

# Online Harassment and Victimization of College Students

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## **Abstract**

*The purpose of this study was to examine the prevalence of victimization occurring through social networking sites. Information was also sought on the internet behavior of college students. Data were collected from 354 college students from September 2007 through April 2008. Anonymous, self-report surveys were completed polling experiences with harassment, stalking, and sexual assault. Analyses showed that the majority of victimization types were reported infrequently, while rates of sexual assault overall were quite high compared to prior research. The types of victimization varied by where they were occurring – online or offline. Acts such as verbal harassment, pestering, unwanted behaviors, and sexual harassment were all fairly prevalent online, while other victimizations, such as being threatened or stalked, occurred more offline. The rates of victimization initiated through online contact suggest that although social networking sites may provide opportunities for certain types of victimization, college students are still at a greater risk from people they meet offline.*

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## **Online Harassment and Victimization of College Students**

### **Introduction**

The current study is in response to recent media reports that have portrayed online social networking sites as dangerous locations where individuals are commonly harassed, stalked, or exposed to sexual predators. We propose that social networks are less dangerous than has been reported in the media, and that the most serious dangers to Internet users still exist offline. To investigate this issue, we focused on empirical research that has not revealed high rates of stranger sexual solicitations of young people online. One well cited study of 1,501 teens aged 10-17 found that of those who were solicited or propositioned for any type of sexual contact, only 24% were solicited by a person aged 18 or over, while the rest of the solicitations were made by juveniles (Finkelhor, Wolak & Mitchell 2000). Less than 5% were actually aggressively solicited, which meant that the solicitor asked the teen to meet, talk on the phone, or sent something through the mail.

Routine activities theory was used to explore whether there is an increased risk while using online sites and whether the use of social networking sites should be deemed a risky act that may lead to various types of victimization. Routine activities theory looks for a convergence in time and location of motivated offenders, targets that are deemed suitable by the offender and a lack of guardianship over desired persons or things (De Coster, Estes, & Mueller 1999). The existence of motivated offenders is assumed in many studies including this one. Previous research has explored the selection of suitable targets of harassment and stalking among college students (Mustaine and Tewksbury 1999). The online behavior of college students, however, has not yet been examined as a potentially risky routine activity. Also worth exploring is the potential lack of capable guardianship which may occur in online settings. Research with teen

computer users found that they were not guarding themselves but were less cautious about sharing personal information because they didn't perceive Internet communications to be a threat to their personal safety (Pierce 2006).

Harassment, stalking, and sexual victimization are all occurring in both online and offline situations. Offline, Fisher, Cullen, and Turner (2002) claim that actual rates of harassment are unknown, yet it is likely that many females in college are at some time victims of harassment. They found that stalking also appears to be fairly prevalent, with research finding that one in ten college students are stalked each year. While sexual assault rates may differ from those not attending college, the American College Health Association's survey of over 50,000 college students showed that 2% of female and .8% of male students had been sexually assaulted during a one year period (2006).

Victimization may also be experienced online due to greater numbers of individuals accessing the Internet. College students are becoming more reliant upon computers, with as many as 90% accessing them daily and over 10% primarily using the Internet to meet others or experiment socially (Forston, Scotti, Chen, Malone & Ben 2007). Few studies have looked at online harassment, stalking, and sexual assault, but those that have looked into the issue have found relatively low levels of victimization.

Mitchell, Becker-Blease, and Finkelhor (2005) found that individuals reported being victimized while using online sites in two forms, sexual and nonsexual. One method is harassment, which can be accomplished by "posting defamatory or embarrassing personal information about others, impersonating others online, stalking people online, threatening violence, and physical and emotional abuse" (Mitchell et al. 2005: 503). Despite this, it appears

that online harassment is rarely reported to law enforcement because most individuals perceive that the victimization is not that serious (Finn 2004).

Rosen's study of 1,257 users of the social networking site MySpace found that the prevalence of stalking while using the website was extremely low (2006a). Rosen concluded that only 1.5% of the sample reported being stalked, while only 4.6% of those sampled claimed they had been propositioned for sexual intercourse. Those stalking victims were both men and women but women were more likely to have been propositioned sexually. Also, those who had been actively using the site for a longer period had a greater risk of victimization. Follow up research by Rosen (2006b) reported that a high number of those users who had reported being either harassed or solicited for sex, blocked the user from contacting him or her, or took some other action to end the contact.

