

# Online harassment in majority contexts: Examining harms and remedies across countries

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Online insults and disrespect are perceived as more harmful by

individuals outside the United States, especially when the content damages family reputation, according to a University of Michigan study.

But there was consensus among all countries, including the U.S., that non-consensual sharing of sexual photos was highest in harm.

Online harassment encompasses many types of behavior, such as hate speech, threats and doxxing (revealing personal information). Most social media sites have reporting systems that flag inappropriate content or behavior, which can result in the content being removed and the user who posted it being sanctioned or banned.

The study examined online harassment with nearly 4,000 participants who spoke 10 different languages in 14 countries worldwide.

Researchers asked them about the following types of harassment:

- Spreading malicious rumors about them on social media
- Taking sexual photos of them without their permission and sharing them on social media
- Insulting or disrespecting them on social media
- Creating fake accounts and sending them malicious comments through direct messages on [social media](#)

The study showed that a person's country was the most important variable when measuring harm, followed by gender. On average, women perceive higher harm than men, says lead author Sarita Schoenebeck, associate professor of information.

Insults and disrespect are perceived as higher in harm to family reputation and for personal safety in countries like India, Colombia, Pakistan and China relative to the United States, the findings show.

"A woman's reputation is closely tied to that of her family, and any

damage to it can have severe consequences, including divorce, limited marriage prospects, abandonment, domestic abuse, house arrest, starvation and even honor killings," said study co-author Amna Batool, a doctoral student in the School of Information. "It is crucial that platforms work together with local stakeholders, users and organizations dedicated to women's cybersecurity."

Study participants differed in their choice of remedies for perceived online harassment. People in most countries outside the U.S. prefer monetary compensation, apologies and publicly revealing offenders' identities, but are less favorable toward removing content, banning users and labeling content relative.

Low trust in people and in the safety in one's neighborhood also correlate with increased perceptions of harm from online harassment.

"Online harassment touches on many social, cultural, political and institutional factors," Schoenebeck said. "Harms associated with online [harassment](#) are greater in non-U.S. countries, and platform governance should be more actively co-shaped by community leaders in those countries."

The paper is published on the *arXiv* preprint server. The study's authors include U-M's Sylvia Darling, Gabriel Grill, Kentaro Toyama, Giang Do and Louise Ashwell; Mehtab Khan of Yale University; and Daricia Wilkinson of Clemson University.

**More information:** Sarita Schoenebeck et al, Online Harassment in Majority Contexts: Examining Harms and Remedies across Countries, *arXiv* (2023). [DOI: 10.48550/arxiv.2301.11715](https://doi.org/10.48550/arxiv.2301.11715)

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