Exploring experiences of online harassment in German men and women

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Abstract

In this preprint we report findings of a quota sample of the adult German online population and their experiences with various forms of online harassment.

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Digital media provide new spaces for negative experiences such as incivility and online harassment. Scholars from different domains have become increasingly worried about the frequency of incivility and harassment in public online environments Southern & Harmer (2021). Harassment is often discussed with incivility, because both behaviors hinder the democratic process, target on the grounds of social groups, and limit the personal freedom of targeted individuals (Papacharissi, 2004). We follow the definition of incivility by Papacharissi, arguing that civility needs to be separated from politeness. Incivility includes a "set of behaviors that threaten democracy, deny people their personal freedoms, and stereotype social groups" (Papacharissi, 2004, p 267) and that aim to obstruct a healthy discussion. In comparison to incivility, online harassment is typically more strongly targeted at an individual with the goal of intimidation. Data from the Pew Research Institute suggest that 41 % of Americans have experienced any form of harassment online, showing a general intensifying trend. 25 % reported experience with more severe behaviors such as stalking, sexual harassment, sustained harassment, or physical threats (Pew Research Center, 2021). Of those who have experienced more severe forms of online harassment, 50 % and 33 % respectively say they have been harassed because of their political views or gender. An international survey of young women 47 % of interviewed women and girls aged 15 to 24 years old from 16 countries reports that they have been attacked for voicing their opinion (PLAN International, 2020). In this preprint we report findings of a quota sample of the adult German online population and their experiences with various forms of online harassment. This ad hoc survey was part of a preregistered survey study.

Methods

Preregistration and open data

The reported data is part of a preregistered study. All hypotheses, exploratory research questions, secondary analysis, study procedures, stimulus materials, and the complete data analysis plan for hypothesis testing were preregistered before the data collection started, using the template by aspredicted.org. The frozen preregistration (registered on June 20th, 2020) can be obtained from the study's OSF repository[1], together with the data and a reproducible R analysis scripts.

Sample

A sample of 750 participants fulfilling representative quotas of the German population in terms of gender (50 % female), age ($M = 44.56$, $SD = 14.35$), and

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[1] https://osf.io/xjac7/

education (lower = 30%, medium = 34 %, higher = 36 %) was ordered from the commercial online access panel by Respondi (www.respondi.com). The final sample was screened for the requested quotas, did not trigger plausibility checks, passed an attention check and had average processing time per questionnaire page. Incentives were issued by the commercial panel provider as part of a collectible point scheme.

Design

Participants landed on a briefing page about the conditions of participating. On our welcome page we informed participants about the study purpose, voluntary participation, termination options, anonymity, and data use. After consent, participants answered social demographics to control for quota fulfillment. The following pages asked for various items related to the experimental study preregistered via OSF. The questionnaire ended with two pages on the direct personal experience of and indirect experience (observation) of online harassment as well as one question about the assumed rationale for being harassed.

Measurements

All measurements were made using answer options on a 7-point scale. Items and questions related to the experimental study are reported via OSF. To assess the prevalence of online harassment, we adapted the categories provided by the Pew Internet Research Institute (Pew Research Center, 2021) to assess the experience and observations participants have made in public online spaces thus far, including offensive behavior (e.g., name-calling, vulgarity), efforts to embarrass someone (e.g., publish intimate details or photos without consent), physical threats (including threats of rape or death), sustained harassment, sexual harassment, extended by objectification, redicule, explaining (without being asked), and being denyed competence. Additionally, we asked participants, who were targets of harassment, whether they associated any of these experiences with one or more aspects of their person (political opinion, sexuality, gender, ancestry, etc). In hindsight, we will not look into this additional item, as it frames the reason for online harassment with the victims.

