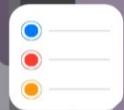


Wednesday, 11th March

11:45

REMINDERS

1m ago



Social media, digital and online abuse and harassment:

What is it and what can we do about it?

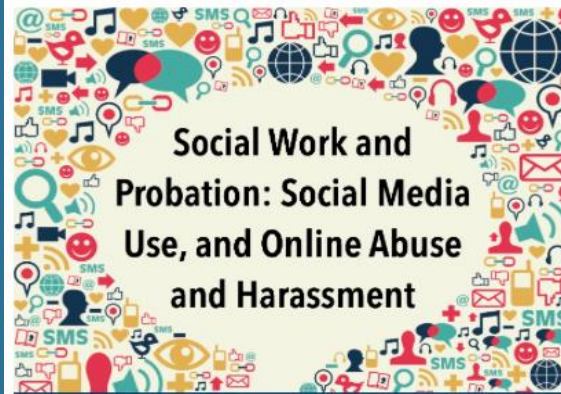


**Kenneth Burns, Olwen Halvey,
Fiachra Ó Súilleabháin and
Amy Bradley**



Social media, online & digital abuse and harassment

This @UCCsocialwork research study examines social workers', probation officers' and social work students' social media usage (2022-present). Phase one examined: 1) these groups' social media use, and 2) their experiences of online and social media abuse and harassment through a national survey. Phase two involved qualitative interviews with social workers and managers in the Child and Family Agency. For further information, contact [Dr Kenneth Burns](#), principal investigator at k.burns@ucc.ie. **Click on the boxes below** to access resources, and outputs from the study.

A vibrant collage of social media and digital communication icons, including speech bubbles, musical notes, and various symbols, serves as a background for the text.

Social Work and Probation: Social Media Use, and Online Abuse and Harassment

About this study and meet the team →

A blue square containing white icons for a hashtag, a thumbs-up, and a megaphone, representing social media and communication.

Resources & advice

How to deal with social media/online abuse & harassment →

A cartoon illustration of a person holding a large sheet of paper, with a chair and other objects floating nearby, suggesting a presentation or a chaotic scene.

Publications and presentations □

Benefits to Social Media



- **Creating and sharing knowledge**
- **Fostering communities of interest**
- **Establishing and/or maintaining connection**
- **Tools for social change and public debate**

Downsides to Social Media



- **Spreading of Disinformation**
- **Cyberbullying**
- **Trolling**
- **Doxxing**
- **Public shaming**

“In our view, the benefits of having social workers, students and probation officers, both in their personal and professional capacities, participating, engaging and being members of social media and online platforms, outweigh the potential negatives”.

The Social Media, Online and Digital Abuse and Harassment of Social Workers, Probation Officers and Social Work Students in Ireland: A National Survey

Kenneth Burns ^{1,*} Olwen Halvey,¹
Fiachra Ó Súilleabháin ¹ Elaine O’Callaghan ¹ and
Gabriel Coelho ²

¹*School of Applied Social Studies, and the Institute of Social Science in the 21st Century (ISS21), University College Cork, Ireland*

²*School of Applied Psychology, University College Cork, Ireland*

*Correspondence to Kenneth Burns, School of Applied Social Studies, University College Cork, Ireland. E-mail: k.burns@ucc.ie

Abstract

An estimated five billion people use social media globally. The digital world enables networking and community-building beyond geographical and jurisdictional boundaries, it can facilitate information-sharing and knowledge development, and facilitates speedy access and communications links. On the other hand, digital and social media platforms can also be sources and purveyors of hurt, discrimination, defamation, hatred, abuse, cyberbullying and disinformation. Their increased usage within professional practice has become a nascent area for scholarly debate and research. Our scoping literature search indicated that there are very few studies examining this issue within the profession. This article seeks to address a considerable gap in the research by reporting the findings from an exploratory study in Ireland focusing on social workers, probation officers and social work students. Three hundred seventy-nine participants completed an online survey on their experiences of using social media, with eighty-three (21.9 per cent) participants indicating that they had experienced online