The first major study that analyzed the prevalence of teenage victimization on social networking sites was the 1999 Youth Internet Safety Survey (Mitchell, Finkelhor & Wolak 2001). In the study, 1,501 individuals between the ages of 10-17 (63% were 14 or older) who were deemed frequent Internet users were surveyed, with 56% frequenting chat rooms, and 56% talking to strangers while online. It was found that nearly one-fifth of the sample had been sexually solicited, which meant that an individual had made requests for sex, discussed sex when it was unwanted, or consensually discussed sex. It was also found that females and those who were between the ages of 14 and 17 were solicited at higher rates than those aged 10 to 13, while those between the ages of 10 and 13 reported being distressed by the solicitations more frequently than older teens. The researchers concluded that while none of those surveyed were sexually assaulted and solicitation may not be problematic for all teens, there may be an

increased risk of exploitation for troubled youth (e.g. experienced depression, death of a family member) who are solicited online.

A second Youth Internet Safety Survey (YISS-2; Mitchell, Finkelhor & Wolak 2007) conducted in 2005 found that there was a decrease in the number of sexual solicitations of juveniles, while the number of aggressive solicitations was unchanged. Of those who were non-aggressively sexually solicited, 82% were between the ages of 14 and 17, nearly three quarters had posted personal information online (72%), and over half used the Internet primarily for talking in chat rooms (54%). Of the 3%-4% who had been aggressively solicited online, 81% had posted personal information and nearly 70% were using the Internet for chat rooms. Risk factors for solicitations were being female, using chat rooms frequently, talking about sex frequently online, revealing personal information, and being abused offline.

The rise in the popularity of the Internet for U.S. citizens has essentially changed daily routine activities (U.S. Department of Commerce 2004). Rather than communicating with one another at meetings, social events, and work, practically all individuals have the option of using the Internet as a means for communication. This research considers whether this social networking behavior is leading to new victimization. Considered were college students' internet behavior, protections used to safeguard privacy and different types of victimization such as stalking, harassment and sexual assault experienced both online and offline.

The current study was designed to determine the victimization rates of harassment, stalking, and sexual assault in both online and offline settings among college students. Also considered were factors that may impact these types of victimization (e.g., protections taken while on social networks, the type of information given to strangers), and how the victimization was conducted, whether it was in person or online.

## **Methods**

### ***Measures***

The research was conducted at a large university in the Southwest United States. A 77-question self-report survey was created to poll personal use of social networking sites, activities conducted while online, and types of victimization that may have occurred as a result of social networking use. Also included were 13 questions from the Sexual Experiences Survey (SES; Koss, Gidycz & Wisniewski 1987). It has been demonstrated that the SES is a reliable measure of both rape and sexual assault involving coercion (Testa, Vanzile-Tamsen, Livingston & Koss 2004). The study was approved by the University Institutional Review Board. To maximize accuracy in data entry, the “Nearly Perfect Data Entry” (Barchard & Pace 2006) system was used, which required that data from each survey be entered twice, with inconsistent entries being highlighted in order to reduce the possibility of human error during data entry

Participants were recruited from criminal justice introductory classes in exchange for course credit. Participants signed an informed consent form prior to being given the survey. Participation was voluntary and the participants were informed that they could choose not to complete any portion of the survey and still receive full participation credit. Upon completion of the survey, participants received a debriefing form that included contact information for counseling services in case they found the material to be upsetting.

### ***Participants***

A total of 354 students completed the survey. More of the participants were female (60.5%) than male. The average age was 22, with 25% of the sample being 18 and the majority of participants being under 21. Participants were predominantly Caucasian (60%), with 13% of the sample being Hispanic, 10.5% African-American, 8.8% Asian, and 7.7% other.



## **Results**

### ***Online Behavior***

Use of social networking sites (SNS) is prevalent among college students. Over 80% of the participants were currently using some form of social network, while nearly 92% had used a social network at some point in their lives. The most popular site used was MySpace with 75.1% of students solely using it and another 15.9% using both MySpace and Facebook. An additional 8.7% of students only used Facebook. Those with profiles were somewhat open with their personal information, with approximately one-third having completely public profiles. Another one-third maintained semi-private profiles and one-third had completely private profiles.

Furthermore, college students appear outgoing with their sites as they are including relatively high numbers of personal pictures, with 30% posting between 21-100 pictures and another 23% with over 100 pictures. Most students shared some personal information across the different privacy levels. For example, over 75% of the sample provided their city and state, over two-thirds stated their present school, and about one-third revealed their place of employment.

The vast majority of SNS users did so to stay in contact with current friends (80.7%). In addition to staying in touch with existing friends, students were also making new social contacts online. Nearly a third (31.3%) of participants met up with someone in person that they had first made contact with online.