Results

For this report we start out by exploring the prevalence of online harassment among a large German sample of online users. A first conclusion from our data is that roughly half of all participants (n = 50.4%) report having experienced some form of online harassment themselves, and more have observed this happening to others online ($n = 55.73\%$).
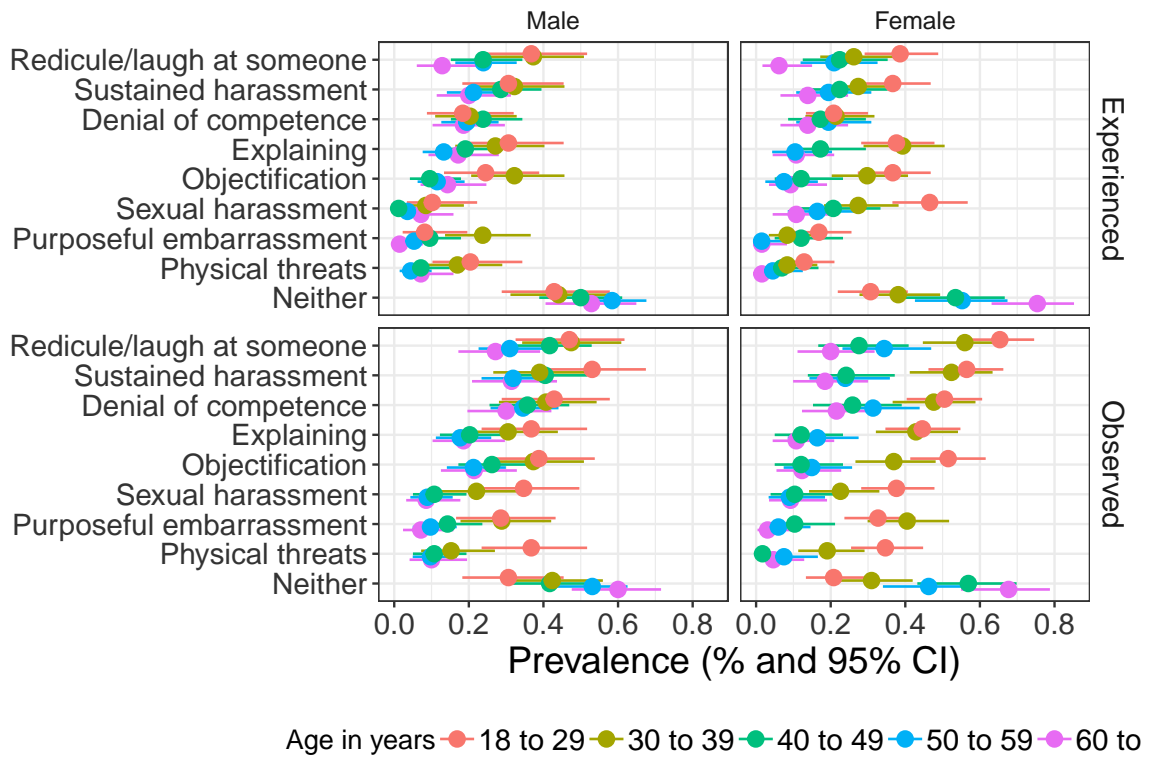
Figure 1

Prevalence of experienced and observed online harassment by gender and age

Figure 1 gives an overview of all items and their prevalence among our sample. Gender differences in experiences are most obvious for sexual harassment ($n_f = 26.67$ %, $n_m = 5.33$ %), virtually all other forms of online harassment show only minor sex differences. Further exploring differences in age and sex, our data shows users aged 18 to 39 experienced a majority of the types of harassment we assessed, with young women leading in almost all categories (objectification, redicule, harassment, sexual harassment, explaining), while young men lead in terms of willfull embarrassment and open threats of violence (cp. Table 1). For the observations of harassment two things stand out. With increasing age the experiences as well as the observations of online harassment decrease, so predominantly younger online users report observing all forms of online harassment. Of those, especially young women report having witnessed almost all forms of harassment significantly more often than young men, while women over the age of 40 report observing way less online harassment than their male counterparts.