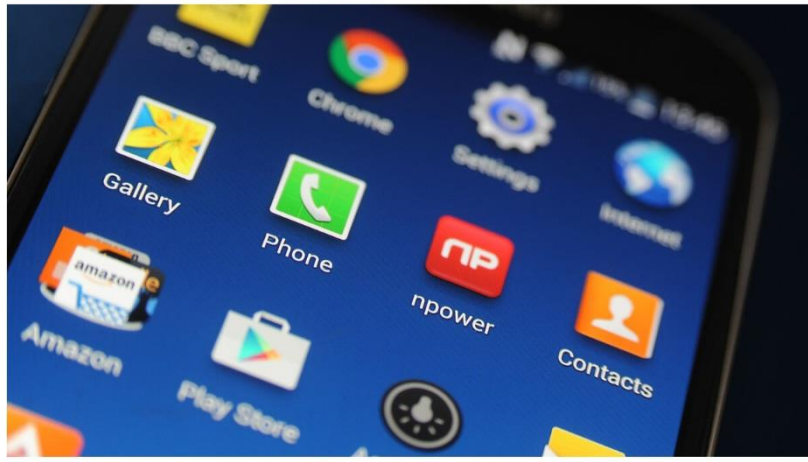
© The Author(s) 2024. Published by Oxford University Press on behalf of The British Association of Social Workers.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted reuse, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

“In this paper, we use ‘online and digital abuse and harassment’. By using this term we mean a set of behaviours and practices, whether single or multiple events, by individuals or groups using digital technologies and devices, social media platforms, and/or the internet to send or post direct or implicit messages that are abusive, threatening, or stalking or harassing behaviours of a person. The intention is to cause upset, distress, harm, shame, reputational harm, or to exert pressure to get a desired outcome. It is not confined to a physical workplace, it is generally publicly visible, it can impact more than the intended recipient, and posts are sometimes without attribution (Burns *et al.*, 2024, p. 3291).

HOME PAGE / NEWS

Two-thirds of young women in Ireland have been harassed online



Two-thirds of Irish girls and young women have been harassed online, and Snapchat and Instagram are the social media platforms that are most likely to be used for harassment. File picture

WED, 03 MAR, 2021 - 06:15
AINE KENNY



Almost all candidates surveyed used social media, particularly Facebook and Instagram.

Online abuse sees Irish politicians install home security over fear of real-life attacks
The media regulator's stark warning comes just days after a significant online threat to Simon Harris's family.
11.01am, 2 Sep 2025 ~4.0k



Six Nations 2026
Itoje warns against 'corrosive' social media after racist abuse of Edogbo

BBC
A third of children have been bullied online
12 February 2025
Jacob Panons
BBC News, South East
Share Save

Irish Examiner
NEWS SPORT LIFESTYLE BUSINESS OPINION
IN FOCUS: Future Cork Six Nations Iran Donald Trump
HOME PAGE / NEWS
'It hits you in the heart': Teacher speaks out after being cyberbullied by students in his school
Claran Kavanagh speaking at the ASTI conference in Wexford.
WED, 03 APR, 2024 - 12:45

BBC
SPORT
Premier League > Scores & Fixtures | Table | Top 5
ADVERTISEMENT
Racism, rape and death threats: One weekend of social media abuse in football
I will beat your *** up!
I want your death
You son of a *****

Irish Independent
Subscribe
Louth
Change county.
News Sport Business Lifestyle Drogheda & Sout
'No public representative... should have to tolerate this' - Councillor subjected to 'vile' online abuse
[Image of a woman in an orange dress sitting on a red sofa]



21%

WHAT WE LEARNED IN PHASE 1



92% of social workers use social media



1 in 6 social workers experience social media abuse and online harassment in the course of their work (1 in 5 if you include personal)



Online abuse/harassment occurred even when practitioners exercised discretion and were privacy-aware on social media; you don't have to be on social media for it to happen



'It can get under your skin': impacts were experienced at personal, familial and professional levels. Social workers were often left to individually deal with the online abuse, but participants noted that this has improved over the last few years

WHAT WE LEARNED IN PHASE 2



Facebook was the main platform used for abuse and harassment reported by 18 of the 19 participants.



The parents of children in care or children being supported by the child protection department were most likely to engage in abuse or harassment (11; 8 mothers and 3 fathers)



Experiencing online/social media abuse and harassment, at least for this sample, was not a high-frequency experience for them



Secondary distress could be caused for workers when their employer left them to manage the issue partly, or mostly, on their own.

What happened?



1 in 3 experienced digital or cyber-stalking.

Nearly **1 in 5** experienced online requests for people to turn out outside their home to protest.

27% received threats of physical violence sometimes or often

10% have received threats of sexual violence (**2%** reported that it has happened often).

Over a **quarter** were targeted by an anti- or hate group.

4% reported racist abuse (**2%** sometimes; **2%** often).

6% reported LGBTQI+ abuse (**2%** sometimes, **4%** often).

Nearly **75%** of those experienced online/social media behaviour which made them uncomfortable (but not threatened).

