

Preliminary Report: Without My Consent Survey of Online Stalking, Harassment and Violations of Privacy

Conducted by

Dan Taube, JD, PhD, Keely Kolmes, PsyD, and Colette Vogeles, Co-Founder, WMC

“Don’t let it silence you.” “Don’t assume it is your fault.” “Do not be ashamed.”

(Suggestions from participants to other people experiencing online harassment.)

Introduction

Abusive and harassing conduct on the Internet takes many forms. Nonconsensual pornography (the nonconsensual publication of explicit images as a way to emotionally abuse, sexually exploit and rob people of control over their own bodies) has become the center point of a national and international debate about online harassing conduct. Over the past year, this controversy has focused on how—and whether—to draft laws that criminalize nonconsensual pornography. Although much attention has been paid to the wording of the proposed laws, little is known about the nature of online harassment itself, and the experiences of people who have borne the brunt of abusive and harassing conduct committed through the use of technology.

This survey was not limited to asking participants about nonconsensual pornography. Rather, the survey asked questions about online harassment more broadly to learn about the many ways in which people are harassed in today’s digital world (nonconsensual pornography is one of many methods of harassment available to today’s harassers). The purpose of our survey was to get some initial information about the nature of online harassment and to understand some of the challenges encountered by those who experience it. Equally important, we hoped to add to a growing library of strategies with which to address online harassment for people who experience this kind of abusive conduct.

Before describing the results of this survey, we have **two crucial points** to make:

First, we genuinely appreciate the time, effort, thought, and criticism participants gave to complete this survey. The picture that has emerged is important, and we hope it will ultimately be useful in putting a stop to the experience of harassment. The richness and detail with which people responded to this survey are central to any benefit that may result.

We also appreciate the efforts of our Board and many others who worked to get the word out about this survey.

Second, we urge our visitors *not* to assume that all people who experience harassment have had experiences similar to our respondents. This was not a random survey, and it *should not* be viewed as representative of all the possible experiences and responses to online harassment. We were not able to gather a sufficiently large number of participants so as to be more confident that

it represents the widest range of experiences, reactions and coping strategies. This survey was intended to be a start, and it is not definitive. It was meant to spur future, larger and more in depth studies (for example, qualitative interviews, ethnographic studies, funded surveys with random selections of large numbers of participants, and so on). It is intended to take a step toward increasing thought and attention to this disturbing, ongoing aspect of our increasingly interconnected online world. Of course, due to our sample size, we cannot provide information about how frequently harassment is experienced in the population at large.

Results:

Who took the survey?

A total of 496 people visited the survey site. A number exited the site, had not experienced online harassment, or lived outside of the United States (these last two were criteria for taking the survey); these participants exited the survey after answering screening questions. Of the remaining 401 participants, 359 completed it (89.5%). Note that some participants did not answer all questions; they could skip questions they preferred not to answer, or did not respond where the nature of their experiences made the questions irrelevant. For example, a number of participants had not chosen to take action against their harasser, so they skipped the question about the type of action they took ($n = 87$); a number also did not complete the demographics questions (response rates for these questions ranged from 280 to 298).

Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 91 with the average being 39.16 years. Most were women (82.6%; $n = 246$), with the remaining identifying as men (14.1%; $n = 42$), transgender (2%; male-to-female, $n = 3$; female-to-male, $n = 2$) or other (2%; $n = 5$). Some 72.1% reported being heterosexual ($n = 211$), with most of the remaining participants identifying as either bisexual (16.9%; $n = 50$), other (7.1%; $n = 21$), lesbian (2.7%; $n = 8$), or gay (1.7%; $n = 5$). The two largest ethnic groups among participants were Euro-Caucasian (78.7%; $n = 233$) and Asian/Asian-American or Pacific Islander (6.1%; $n = 18$; see Figure 1 for a detailed description). Most respondents (71.3%; $n = 221$) reported that they did not have a disability. The remaining 28.7% of participants reported a wide range of conditions, including specific learning, visual, orthopedic, psychiatric (e.g., depression, PTSD; some noted these diagnoses were not related to harassment), and other medical disabilities. Most respondents lived in either large (42.4%; $n = 125$) or small (24.4%; $n = 72$) cities (see Figure 2). The modal education level was a 4 year college degree (38%; $n = 100$). Educational levels ranged from less than high school (0.3%; $n = 1$) to professional and doctoral degrees (13%; $n = 38$). The median yearly income of the group was between \$25,000 and \$50,000 per year, with a range of \$0 to over \$200,000. The modal income was between \$0 and \$25,000 per year.

