

Impact case study (REF3)

Institution: University of Liverpool		
Unit of Assessment: 34 - Communication, Cultural and Media Studies, Library and Information Management		
Title of case study: #Speakout: tackling online harassment in student communities		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: December 2017- March 2019		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Dr Craig Haslop Dr Ros Southern Dr Fiona O' Rourke	Senior Lecturer in Media Lecturer in Media Research Associate	June 2016 - Present January 2017 - Present April 2018 – Present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: April 2018 - December 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		
1. Summary of the impact		
<p>Our research and evidence-based interventions have shaped how UK policymakers, educational institutions and safeguarding professionals are tackling and preventing online harassment in student communities. Key findings from our research have informed recommendations to the Office for Students about how universities can actively work to tackle and prevent online harassment among students. Subsequently, our interventions have been identified as examples of best practice in national guidance from Universities UK to the higher education sector and have led to changes in professional practices in universities, schools and law enforcement agencies across England, which include new safeguarding initiatives to mitigate online harassment in these contexts. At local levels, follow up surveys have shown these new initiatives have begun to de-normalise online harassment among students, fostering a greater willingness by students to report online harassment to their educational institutions.</p>		
2. Underpinning research		
<p>The #Speakout research project was developed in response to national-level calls for evidence-based interventions and training resources to effectively tackle the increasing prevalence of online harassment among students on UK university campuses. Key findings from Universities UK's (UUK) Changing the Culture report (2016), found that online harassment among UK university students is widespread, and digitised spaces are often a conduit for hate crimes, including those that target an individual's race, gender and sexual orientation. To address these issues, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (now the Office for Students – OfS) offered competitive funding to universities who could develop innovative approaches to tackling online harassment including safeguarding initiatives to mitigate these practices, which created a network of higher education institutions collectively focused on this common goal. Led by Dr Craig Haslop in the Department of Communication and Media, the University of Liverpool (UoL) developed a successful bid for this funding through the #Speakout project, which demonstrated how research can be used to tackle and prevent online harassment at UoL via evidence-based interventions and training resources that can be adapted for use in other educational contexts.</p> <p>The project builds on the Department's growing reputation as a centre for the study of online harassment, through an emerging body of research. Dr Haslop and Dr Southern have both conducted research that explores links between online affordances and social inclusion/exclusion (3.1, 3.2, 3.3), which seeks to build an understanding of the issue in different contexts and develop strategies to help online users understand, navigate and respond appropriately to these experiences. Dr O' Rourke's research has examined how social inequalities in England, particularly those structured by race and gender, can be tackled in pedagogic spaces through research-informed interventions.</p> <p>Research for the #Speakout project, so-called because it wanted to give students an opportunity to speak out about their experiences, further built on this body of research by critically examining online harassment in student's peer groups at UoL and exploring the extent to which these practices reflect social inequalities in the broader social context (3.4). This research was then used to develop interventions and resources to tackle and prevent these practices in educational contexts at the local, regional and national level, including secondary schools, where norms around</p>		

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online harassment are often established (3.4).

Conducted between December 2017 and March 2019, our project comprised four phases which aimed to: 1) conduct research; 2) identify priority issues on the University campus; 3) develop and conduct interventions; and 4) evaluate their impact on the student population. The following summarises the research phase of the project.

The research phase of our project critically examined the extent and nature of online harassment in peer-to-peer interactions between students at UoL, their perceptions of and attitudes to these practices, their willingness to report these incidents to the University and their knowledge of how to do so. To address these research concerns, a mixed research methodology was employed, combining a web-based benchmark survey of 795 students, and 15 student interviews. Key findings from the research phase included:

- Harassment is so prevalent in online spaces, it is often perceived to be the 'norm' by students (3.4). For example, over 50% of students who responded to our survey believed that specific forms of online harassment, such as abusive comments and non-consensual sharing of personal information, were likely to happen in interactions with their peers (3.4).
- 21.94% of students reported that they had personally experienced online harassment and 5% thought they might have (3.4).
- Online harassment can have adverse effects on respondent's health, wellbeing and educational experience (3.5).
- 7.90% more female, than male students, reported they had experienced online harassment, and women are more likely to have encountered its sexualised forms, such as unwanted sexual comments in online spaces (3.5).
- 70.90% of transgender students reported they had experienced online harassment, suggesting they are substantially more likely to be harassed online, than their cis-gender counterparts (3.6).
- Significant numbers of students had a relatively low willingness to report gendered forms of online harassment to the University and/or student's union, particularly online abuse that was directed at women (3.6).

