

# **Victims of Anonymous Online Harassment Suffer Serious Consequences**

By [Carolyn Wheeler](#)  
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With the rise of #MeToo, social media and the internet have been used as a powerful tool for empowering those who have experienced sexual harassment to come forward. Through social media, victims of harassment in the workplace can identify others with similar experiences, and the impact of their combined voices can help bring about change. Yet, the online world has also proved to be a weapon frequently used by harassers, who hide behind a real or perceived protection of anonymity.

## **Online Harassment Statistics**

Evidence suggests that online harassment is widespread and that young women suffer especially severe forms of cyber harassment. According to a 2017 [study](#) by the Pew Research Center, 41 percent of Americans have experienced some form of harassment online, and nearly 1 in 5 have experienced a severe form of harassment, such as physical threats, sustained harassment, stalking, or sexual harassment.

Unsurprisingly, women are encountering sexualized cyber harassment at much higher rates than men. While 9 percent of men ages 18 to 29 say that they have been sexually harassed online, the number is more than twice that (21 percent) for young women of the same age range. Over half of young women (53 percent) report receiving unsolicited explicit images. In a 2006 project conducted at the University of Maryland, in which researchers set up fake online accounts in chat rooms, accounts with feminine-sounding usernames received around 100 sexually explicit and/or threatening messages each day, while masculine names averaged only 3.7 messages of the sort.

## **Yik Yak: A Social Media Harassment Case Study**

Cyber harassment can be particularly harsh on anonymous forms of social media and also difficult to combat, especially when it occurs in public schools and universities. In a [Title IX case](#), five women who were previously students at the University of Mary Washington in Virginia alleged that the school violated their rights to be free from [sex discrimination under Title IX](#) by failing to take action to protect them from online sexual harassment. During the 2014-2015 school year, members of UMW's Feminists United group were subjected to sexually demeaning harassment and threats of physical and sexual violence via the now-defunct anonymous social media app, Yik Yak. Users of the app called the group's members derogatory slurs, sometimes referring to them by name.

In December 2018, the Fourth Circuit ruled that the Feminists United plaintiffs could proceed with their Title IX claims against the University of Mary Washington. Most significantly, the

court held that the University had sufficient control over the harassment to be liable for the creation of a hostile and abusive school environment, despite the harassment being conducted anonymously on social media. The opinion provides useful suggestions for what schools can and should do when confronted with complaints about such bullying and harassment. After this decision, the claims were settled confidentially out of court. Read more about the ruling [here](#).

The Yik Yak app, created in 2013, allowed users to share anonymous messages, or “Yaks,” with any app user within a 1.5-mile radius. It took off on college campuses, but quickly became known as a hotbed of hate speech, [cyberbullying](#), and [threats of violence](#). In 2014, a student at Middlebury College spoke publicly in an open letter about being harassed on the app for her weight. In the same year, schools in Massachusetts and California had to evacuate their students after bomb threats came in via the app. The app’s creators tried to combat the hate speech and threats on the platform, but their efforts proved ineffective. The app closed down in April 2017.

Yik Yak is not the only app of its kind. In 2017, an anonymous app called “Sarahah,” which loosely translates to “honesty” in Arabic, skyrocketed to the top of app stores. Originally created for employees to give anonymous feedback to their bosses, the app allowed users to submit anonymous comments and critiques to their peers’ profiles. Many have compared it to older anonymous social networking platforms like [Ask.fm](#) and [Formspring](#), which were criticized after being linked to widespread cyberbullying and a string of teen suicides.

According to Danielle Keats Citron, the author of *Hate Crimes in Cyberspace*, anonymity can be particularly dangerous, as it allows people to feel free to go against social norms and removes the fear of being reprimanded for their actions. While apps like Yik Yak provided an especially attractive platform for hate speech, Citron also writes that, even on social networks where individuals’ identities are known, the perception of anonymity encourages harassers to act as if others do not know who they are, and as if their actions are small and insignificant in the large web of online interactions happening at the same time. A [2017 study by the Pew Research Center](#) found that 86% of online adults feel that the internet allows people to be more anonymous than is true offline.

## **What Is the Impact of Online Harassment?**

While many commentators understate the significance of cyber stalking and threats, online harassment often has severe and debilitating consequences for its victims. The internet extends the impact of destructive online posts. Lies that are spread can stay on the internet forever and appear whenever someone – including potential employers – types the victim’s name into Google. According to a [2013 study](#), victims of cyberstalking reported that they had to take time off work or change or quit their job or school at higher rates than targets of traditional stalking. The same study reports that the average financial impact of cyberstalking per victim is \$1,200, which often includes legal fees, property damage, moving expenses, and the cost of changing a phone number. In comparison, the average cost to traditional stalking victims was about \$500.

Additionally, emotional harm and psychological distress regularly plague victims of cyber stalking and harassment, especially due to their feeling that the perpetrator is inescapable.

As a result of its 24/7 presence, cyber harassment may actually be more harmful to a victim's mental health than other forms of harassment or stalking.

### **What Are the Remedies for Online Harassment?**

Whether online harassment occurs in a school setting or in connection with an individual's job, there are legal avenues to challenge it under [Title IX](#), which prohibits sex discrimination in publicly funded educational programs, and [Title VII](#), which prohibits sex discrimination in employment. While schools and employers may find it challenging to investigate and punish online harassers, their obligations to do so are the same as if the harassment occurred in person.

Individuals should not suffer such harassment in silence. Rather, they should take heart from the #MeToo movement, which has demonstrated that speaking out can lead to change in such intolerable behavior.

*Our winter intern, Hannah Robinson, contributed to this blog.*