Figure 1. Participant Ethnicity

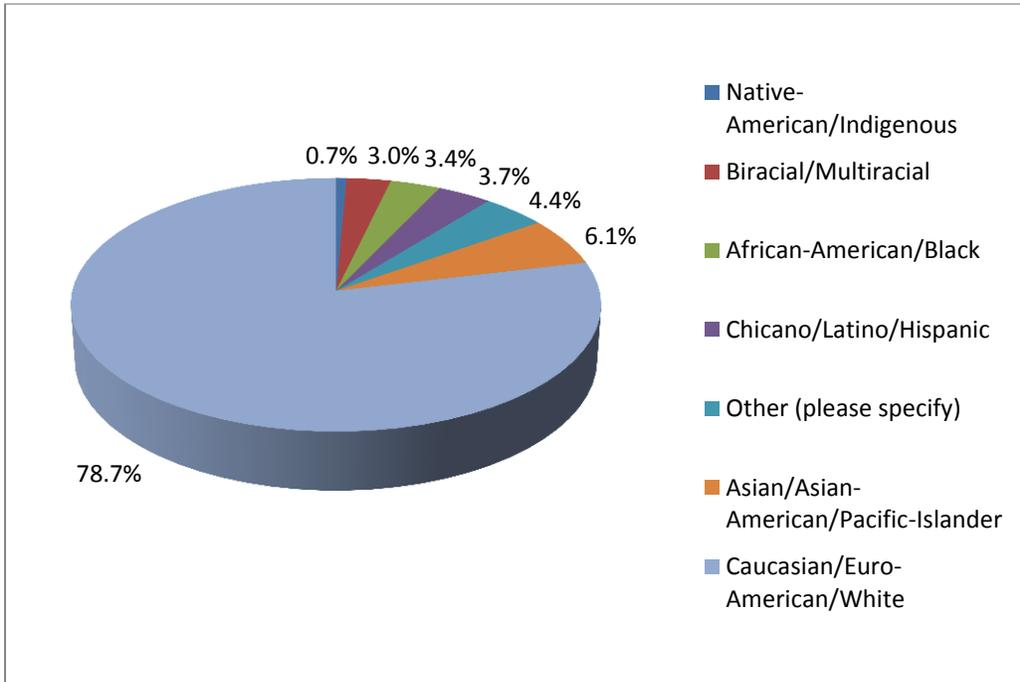
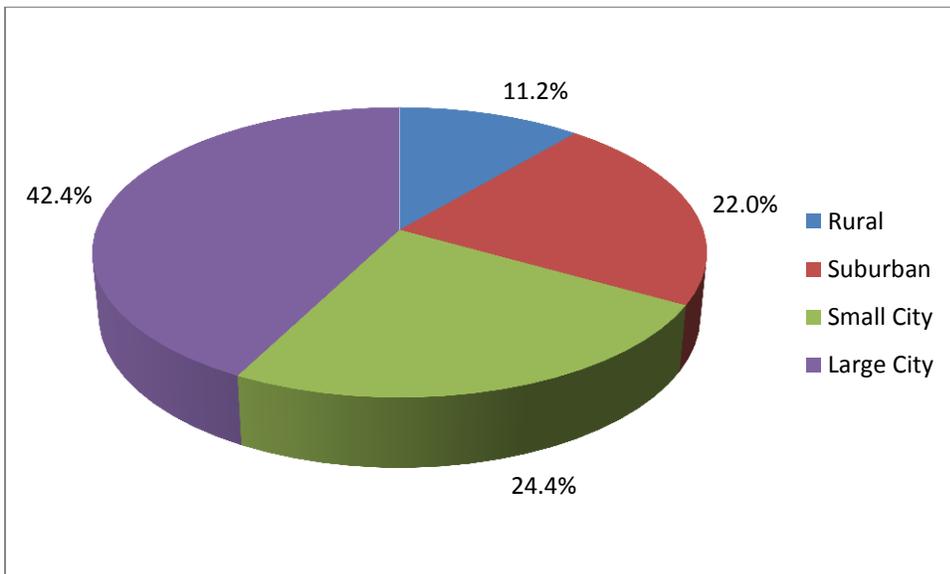