Based on these findings our team developed, evaluated and implemented a series of interventions designed to tackle and prevent online harassment among students. These are outlined in section 4, along with their subsequent impacts.

3. References to the research

- 3.1 **Southern, R.** and Harmer, E. (2019) 'Twitter, incivility and "everyday" gendered othering: An Analysis of Tweets sent to UK Members of Parliament', *Social Science Computer Review*, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0894439319865519>. [REF2].
- 3.2 **Haslop, C** (2018) ESRC Three-Year 'New Investigator' Grant, '#Ladculture: social networking sites, 'laddism' and young masculinities', 2018-2021. [Summary of the research scope, available on request].
- 3.3 Mowlabocus, S. Harbottle, J. Tooke, B. **Haslop C.**, and Dasgupta, R. (2015) 'Because even the placement of a comma might be important': Expertise, filtered embodiment and social capital in online sexual health promotion', *Convergence: the International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, 21(3), pp. 375–387 [REF2].
- 3.4 **Haslop C. and O'Rourke F.** (2020) 'I mean, in my opinion, I have it the worst, because I am white. I am male. I am heterosexual': Questioning the inclusivity of reconfigured hegemonic masculinities, in a student online culture', *Information, Communication and Society, Special issue: Sexuality, Gender, Media. Identity articulations in the contemporary media landscape*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2020.1792531>.
- 3.5 **Haslop, C. and O'Rourke F.** (2020) *#Speakout: Calling out online harassment, changing the online campus*, report to the University of Liverpool. [Held in the institution and available on request].

3.6 **Haslop C., O' Rourke F. and Southern R.** '#NoSnowflakes: The toleration of harassment and an emergent gender-related digital divide, in a UK student online culture', *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, [delayed output – available on request].

4. Details of the impact

Our research and evidence-based interventions have shaped efforts by UK policymakers, educational institutions and safeguarding professionals to tackle and prevent online harassment among students. As a consequence, our research has created impact across the education sector at national, regional and local levels in three key areas: 4.1) *Shaping UK higher education sector recommendations and guidance*; 4.2) *Changing safeguarding and professional practices across the educational sector*; and 4.3) *De-normalising online harassment among students at the University of Liverpool*.

4.1 *Shaping UK higher education sector recommendations and guidance*

Our research has informed higher education (HE) sector wide policy recommendations and guidance on tackling and preventing online harassment within student communities, which has resulted in the following contributions to the sector's response:

a) Our findings were used by **Advance HE** in their report to the **Office for Students** (OfS), which evaluated the OfS funded projects' approaches to tackling and preventing online harassment among student populations and made recommendations to the UK HE sector (5.1, report p. 28). This report included our research finding that online harassment was normalised among students, which in turn led directly to their research informed conclusions and sector wide recommendations for action. The lead author of the **Advance HE** report said: 'We included a substantive extract from the [...] team's final report [...] to support this conclusion' (5.1, testimonial). Based on this conclusion, **Universities UK** recommended that universities 'facilitate students to recognise and challenge these normalised behaviours' (5.2, report p.6) in their national guidance which outlined how the UK HE sector can actively work to tackle and prevent online harassment.

b) **UUK** identified our project and its evidence-based interventions as an example of best practice in their sector wide guidance to universities, which outlined effective ways of mitigating online harassment within student communities (5.2, case studies p.14). The lead author of the guidance explains why the project was included: 'One of the reasons why UUK has chosen to highlight #Speakout...is that the project was clearly informed by primary research gathered from the University of Liverpool's cohort of students [...]. Additionally, the project's impact assessment found promising results indicating a positive change in students' critical awareness of online harassment [...]' (5.2 testimonial).

