Chapter 89
Empirical Study of Cyber Harassment among Social Networks

Joanne Kuzma
University of Worcester, UK

ABSTRACT

The growth of Online Social Networking sites has brought new services and communication methods to consumers. However, along with benefits, serious problems such as online cyber harassment have recently come to the forefront of the electronic media. This behavior can have significant negative effect on individuals, businesses and the social networks. Some sites have begun to provide some levels of protection and create specific anti-harassment policies in their terms of service along with implementing protection technologies. However, these protective measures are not consistent among social media, leaving some consumers at greater risk. This study analyzed 60 worldwide social sites and determined the level of cyber-harassment protection. It reviewed statistical differences among geographical-based social networks. The results showed significant gaps among various social networks, but suggests methods for improving consumer safeguards to provide consistent levels of protection.

INTRODUCTION

The rise of Online Social Networking (OSN) sites has brought a multitude of new services and abilities to establish relationships with a wide community of like-minded people throughout the world. Communication channels and tools on OSNs includes blogs, email, wikis and other methods consumers use to communicate on a global basis. However, benefits are countered by online harassment and bullying problems, and reports of victimization have been increasing each year. Gleicher (2008) claims new technology has made harassment more possible and powerful online and empowered bullies an anonymous method of reaching an ever-growing global audience.

Increasing online victimization has led organizations to create mitigation measures. Some national and local governmental entities have proposed and enacted levels of legal protection, although this has been a slow process. In response to negative publicity, some OSNs have enhanced

their sites to provide greater safeguards among their users. Industry watch groups and businesses have also proposed methods and procedures that consumers and firms can use to mitigate harassment.

However, even with the wider scope of safeguards, it is apparent that one method cannot solely solve this wide-ranging and growing problem. Although many stakeholders are involved in resolving online harassment, this paper will concentrate on the problems that OSNs and businesses face when dealing with cyber-harassment.

There were two major aims to be addressed in this study:

1. What are common characteristics that OSNs use when developing a terms-and-conditions-policy for cyber-harassment and are these attributes consistently applied by most OSNs?
2. Is there any difference between sites that cater to specific geographic markets in dealing with cyber-harassment issues?

The study starts with a literature review of cyber-harassment and bullying, and explains recent legal developments. Next, the research methodology is covered, followed by an explanation of the survey results. Finally, implications for this study are highlighted, along with suggestions for OSN site owners to consider when strengthening anti-harassment policies and terms of service.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature section reviews cyber-harassment and bullying, and explains recent legal developments. It also discusses other cyber harassment studies and issues that OSNs should consider. However, there are gaps in the current research that have not been addressed previously, and this paper addresses some of these issues. Most research have concentrated on analysis of cyber-

harassment among children and teenagers, but no systematic study has been done on various harassment characteristics for major OSNs among major global geographical areas. Thus, this paper will contribute to the research for this field.

According to Geach and Haralambous (2009), cyber-harassment and online bullying are broad terms encompassing a range of activities. These include sending abusive, threatening or obscene emails through mediums such as OSN sites; stalking users on sites, impersonating another person online by creating a fake profile; or spamming a specific user repeatedly. Feinberg and Robey (2009) further add to this definition by including online activities such as stalking, threats, harassment, impersonation, humiliation, trickery and exclusion.

Government and Industry Protection

One cyber-harassment legal issue is how the consumers can determine the legal jurisdiction of their OSN service. Users may find themselves in a difficult situation where they are located in one country, but may find that their use of a specific OSN located in another geographical area may leave them vulnerable to weaker laws compared to OSNs based in the consumer's own country.

Some countries have taken a stronger view on anti-harassment and have enacted robust frameworks for abuse protection. In 2003, Greece established an independent agency, SafeLine, to provide a safe online surfing environment (Christodoulaki & Fragopoulou, 2010). This organization is in direct collaboration with the Greek police in forwarding reports of online harassment, abuse and illegal content. A user who believes they have encountered illegal online content or harassment can report directly to SafeLine through a variety of methods (online, telephone or email), and SafeLine will review the report and forward it to the police if appropriate.

The U.S. has no overall cyber harassment law, but other non-harassment laws may be applied to

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