23% reported audio/video material being posted online without consent.



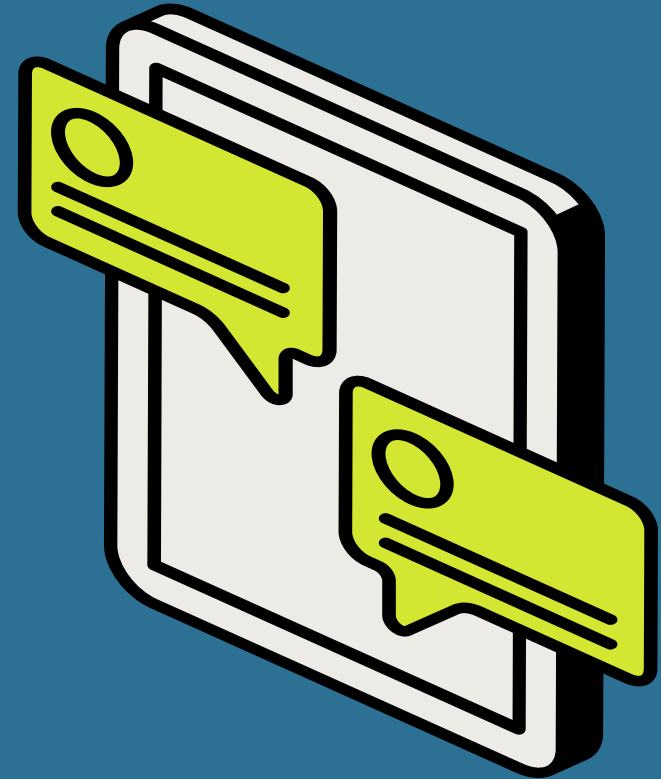
SOCIAL MEDIA, DIGITAL, & ONLINE ABUSE KEY FINDINGS

What happened?

"... a client...would have set up a fake account using my name, and then would have requested friends of my friends." – Shirley

"And then she posts, started posting on this website called shameyoursocialworkers.com.It's an English site.

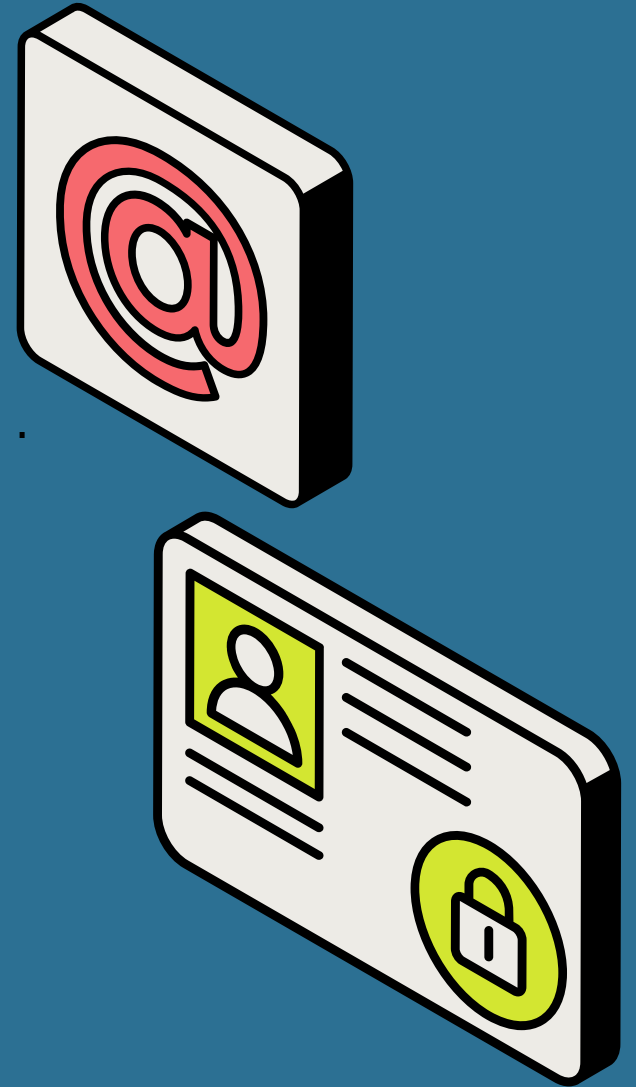
Shameyoursocialworker and she started posting there." Lily



What happened?