c) Our project has shaped **UUK's** response to the increase in domestic violence and technology mediated abuse within student communities, which has been exacerbated by the increased need for digital social interaction during the COVID-19 pandemic (5.3 report). Findings from our research informed the scope of their national guidance briefing document to the UK HE sector (5.3 report). Writing about our unique contributions to this briefing, the Policy Manager at UUK notes the #Speakout research highlighted 'that it [online domestic violence and abuse] can take place between students in a number of settings, that include halls of residence and private shared accommodation, as well as between family and intimate partners in more traditional home environments'. She continues: '[these] contributions worked to broaden our working definition of domestic abuse [...] and our subsequent framing of university-based interventions [...] to tackle and prevent these practices within university communities' (5.3 testimonial).

4.2 *Changing safeguarding and professional practices across the educational sector*

Our research and evidence-based resources have instigated new safeguarding initiatives to tackle and prevent online harassment among students in universities, secondary schools and law enforcement agencies across England, changing professional practices in these contexts. This includes the adoption of our student-centred online training module titled 'Developing a Positive Online Presence'.

- **The University of Manchester** have revised their induction programme for students to address

online harassment in direct response to our findings and have embedded our online module into their welcome week programme. Writing about this progressive change in their professional practices, UoM's Sexual Violence and Response Manager states: 'The module represents the first safeguarding initiative at the University of Manchester that aims to mitigate online harassment among students on our campus'. She continues: 'one of the most valuable aspects of the module is that it encourages students to think about consent in an online setting [...] there are few resources available that challenge university students to think about [...] consent within a digital context' (5.4).

- **The University of Leicester** (UoLeic) have integrated our online module into their '[Standing Together](#)' student training programme, which previously focused only on physical forms of harassment, representing their first institution wide initiative to address online harassment among students. Writing about why UoLeic adopted the module, their Wellbeing Case Manager and Standing Together Lead says: 'one of the strengths of the module is that it aims to educate students about how to use online technologies in a safe, civil and considered way, rather than simply telling them what 'not to do' [...]' (5.4). The normalisation of online harassment highlighted by our research (Haslop and O'Rourke, 2020, see 3.5), means students often do not recognise the need to raise their own critical awareness of the subject. The module engages students by highlighting the benefits of understanding online harassment as part of developing their online presence, which can enhance their long-term career prospects.

- **Merseyside Police** have adopted our module and changed their pedagogic approach to their 'Safer Schools Programme', which works to keep young people safe and prevent them from becoming involved in crime. Like universities, schools and law enforcement agencies that work with them, often lack the resources to help young people raise their critical awareness of online harassment. As Merseyside Police's Youth Engagement officer explains: '...within schools – staff recognise there is a problem but lack the expertise to tackle and prevent online harassment [...]'. 'The resource's focus on young people's experiences makes its content very relevant to school students, making it easier [for police officers] to engage them in the training'. She continues: '[The module] has helped us change the ethos of delivery from one where we stand up and tell [young people] what they are doing wrong and they must not do it again, to one where we allow them to recognise their own behaviours and to take steps to change those behaviours' (5.5).

- **The Independent Schools Association**, which represents 550 independent schools across the UK, have recommended our student training module to its members, following a successful trial at **Scarisbrick Hall School** in Ormskirk, Liverpool. While tackling online harassment among student populations was already a priority for schools, the COVID-19 pandemic has intensified the need to address the problem. As the Headmaster of Scarisbrick Hall School and Chair of the Independent Schools Association notes: '[D]ue to the lockdown restrictions [...] across the sector we have seen a rise in risks connected to online harassment, exploitation and peer pressures'. He continues: '[a]s a school it has been encouraging to see the impact that the module has had on pupils [...] staff have [...] commented that following [completion of] the module students asked more profound questions about online behaviours' (5.6).