Even with the high levels of use, only 15.1% reported ever fearing for their safety after using such a site. The relatively low levels of fear for safety may be the result of users having the ability to use strategies to protect themselves. The first strategy would be to block other users that they no longer wished to communicate with, which was done by 29% of participants. A second strategy would be to change information provided on their sites. A few students changed

their phone numbers, addresses, or email addresses in response to unwanted incidents online. In this study, 2.9% changed personal information as a result of fears of stalking or harassment.

Most of these changes to profiles (90%) were in response to stalkers or harassers that participants met online; only 10% of the changes were in response to harassers that victims had met offline.

Another possible response to being victimized could be deleting profiles. Twenty-six individuals deleted profiles after being harassed or stalked by an individual online, while two people deleted social networking profiles after being physically stalked. Finally, one participant filed a formal restraining order due to an online incident, while 22 participants (6.2%) had filed a restraining order due to an offline incident.

### ***Online and Offline Victimization***

Some types of victimization occurred more in online settings, some more in offline settings and others in comparable rates online and offline. Two types of harassment occurred more frequently in online situations. First, sexual harassment occurred more frequently online. Types of sexual harassment experienced are presented in Table 1. Second, pestering, incessant and unyielding attention also occurred more frequently in online situations. While being irritated to the point of wanting to end a friendship occurred in both settings, more students had their requests to cease contact ignored in online situations. The third type of harassing behavior, verbal harassment, occurred in similar levels online and offline. The majority of students (53.4%) had been verbally attacked in one setting or another.

**Table 1. Harassing Behavior**

	No n (%)	Yes n (%)	Victimized Online	Victimized Offline
<b><i>Sexual Harassment</i></b>				
I have had verbal statements made to me which I considered inappropriate due to their sexual nature.	208 (58.8%)	145 (41.0%)	86 (24.3%)	67 (18.9%)
I have been sent unwanted material of a sexual nature.	265 (74.9%)	89 (25.1%)	84 (23.7%)	7 (2.0%)
<b><i>Pestering Behavior</i></b>				
I have been pestered or irritated by an individual to the point that I no longer wished to be friends.	167 (47.2%)	187 (52.8%)	102 (28.8%)	92 (26.0%)
I have requested that an individual or individuals no longer contact me, but these requests were ignored.	268 (75.7%)	86 (24.3%)	60 (17.0%)	31 (8.8%)
I have been repeatedly contacted online unwantedly by an individual.	277 (78.2%)	76 (21.5%)	73 (20.6%)	7 (2.0%)
<b><i>Verbal Harassment</i></b>				
I have been verbally attacked.	164 (46.3%)	189 (53.4%)	101 (28.5%)	104 (29.4%)
I have been verbally harassed.	187 (52.8%)	166 (46.9%)	85 (24.0%)	91 (25.7%)
I have had verbal statements made to me which I considered derogatory.	191 (54.0%)	162 (45.8%)	82 (23.2%)	91 (25.7%)

*Note. Some people reported both online and offline victimization.*

Threatening behavior was also measured and it occurred more frequently in offline situations. Experience with these behaviors is presented in Table 2. Threats that did not cause fear were actually received more in offline situations than online. Twice as many students were threatened offline as online in a manner that did not make them fear for their lives (18.6% offline, 9.3% online). Threats that did cause fear were also occurring more frequently offline

than with online. More participants responded to these real world threats by filing restraining orders, with 22 participants (6.2%) filing in response to offline threats in contrast to only one participant (0.3%) filing one after an online threat.

**Table 2. Threatening Behavior**

	No n (%)	Yes n (%)	Victimized Online	Victimized Offline
<b><i>Threats that did not cause fear</i></b>				
I have been threatened physically, but I did not fear for my life.	259 (73.2%)	95 (26.8%)	33 (9.3%)	66 (18.6%)
I have had pictures taken of me which I did not consent to.	326 (92.1%)	27 (7.6%)	9 (2.5%)	17 (4.8%)
I have been watched by another without my consent.	320 (90.4%)	32 (9.0%)	4 (1.1%)	28 (7.9%)
<b><i>Threats causing fear</i></b>				
I have been threatened physically, and did fear for my life.	326 (92.1%)	28 (7.9%)	6 (1.7%)	22 (6.2%)
I have feared for my safety because of a person.	254 (71.8%)	100 (28.2%)	14 (4.0%)	86 (24.3%)
I filed a restraining order against someone out of fear for my safety.	331 (93.5%)	23 (6.5%)	1 (0.3%)	22 (6.2%)
Physical threats have been made against me, family, or friends.	283 (79.9%)	70 (19.8%)	30 (8.5%)	42 (11.9%)
I have asked someone to no longer contact me because I feared for my safety because of that individual.	317 (89.5%)	36 (10.2%)	36 (10.2%)	13 (3.7%)
I have had threats made against me that made me fear for my life.	331 (93.5%)	21 (5.9%)	4 (1.1%)	17 (4.8%)