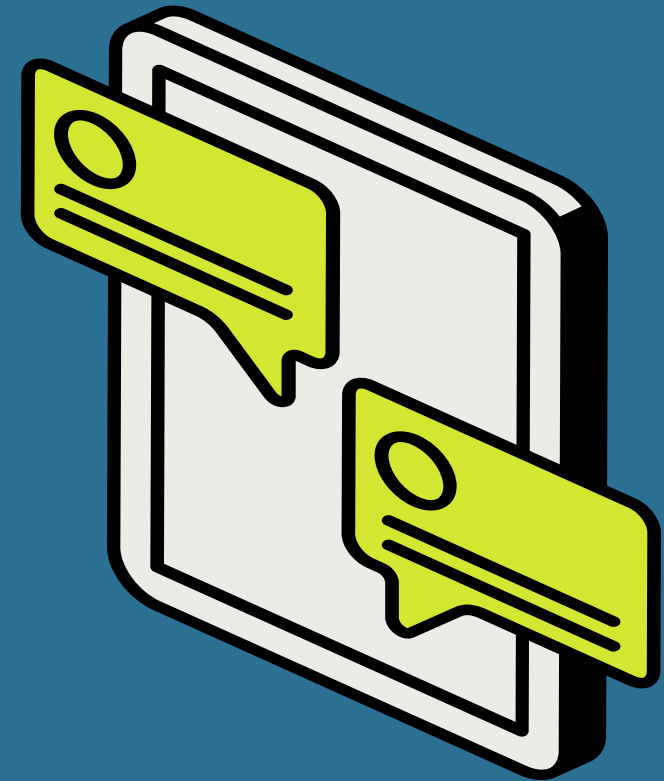
"... she put up a video on Facebook. It was about 45 minutes long, just a black screen with her talking about how there was a bullet with my name on it." Rachel

"... photographs of my children were put up online." Debby



What happened?

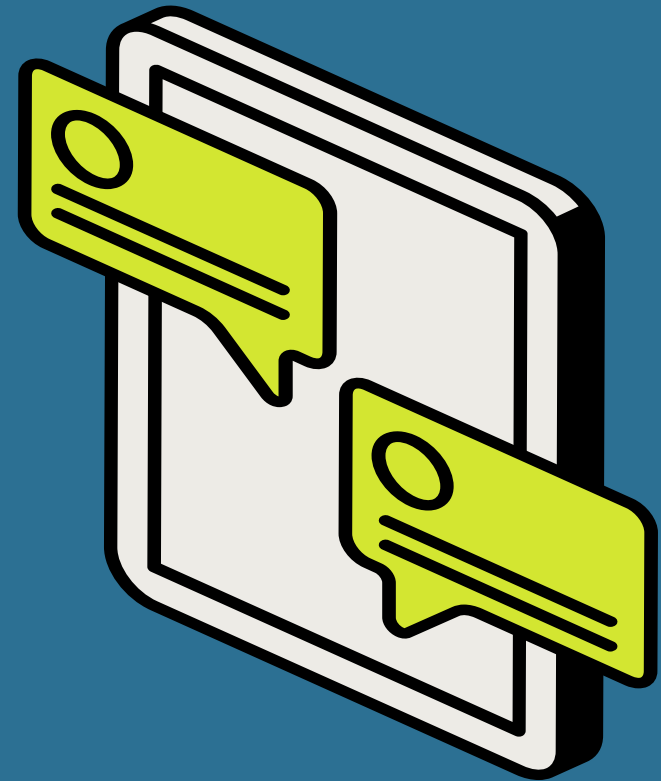
- Client emailed organisation to say manager was sexually abusing children.
- Posted similar messages on Facebook.
- Shared allegations with an investigative journalism section of the national broadcaster.
- Appeared on a podcast to repeat allegations leading to threats.
- Allegations were 100% false.



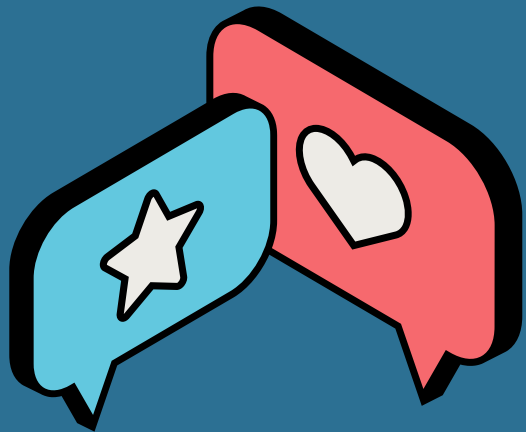
Distinguishing between complaint and abuse

"I'd expect a level of people putting up stuff, maybe not so much identifying who they're dealing with, but saying that, actually, their experience has not been good. But then when it veers in, going: 'I'll get you', like, and that kind of threatening language coming into it. I think that's probably when it crosses the line"

Rachel



What does a good response look like?