4.3 Denormalising online harassment among students at the University of Liverpool (UoL)

Our research and its evidence-based interventions have changed professional practices and safeguarding initiatives at UoL, leading to a positive shift towards the denormalisation of online harassment among students (5.7 p109). This shift included a change in attitudes among students to reporting gendered forms of online harassment which, based on our research, were identified as an intervention priority at UoL. For example, before our evidence-based interventions, we asked how students would respond if they observed a peer directing abusive online comments at a female student expressing her views about feminism. In the benchmark survey, 44.17% said they would report, which increased to 65.5% in a follow up survey conducted three months after our interventions (5.7, p106).

These changes were seen after three key interventions developed by our team and conducted in collaboration with the Liverpool Guild of Students (the student's union at UoL known as 'The Guild'), Sport Liverpool (UoL's sports and fitness centre), and UoL's Student Support Services:

a) Our findings changed an established bystander intervention programme at UoL, which had

previously focused on how students can safely respond or intervene to incidents of physical sexual harassment and had not addressed its online forms. After taking the training, 89% of students surveyed felt 'better equipped with the skills necessary to respond appropriately to online harassment' (5.8).

b) The Guild's senior management drew on our research to adapt an annual campus-wide awareness campaign, titled '[#Call it Out](#)'. Previously, their campaign had focused exclusively on raising awareness of physical forms of sexual harassment and had not addressed its online forms. The Vice President and the Director of Membership Services for The Guild notes: 'The data and research on online harassment helped us understand the prevalence of the issue, and the disproportionate way in which specific groups are targeted' (5.8).

c) Using insights from our research, our team developed a new [online information hub](#) about online harassment for UoL students, which has been viewed 990 times since its creation in March 2019 (5.9). The #Speakout research identified a lack of knowledge among students about how to report online harassment to the University. The new web pages addressed this by providing information about behaviours that constitute online harassment and how to report them.

In summary, our research has impacted the higher education and secondary schools' sectors with beneficiaries including: policymakers, in their development of relevant national guidance to universities about effective approaches to tackle and prevent online harassment; educational and safeguarding professionals, who have used our research to implement new initiatives to mitigate online harms; and young people, who have become more critically aware of online harassment. As our evidence-based resources continue to be rolled out to secondary schools and universities across the UK, we anticipate they will have ongoing impact in these contexts.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

5.1 Advance HE report and testimonial from its lead author, confirming the influence of the #Speakout research on their recommendations to the Office for Students (OfS).

5.2 Report and case studies from Universities UK (2019) *Changing the culture: Tackling online harassment and promoting online welfare*, London: Universities UK, highlighting that our findings about normalisation were included in their recommendations to universities and that our project was featured as an example of best practice; testimonial from Policy Researcher for Universities UK, explaining why our research was included in the above report as a case study.

5.3 Briefing from Universities UK (2020) *Continuing the conversation: responding to domestic violence and technology mediated abuse in higher education communities during the COVID-19 pandemic*. London: Universities UK, confirming the research project was included as an example of best practice; testimonial from Policy Manager for Universities UK confirming that the project shaped UUK's approach to defining domestic violence and technology mediated abuse.

5.4 Testimonials confirming how the #Speakout research impacted on university professional practices and highlighting why they adopted the 'Developing a Positive Online Presence' module.

5.5 Testimonial from Merseyside Police's Youth Engagement Officer and lead for school's officers, highlighting why they adopted the 'Developing a Positive Online Presence' module.

5.6 Testimonial from the Headmaster of Scarisbrick Hall School, confirming the recommendation of the module to the Independent Schools Association and the improved awareness of online harassment among students at Scarisbrick Hall School.

5.7 A report to the University of Liverpool - Haslop, C. and O'Rourke F. (2020) *#Speakout: calling out online harassment, changing the online campus*. Liverpool: University of Liverpool, highlighting the denormalisation of online harassment achieved through the #Speakout interventions.

5.8 Testimonial about the collaboration and training with the Liverpool Guild of Students, proving the impact of the project on their professional practices and student's confidence to respond appropriately to online harassment directed at them or their peers.

5.9 University of Liverpool website analytics report confirming number of views of the online harassment information pages.