*Note. Some people reported both online and offline victimization.*

Stalking behavior also occurred more frequently offline than online. Over 13% of the participants reported being stalked, 10.1% offline and 3.1% online. Participants stalked online did not report changing their daily routine in response, but 10 (2.8%) did report changing their personal information available online. Participants stalked offline did change their behavior due to stalking (13 or 3.7%). Participants also reported changing their personal information in response to being stalked offline (24 or 6.8%).

**Table 3. Stalking Behavior**

	No n (%)	Yes n (%)	Victimized Online	Victimized Offline
<b><i>Stalking</i></b>				
I have been forced to change my daily routine due to fears resulting from stalking.	340 (96.0%)	13 (3.7%)	0	13 (3.7%)
I have been under more stress due to fears resulting from being stalked.	339 (95.8%)	14 (4.0%)	1 (0.3%)	13 (3.7%)
I have changed my phone number, address, or email address due to a stalking or harassment incident.	319 (90.1%)	34 (9.6%)	10 (2.8%)	24 (6.8%)
I have quit my job or moved from my home due to a stalking or harassment incident.	339 (95.8%)	14 (4.0%)	1 (0.3%)	13 (3.7%)
I have been stalked	306 (86.7%)	47 (13.3%)	11 (3.1%)	36 (10.1%)

*Note. Some people reported both online and offline victimization.*

### ***Sexual Victimization***

The majority of the college students reported being sexually active; 78.7% disclosed engaging in consensual sexual intercourse. Results from the SES questions indicated that 31.7% of the female student population had been sexually assaulted. Of the 31.7% of females

victimized, 26.1% self-identified themselves as sexual assault victims, while another 5.6% of the female students described having experienced coercive sexual experiences that would meet the legal definition of sexual assault but they did not identify themselves as sexual assault victims. Furthermore, 4.3% of the male participants reported being sexually assaulted.

### ***Internet Behavior***

To look further into the differences in victimization, analyses were run considering differences in internet behavior. The variable that was focused on was the level of privacy employed in participants' profiles, which were self-reported to be a profile that was public, semi-private, or completely private. Close to a third of respondents (34.9%) reported having a public profile, 31.5% used some restrictions (semi-private), and 33.6% had completely private profiles. ANOVAs were also used to determine whether there were group differences based on the three levels of privacy. To avoid increased errors due to multiple analyses, a Bonferroni correction was applied and only results with a  $p < .01$  were considered significant.

Levels of privacy did not distinguish some types of victimization. For example, rates of harassment or of receiving unwanted material did not vary significantly between the privacy levels. Other victimizations approached significance but did not meet the Bonferroni corrected level. Rates of sexual assault almost varied significantly ( $p < .043$ ) with the private profiles reporting higher levels of sexual assault than semi-private or public. Being stalked also approached significance ( $p < .019$ ) with the public profiles reporting lower rates than semi-private or private profiles.

To further understand the participants, privacy was considered in relation to other online behaviors like hours spent online, number of friends added to site, and publishing of specific personal information on profile (e.g., home address). These behaviors did not vary significantly

between the privacy levels. Only one variable, having a school listed on a profile, was found to have significant differences with public profiles more likely to include that information than semi-private or private profiles ( $F = 4.65 (2, 295), p < .01$ ).

The use of two protective strategies varied significantly by privacy level. First, blocking a user from further contact was used significantly more by public profile users than by private profile users ( $F = 4.87 (2, 295), p < .01$ ). The semi-private group did not vary significantly from the other two groups. Second, the semi-private group reported having deleted profiles in response to harassment significantly more than the public or private groups ( $F = 4.65 (2, 295), p < .01$ ). This curvilinear relationship was interesting as harassment victims deleted profiles but did not change to a completely private profile.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

The current study has shown that most college students use social networking sites (91.8%). Also revealed in this study were high rates of victimization occurring among students, both online and offline. Koss' Sexual Experiences Survey showed that female students experienced higher than average rates of sexual assault with 31.7% of female participants reporting that they had been sexually assaulted (68 of the 215 female participants). Six men (4.3% of the male participants) reported having been sexually assaulted. These findings for women are higher than previous studies utilizing the SES, which found that 20% of college aged females reported sexual assault and should be investigated in future research (Koss 1998; Koss et al. 1987; Testa et al. 2004).