What participants in our study said they needed: a good response

1. Someone to recognise what was happening as a workplace issue.
2. Someone to be empathetic, not just follow the policy.
3. Someone to “have their back” / advocacy / leadership.
4. Access to legal support, where necessary (takedown requests).
5. Risk assessment (personal, family, team).
6. Understanding peers (family usually are not told about it)
7. Manager/agency do not need to be social media experts to effectively support a staff member.

What can I do?



Spring clean exercise

1. When was the last time you reviewed your social media settings?
2. What level of privacy / 'visibility' are you comfortable with?
3. What changes do you need to make, if any?
4. What social media accounts do you manage for community groups / sporting organisations?
5. I'm not on social media: what has any of this got to do with me?!

Spring clean exercise

- Ask a friend / family member to search for you
- Learn from feedback and review your setting
- Repeat the search
- If you are not on social media, it is likely that there is still materials up on the web/SM about you
 - Google search
 - Search social media apps
 - Is there any content that could result in your being doxxed?
 - Put yourself in the shoes of a service user and review the content through their eyes

SOCIAL MEDIA SPRING CLEAN AND SETTINGS:

QUICK TIPS FOR SOCIAL WORKERS & PROFESSIONALS

ADVICE FROM PARTICIPANTS IN A @UCCSOCIALWORK STUDY ON THIS TOPIC

REFLECTIONS

How much do you use social media? What platforms are you using? What level of privacy / 'visibility' are you seeking to create on your accounts?

1

SCAN ME



2

REVIEW SETTINGS

When was the last time you reviewed your social media account settings? Are they fit for purpose given your work role and your desired level of privacy?

3

PERIODIC REVIEWS

Settings on social media platforms can change regularly. Set a reminder to review every 6-12 months.

4

FIND ME ...

Once you have your settings changed, ask a friend to search for you. Further revise your privacy settings.

5

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Some participants changed their profile names and bios., mostly using the non-English version of their name or some other obfuscation.

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PREVELANCE

78% of the participants in our study did not experience abuse or harassment online or on social media. Many made preventative changes to privacy settings on their social media accounts when they started work.

7

TAGGING & RESPONDING

Many of the study participants asked friends and family members not to tag or mention them in posts and photos. 81% of those who received abuse or harassment, did not respond or engage.

8

POSITIVES

There are many positives to being on social media: many of those who experienced abuse or harassment in this study stayed on these platforms.

FRIEND REQUESTS

This can be tricky to respond to as this is how social media works, but it led to some practitioners feeling uncomfortable. Friend requests to personal accounts usually led to changes to privacy settings.

9

10

STAY OR GO?

What are the pros and cons of using social media for you? Is it worth keeping these accounts open for your life, work & health? Our research indicated that closing your a/c is unlikely to stop the abuse or harassment.

11

OTHER ACCOUNTS

Some of the study participants were located and contacted through accounts that they managed for community groups, even though their own privacy settings were strong.

12

I'M NOT ON SOCIAL MEDIA

Quite a few study participants experienced digital abuse and harassment even though they were not on social media. Use the report buttons in the app., inform your employer, and/or An Garda Síochána.

K. BURNS, O. HALVEY, & F. Ó SÚILLEABHÁIN (2024)

A QUICK GUIDE: WHAT TO DO IF IT HAPPENS TO YOU

Assess risks to you, colleagues, and/or family. Review your social media settings and content.



Inform your employer, if work-related. Request supports and resources.



Report (where necessary): platform, police, agency reporting systems.



Utilise agency policies & procedures.



Access supports.



Detailed advice and information on the link / QR code below.



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REFLECTION, ASSESSMENT AND ACTIONS

What and whom are you concerned about? Clarify & list your concern(s) (include frequency + assessment of severity). Who is impacted?

What are the implications? What is in the best interests of service users? Is there a justifiable reason why the person is upset, even if how they express this upset on social media is causing you distress? How might this issue impact your work with a family / community / group / individual / colleague? How might the social media poster's own experiences of trauma and the pressures associated with an intervention, influence their online behaviours? How might cultural and age differences about sharing information on social media be influencing your experience? Remember: social media is not real life; however, what happens on social media can have real-life implications.



