was found to be an important predictor in whether the incident was reported to the SNS provider. The coping strategy of reporting sexual harassment to SNS providers unravels low situational control-by-the-self that indirectly predicts the reporting through negative emotions. Negative emotions contribute to the reporting of sexual harassment to SNS providers. They play a role in help seeking from teachers, friends, or family for bullying. These findings highlight the importance for SNS providers to offer responses directed toward alleviating negative emotions.
Yet, an anonymous perpetrator can evoke powerlessness and frustration because of the victim’s limited possibility to stop the incident, whereas also knowing the perpetrator can be distressing because of their direct access to the victim’s social network. The study indicates that SNS often do not respond to reported sexual harassment due to the high number of reports or it does not violate their terms of use, in an algorithmically rule-bound way. This is problematic since adolescents reporting the event expect the content to be removed as an important predictive factor for low control-by-the-self. Additionally, publicly visible incidents are perceived as less controllable. Reacting upon reports of public incidents is important, since publicly visible harassment in cyberspace has been related with higher perceived severity due to bigger audiences.
They argue for the provision of emotional support, in addition to technical assistance (e.g., remove the content; block/trace the harasser). One strategy may consist of providing the victim, who reported the harassment, with automatic messages containing emotional support and links to support organizations, thereby reducing the step to find help by advising whom to contact." (Van Royen et al., 2016, pp. 19-20)