

# Chapter 5

## Explicit Content: An Investigation of Online Sexual Harassment

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This chapter investigates the transformation of traditional face-to-face sexual harassment (SH) to online sexual harassment (OSH). First, an overview of traditional workplace sexual harassment is discussed. Next, the issues of cyberbullying and cyberstalking are presented as a bridge to online sexual harassment, as the two former types of behavior can be seen in online sexual harassment and have both received considerable attention. Then, current research concerning online sexual harassment will be presented, including a discussion of factors that facilitate OSH, social media as a site of harassment, coping strategies, and effects. This concept is worthy of study because online sexual harassment represents a way for the perpetrator to victimize his or her target without the boundaries and restrictions of time, location, or fear of consequence. This chapter concludes with some practical recommendations for organizational leaders to implement to prevent both on- and offline SH from occurring within their company.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Within the last several years, sexual harassment (SH) and assault allegations have truly become prominent and problematic issues within organizations and throughout society (Shaw, Hegewisch, & Hess, 2018). Specifically, since 2017, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) has received 38,222 sex-based harassment allegations, which resulted in approximately \$171 million in monetary benefits paid to employees (EEOC, 2020). This figure does not include allegations filed at the state or local levels, or the incidents that occurred that were never filed. During this time frame, primarily due to the #MeToo movement, accusations of SH and sexual assault ripped through the country, claimed against a myriad of revered men from the entertainment industry, business organizations, and the United States government (Williams & Lebsack, 2018). Some of these men include film producer Harvey Weinstein; actor Kevin

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## **Explicit Content**

Spacey; television news anchor Matt Lauer; television journalist Charlie Rose; record executive Russell Simmons; comedian Louis C.K.; [former] senator Al Franken; [former] chief justice Roy Moore; and even, the president of the United States, Donald J. Trump. The accusations range from unwanted sexual comments and unsolicited touch to full-fledged sexual assault and rape.

As renowned perpetrators continue to fall one-by-one, the general population may find it jarring that, in reality, the average, everyday citizen may be engaging in SH. Specifically, most of the #MeToo allegations refer to men, often in high-power positions, engaging in SH and assault of their subordinates and colleagues within their organizations and industries (Anderson & Toor, 2018; Graf, 2018). However, not all SH is perpetrated during face-to-face (FtF) interactions at work (Graf, 2018). For example, 25% of women between the ages of 18-24 report being sexually harassed on social media, while 26% report being stalked (Leber, 2014). The general problem is that the perpetration of SH continues to persist in the workplace. The specific problem is that as online interactions have become more mainstream over the last two decades, perpetrators have expanded platforms to engage in SH. Specifically, innumerable survivors suffer in silence due to the consequences of speaking out or reporting the crimes committed by the perpetrator, such as re-living trauma, their own reputations being trashed by the public, and even receiving death threats (May, 2018).

Therefore, this state-of-the-art review has three primary goals. First, this chapter begins by laying out the foundation of traditional concepts of SH in the workplace. This section defines SH and highlights several reasons why it may occur within organizations. Next, the chapter shifts its attention to SH in an online environment. Several topics covered include factors that influence SH online, social media as a specific site of harassment, how individuals may attempt to cope with online sexual harassment (OSH), and the potential effects OSH can have on survivors. Finally, several practical recommendations are provided to assist organizational leaders in managing and minimizing the incidence of OSH. The author hopes that this chapter will help illuminate the prevalence and seriousness of OSH to bring about behavioral change in online interactions within and outside organizations.

## **BACKGROUND**

### **Traditional Concepts of Sexual Harassment**

Traditionally, sexual harassment (SH) has been defined as “verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature that unreasonably interferes with an individual’s job performance or creates an intimidating or hostile work environment” (Rotundo, Nguyen, & Sackett, 2001, p. 914). Based on this definition, two specific types of SH encompass most of the inappropriate behavior: quid pro quo and hostile work environment (Richman et al., 1999). Quid pro quo harassment (Latin for “something for something”) is a form of harassment that involves an exchange of conditional circumstances, primarily concerning threats or bribery. For example, a supervisor may say that he will give his female subordinate the weekend off if she agrees to go on a date with him. The other form of SH, hostile work environment, encompasses a wide range of behaviors that inhibit an employee from effectively and comfortably completing her or his job. This may include offensive sexual comments or jokes, as well as inappropriate touching of employees.

Several aspects of SH have been discussed in the literature over the years, including the gender-composition of the industry, the workplace environment, the target, and the perpetrator (Bowling & Beehr, 2006). First, women file more SH claims than men across all industries (Women’s Initiative,

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