SOCIAL MEDIA ABUSE, ONLINE HARASSMENT AND SOCIAL WORK (IRELAND EDITION)

KENNETH BURNS, FIACHRA Ó SÚILLEABHÁIN, KERRY
CUSKELLY & PAT KELLEHER



University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh



<http://www.ucc.ie/~socialwork/>

What to do – suggested actions

1	Work or personal? If work, it is not your sole responsibility
2	Document the concern with relevant details, including screenshots, links, dates, and time.
3	Report the issue to your immediate supervisor / manager.
4	Do not respond / engage
5	What are the potential risks to you, clients, family members? (safety, reputation, harm, community, relationships)
6	What immediate/medium term actions could be helpful? (court order, take down requests, reporting, mute, blocking, police, etc.)
7	Follow the advice in your social media policy
8	Engage supports (team, personal, family)
9	Self-care strategies

SOCIAL MEDIA AND ONLINE ABUSE



ADVICE FROM PARTICIPANTS IN A @UCCSOCIALWORK STUDY FOR THEIR PEERS



PEER-TO-PEER ADVICE

- **Take Action Immediately:** “Don’t let it continue until you get to the point where you’re thinking, ok, I now want to do something about it”. Act as soon as something occurs and “Don’t brush it off as just one of those things that you have to accept, cause it’s not...”
- **Work-Life Boundaries:** This is a work-related issue and should be contained, where practicable, within working hours. Try not let this eat into your personal and family time by regularly checking for posts.
- **Abusive Content:** As hard as it may be, abstain from viewing the negative content, “Don’t view, don’t go onto Twitter (X) or wherever it’s been posted and view it”.

[NON] ENGAGEMENT

- **Do Not Engage with the Perpetrator(s)** as study participants believed that it is not a helpful response, that it may “legitimise” their behaviour, and/or “escalate” the situation. 81% of survey participants did not engage.
- **Do engage with supports:** reach out to colleagues, management, occupational health, Gardaí (police), and/or legal services for support and advice.



ONLINE SAFETY

- **Review Security Settings:** You have every right to have and enjoy a personal social media account. However, it is important to make sure that your social media settings are set to protect your online safety & privacy.
- **Skills:** If required, ask a tech-savvy colleague/friend to help you review your social media settings.
- **Social Media Use:** Be cautious about what you share online. Consider when posting content you wouldn’t want publicly visible to those who are not friends or family.
- **Evaluate:** Evaluate the pros and cons of social media: several study participants stated that they wouldn’t be on social media knowing what they know now. However, most still kept their accounts open despite the abuse.



PRACTICAL ACTIONS



- **Social Media Policy:** Familiarise yourself with your agency's social media policy and other relevant guidelines (available on our website below).
- **Report (management):** Report any incidents to your line manager as soon as possible. If relevant, ask your organisation to issue a "take down" request on your behalf.
- **Report (police):** Report relevant incidents to An Garda Síochána (police) to have it on record, if appropriate, and you are comfortable to do so.
- **Report (social media):** Report abusive content to social media platforms (see our website for advice).



SUPPORTS

- **Peer Support:** Reach out for emotional and practical support from peers. Study findings highlight the importance of having support from team members. Participants rarely sought support from family.
- **Managerial Support:** Seek support from your line manager: they can often provide guidance and resources to support you through this time. They do not need to be a social media expert to provide effective support (see website for a guide for managers).

A. Bradley, K. Burns, O. Halvey & F. Ó Súilleabháin (2024)



Further advice & resources:

[UCC.IE/EN/APPSOC/RESEARCH/PROJECTS/SMOA](https://www.ucc.ie/en/appsoc/research/projects/smoa)