Table 1

Experienced online harassment by gender and age

age	women			men		
	P	LLCI	ULCI	P	LLCI	ULCI
Sustained harassment						
18 to 29 years	0.37	0.27	0.47	0.31	0.18	0.45
30 to 39 years	0.27	0.18	0.38	0.32	0.21	0.46
40 to 49 years	0.22	0.13	0.35	0.29	0.19	0.39
50 to 59 years	0.19	0.11	0.31	0.21	0.14	0.30
60 to 69 years	0.14	0.07	0.25	0.20	0.11	0.31
Purposeful embarrassment						
18 to 29 years	0.17	0.10	0.26	0.08	0.02	0.20
30 to 39 years	0.08	0.03	0.16	0.24	0.14	0.37
40 to 49 years	0.12	0.05	0.23	0.10	0.04	0.18
50 to 59 years	0.01	0.00	0.08	0.05	0.02	0.11
60 to 69 years	0.02	0.00	0.08	0.01	0.00	0.08
Physical threats						
18 to 29 years	0.13	0.07	0.21	0.20	0.10	0.34
30 to 39 years	0.08	0.03	0.16	0.17	0.08	0.29
40 to 49 years	0.07	0.02	0.17	0.07	0.03	0.15
50 to 59 years	0.04	0.01	0.13	0.04	0.01	0.10
60 to 69 years	0.02	0.00	0.08	0.07	0.02	0.16
Sexual harassment						
18 to 29 years	0.47	0.37	0.57	0.10	0.03	0.22
30 to 39 years	0.27	0.18	0.38	0.08	0.03	0.19
40 to 49 years	0.21	0.11	0.33	0.01	0.00	0.06
50 to 59 years	0.16	0.08	0.27	0.04	0.01	0.09
60 to 69 years	0.11	0.04	0.21	0.07	0.02	0.16
Explaining						
18 to 29 years	0.38	0.28	0.48	0.31	0.18	0.45
30 to 39 years	0.39	0.29	0.51	0.27	0.16	0.40
40 to 49 years	0.17	0.09	0.29	0.19	0.11	0.29
50 to 59 years	0.10	0.04	0.20	0.13	0.08	0.21
60 to 69 years	0.11	0.04	0.21	0.17	0.09	0.28
Denial of competence						
18 to 29 years	0.21	0.13	0.30	0.18	0.09	0.32
30 to 39 years	0.21	0.13	0.32	0.20	0.11	0.33
40 to 49 years	0.17	0.09	0.29	0.24	0.15	0.34
50 to 59 years	0.19	0.11	0.31	0.19	0.13	0.28
60 to 69 years	0.14	0.07	0.25	0.19	0.10	0.30
Redicule/laugh at someone						
18 to 29 years	0.39	0.29	0.49	0.37	0.23	0.52
30 to 39 years	0.26	0.17	0.37	0.37	0.25	0.51
40 to 49 years	0.22	0.13	0.35	0.24	0.15	0.34
50 to 59 years	0.21	0.12	0.33	0.24	0.16	0.33

Table 1

Experienced online harassment by gender and age (continued)

	women			men		
age	P	LLCI	ULCI	P	LLCI	ULCI
60 to 69 years	0.06	0.02	0.15	0.13	0.06	0.23
Objectification						
18 to 29 years	0.37	0.27	0.47	0.24	0.13	0.39
30 to 39 years	0.30	0.20	0.41	0.32	0.21	0.46
40 to 49 years	0.12	0.05	0.23	0.10	0.04	0.18
50 to 59 years	0.07	0.02	0.17	0.12	0.06	0.19
60 to 69 years	0.09	0.03	0.19	0.14	0.07	0.25
Neither						
18 to 29 years	0.31	0.22	0.41	0.43	0.29	0.58
30 to 39 years	0.38	0.28	0.49	0.44	0.31	0.58
40 to 49 years	0.53	0.40	0.67	0.50	0.39	0.61
50 to 59 years	0.55	0.43	0.67	0.58	0.49	0.68
60 to 69 years	0.75	0.63	0.85	0.53	0.41	0.65

Note: n by gender and age bracket
[1] women; 18 to 29 years: n = 101, 30 to 39 years: n = 84, 40 to 49 years: n = 58, 50 to 59 years: n = 67, 60 to 69 years: n = 65
[2] men; 18 to 29 years: n = 49, 30 to 39 years: n = 59, 40 to 49 years: n = 84, 50 to 59 years: n = 113, 60 to 69 years: n = 70