Students in this sample population often met the routine activities theory criteria of suitable and available targets as they were sharing a high amount of personal information in a public arena - over two-thirds of the sample either had public or semi-public profiles.

Furthermore, over 90% of the sample reported use of these sites sometime in their lives, which created a large base of potential targets for motivated offenders. Finally, a lack of capable guardianship is likely occurring online due to the high levels of personal information reported to be disclosed online. For example, over 75% of the sample posted their city and state, over two-thirds disclosed their current school affiliation, and about one-third revealed their place of employment.

When comparing online and offline victimization, it was found that certain behaviors were seen more commonly either online or offline. The only exception to this was verbal harassment, which had comparable rates of victimization occurring online and offline. Types of victimization exhibited more frequently offline were non-fearful and fearful threats, physical harassment, and stalking.

Victimization reported at high levels by participants in online settings were verbal harassment, pestering behaviors, and sexual harassment. This is likely due to the ease by which others are able to perpetrate such acts through social networking sites. Also, fearful threats occurred more frequently in online settings than non-fearful threats did online.

When analyses were conducted to see if exposure online affected victimization, it was expected that there would be a linear relationship, with those having the lowest levels of privacy being victimized the most, those with moderate protections being victimized less, and those with private profiles having the lowest amounts of victimization. This was not always the case for some types of victimization. For example, those who deleted profiles due to stalking or harassment incidents did not necessarily change to private profiles, with those with both public and private profiles having lower rates of victimization than those with semi-private profiles.



It is an interesting finding that the relationship with privacy in some cases was curvilinear. This finding may reflect that those who had initially had public profiles may have experienced some type of victimization and then as a result changed their profile to semi-private, but were unwilling to make completely private profiles. Future research should look for reasons why people choose to change their levels of privacy.

Also important to explore further is the trend that 31.3% of the students moved an online relationship into the real world by agreeing to meet in person someone that they first made contact with online. While these students did not disclose being victimized by these new acquaintances, it is clear that students are forming relationships through social networking. It is easier to protect oneself in an online environment by blocking contact, a strategy employed by 29% of the students.

This research study is a good first step in determining the risk of victimization while using social networking sites and future research can focus further on the differences between victims who experience negative incidents online, offline, or in both venues. The preliminary analyses in this project indicate that these groups differ, so the next step is to predict what independent characteristics show where an individual is most at risk of being victimized. Although there may be some risks while using social networking sites (i.e., sexual harassment and pestering unwanted contacts), there is still a much greater risk of being severely victimized offline during the everyday routine activities of individuals.

### **Limitations**

The current study does have a few limitations. The primary limitation is that those surveyed were from introduction to criminal justice courses. This implies that the majority of the students surveyed represent those who have just begun school, which limits the ability to capture

the victimization rates of students throughout their entire college careers. Future research may be conducted which measures those entering college, as well as collecting data from those in their last semester, in order to have two groups for comparisons. Additionally, only students in criminal justice courses from one university were surveyed, which limits the ability to generalize all academic majors, as well as other college campuses. More extensive research may be conducted to examine the victimization rates on social networking sites of various majors throughout the United States in order to determine if the results from the current study are consistent throughout the country.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

It was found that there was an unexpected curvilinear relationship of victimization based upon the privacy of a user's profile. Due to the lack of questions regarding the reasons behind the choice of privacy level, it was impossible to determine whether the participant was victimized and then changed a profile to private or if the profile was initially private and the victimization occurred anyways. Further analyses should be conducted in this area in order to determine if having a profile set to private provides a high degree of protection, or if individuals are still being victimized even with such settings in place.

The goal of the current study was to determine where the victimization was more prevalent and what factors may have led to victimization, so the quantity or frequency of victimizations, both online and offline, were not surveyed. Future research should delve into the number of times students are being victimized in order to determine if certain individual characteristics lead to repeat victimization, whether online or offline.

Finally, future studies should be conducted using sample populations other than college-aged individuals. Previous researchers have explored victimization of children under the age of

17, while research on those 18 and over has been scant. The current study included those 18 and over, but only included individuals in college. Comprehensive research spanning all age groups and professions is necessary in order to determine the full extent of victimization while using social networking sites.

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