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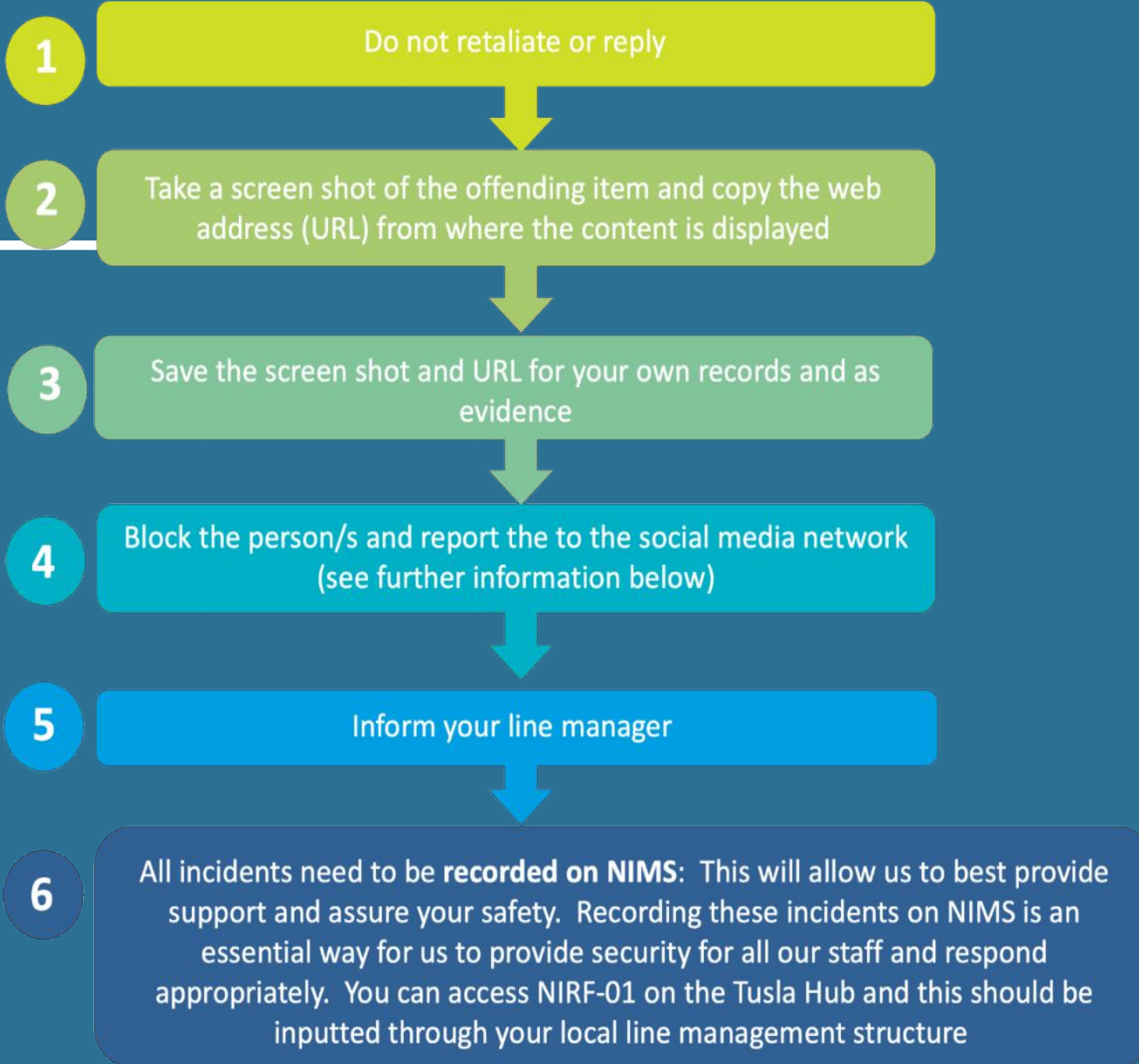
Accountability and regulations

1. Europe / UK model higher regulation / move towards accountability (e.g. Digital Service Act 2024)

vs.

2. US light regulation model / low accountability & antagonistic towards countries that are seeking to regulate social media companies





6

All incidents need to be **recorded on NIMS**: This will allow us to best provide support and assure your safety. Recording these incidents on NIMS is an essential way for us to provide security for all our staff and respond appropriately. You can access NIRF-01 on the Tusla Hub and this should be inputted through your local line management structure

Assess your safety: Do you feel the matter is once off in nature and has now been dealt with through steps 1-6?

If YES

If NO

You may deem the matter closed and no further action is required. It is however you may also wish to avail of **step 9**

If the online abuse has made you concerned for your safety or that of your family and/or colleagues you should proceed with step 8. If you feel in immediate danger you should contact An Garda Siochana **without delay**

8

Notify Tusla Legal Services by emailing legalhelpdesk@tusla.ie outlining your concerns and including relevant URL(s) and screen shot(s). The legal adviser will consider the best course of action on a case-by-case basis

9

Seek Support: Speak out and seek support from your line manager, colleagues, friends and family. A range of supports are available to all staff through the Tusla Health, Wellbeing and EAP team that are free and confidential. For further information contact eap@tusla.ie or phone 0861438390

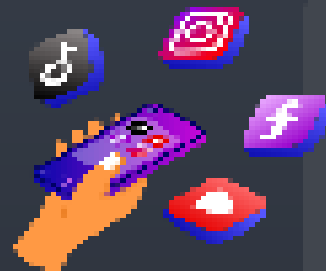
WHAT TO DO IF A STAFF MEMBER IS ABUSED / HARASSED ON SOCIAL MEDIA: ADVICE FOR MANAGERS

ADVICE FROM PARTICIPANTS IN A #DUCSOCIALWORK STUDY ON THIS TOPIC



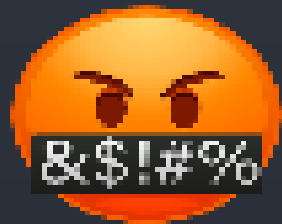
1. CHECK IN, LISTEN, & ASK QUESTIONS

Many of the participants in this study said that no one called them to ask how they were. Ask: What happened? How are you feeling? What can I do to help? Say: you are not on your own. What do you need to do next as a manager?