Table 2

Observed online harassment by gender and age

age	women			men		
	P	LLCI	ULCI	P	LLCI	ULCI
Sustained harassment						
18 to 29 years	0.56	0.46	0.66	0.53	0.38	0.67
30 to 39 years	0.52	0.41	0.63	0.39	0.27	0.53
40 to 49 years	0.24	0.14	0.37	0.40	0.30	0.52
50 to 59 years	0.24	0.14	0.36	0.32	0.23	0.41
60 to 69 years	0.18	0.10	0.30	0.31	0.21	0.44
Purposeful embarrassment						
18 to 29 years	0.33	0.24	0.43	0.29	0.17	0.43
30 to 39 years	0.40	0.30	0.52	0.29	0.18	0.42
40 to 49 years	0.10	0.04	0.21	0.14	0.08	0.24
50 to 59 years	0.06	0.02	0.15	0.10	0.05	0.17
60 to 69 years	0.03	0.00	0.11	0.07	0.02	0.16
Physical threats						
18 to 29 years	0.35	0.25	0.45	0.37	0.23	0.52
30 to 39 years	0.19	0.11	0.29	0.15	0.07	0.27
40 to 49 years	0.02	0.00	0.09	0.11	0.05	0.19
50 to 59 years	0.07	0.02	0.17	0.10	0.05	0.17
60 to 69 years	0.05	0.01	0.13	0.10	0.04	0.20
Sexual harassment						
18 to 29 years	0.38	0.28	0.48	0.35	0.22	0.50
30 to 39 years	0.23	0.14	0.33	0.22	0.12	0.35
40 to 49 years	0.10	0.04	0.21	0.11	0.05	0.19
50 to 59 years	0.09	0.03	0.18	0.09	0.04	0.16
60 to 69 years	0.09	0.03	0.19	0.09	0.03	0.18
Explaining						
18 to 29 years	0.45	0.35	0.55	0.37	0.23	0.52
30 to 39 years	0.43	0.32	0.54	0.31	0.19	0.44
40 to 49 years	0.12	0.05	0.23	0.20	0.12	0.30
50 to 59 years	0.16	0.08	0.27	0.18	0.11	0.26
60 to 69 years	0.11	0.04	0.21	0.19	0.10	0.30
Denial of competence						
18 to 29 years	0.50	0.40	0.61	0.43	0.29	0.58
30 to 39 years	0.48	0.37	0.59	0.41	0.28	0.54
40 to 49 years	0.26	0.15	0.39	0.36	0.26	0.47
50 to 59 years	0.31	0.21	0.44	0.35	0.26	0.44
60 to 69 years	0.22	0.12	0.33	0.30	0.20	0.42
Redicule/laugh at someone						
18 to 29 years	0.65	0.55	0.75	0.47	0.33	0.62
30 to 39 years	0.56	0.45	0.67	0.47	0.34	0.61
40 to 49 years	0.28	0.17	0.41	0.42	0.31	0.53
50 to 59 years	0.34	0.23	0.47	0.31	0.23	0.40

Table 2

Observed online harassment by gender and age (continued)

	women			men		
age	P	LLCI	ULCI	P	LLCI	ULCI
60 to 69 years	0.20	0.11	0.32	0.27	0.17	0.39
Objectification						
18 to 29 years	0.51	0.41	0.62	0.39	0.25	0.54
30 to 39 years	0.37	0.27	0.48	0.37	0.25	0.51
40 to 49 years	0.12	0.05	0.23	0.26	0.17	0.37
50 to 59 years	0.15	0.07	0.26	0.21	0.14	0.30
60 to 69 years	0.12	0.05	0.23	0.21	0.13	0.33
Neither						
18 to 29 years	0.21	0.13	0.30	0.31	0.18	0.45
30 to 39 years	0.31	0.21	0.42	0.42	0.30	0.56
40 to 49 years	0.57	0.43	0.70	0.42	0.31	0.53
50 to 59 years	0.46	0.34	0.59	0.53	0.43	0.63
60 to 69 years	0.68	0.55	0.79	0.60	0.48	0.72

Note: n by gender and age bracket
[1] women; 18 to 29 years: n = 101, 30 to 39 years: n = 84, 40 to 49 years: n = 58, 50 to 59 years: n = 67, 60 to 69 years: n = 65
[2] men; 18 to 29 years: n = 49, 30 to 39 years: n = 59, 40 to 49 years: n = 84, 50 to 59 years: n = 113, 60 to 69 years: n = 70

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