2. PERSONAL OR AGENCY ISSUE?

If abuse or harassment on social media is related to an employee's work for the agency, the employer has a duty of care. Study participants described it as a second source of distress when they were told that this was a personal matter to address on their own.



3. ASSESSING SAFETY & RISK

Are there risks to staff or others? What is the nature of these risks? Who needs to know? What practical, immediate steps can you take? Refer to, and implement, relevant agency policies. Screenshot, record evidence & share with relevant persons.

4. A SUPPORTIVE WORKING ENVIRONMENT

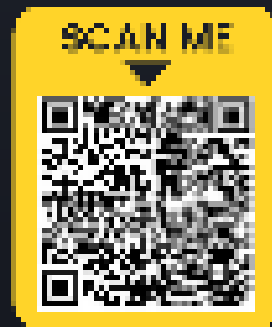
Staff have an expectation of a safe working environment, which now includes digital safety. Supportive managers listened, accepted that this is a work issue, facilitated access to resources, and were compassionate. Ask: What can the organisation do to help?



5. REPORTING RESPONSIBILITIES

Who needs to know? Will the staff member need legal support? Has the incident been reported to the social media platform? Do you need to notify An Garda Síochána? Is a 'take down' request to the social media company required?

FOR MORE DETAILED ADVICE AND RESOURCES:
[UCC.IE/EN/APPSOC/RESEARCH/PROJECTS/SNOA/](https://ucc.ie/en/appsoc/research/projects/snoa/)
OR SCAN THE QR CODE



E. Burns, E. Ó Súilleabháin, & D. Mahony (2020)



@UCCsocialwork
School of Applied Social Studies

WHAT TO DO IF A STAFF MEMBER IS ABUSED / HARASSED ON SOCIAL MEDIA: ADVICE FOR MANAGERS

ADVICE FROM PARTICIPANTS IN A @UCCSOCIALWORK STUDY ON THIS TOPIC

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K. Burns, F. Ó Súilleabháin, & O. Halvey (2024)



@UCCsocialwork
School of Applied Social Studies

SOCIAL MEDIA SPRING CLEAN AND SETTINGS

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@UCCsocialwork
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SOCIAL MEDIA AND ONLINE ABUSE

ADVICE FROM PARTICIPANTS IN A @UCCSOCIALWORK STUDY FOR THEIR PEERS

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- Skills:** If required, ask a tech-savvy colleague/friend to help you review your social media settings.
- Social Media Use:** Be cautious about what you share online. Consider when posting content you wouldn't want publicly visible to those who are not friends or family.
- Evaluate:** Evaluate the pros and cons of social media: several study participants stated that they wouldn't be on social media knowing what they know now. However, most still kept their accounts open despite the abuse.

PRACTICAL ACTIONS

- Social Media Policy:** Familiarise yourself with your agency's social media policy and other relevant guidelines (available on our website below).
- Report (management):** Report any incidents to your line manager as soon as possible. If relevant, ask your organisation to issue a "take down" request on your behalf.
- Report (police):** Report relevant incidents to An Garda Síochána (police) to have it on record, if appropriate, and you are comfortable to do so.
- Report (social media):** Report abusive content to social media platforms (see our website for advice).

SUPPORTS

- Peer Support:** Reach out for emotional and practical support from peers. Study findings highlight the importance of having support from team members. Participants rarely sought support from family.
- Managerial Support:** Seek support from your line manager: they can often provide guidance and resources to support you through this time. They do not need to be a social media expert to provide effective support (see website for a guide for managers).

A. Bradley, K. Burns, O. Halvey & F. Ó Súilleabháin (2024)



Further advice & resources: [UCC.IE/EN/APPSOC/RESEARCH/PROJECTS/SMOA](https://ucc.ie/en/appsoc/research/projects/smoa/)



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Advice for managers



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What does a good response from a manager look like?

Advice from participants in our study



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Advice for front-line staff

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**Need more
information?**

No

Yes



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