Figure 2. Participant Location



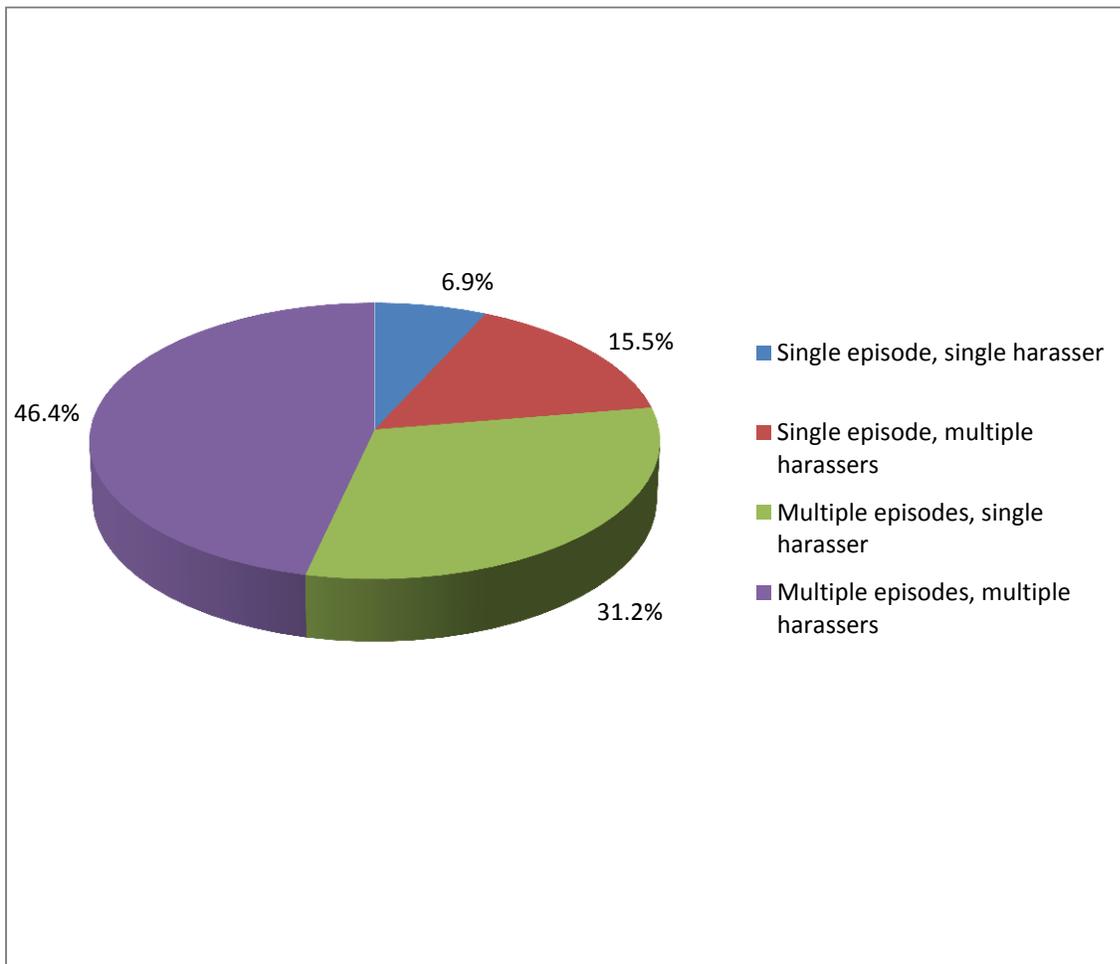
What did we ask?

Aside from consent, screening, and demographic items, we asked 33 questions about participants' experiences of online harassment. For most questions, participants could select one of a list of events or actions, could choose "other" and provide their own description, or both. When participants had undergone more than one harassment experience, we requested that they respond to questions with the event or events that had the most impact on them.

What number of incidents and harassers had participants experienced?

In terms of the frequency and amount of online harassment, the largest portion (46.4%; $n = 162$) of respondents had experienced multiple harassment episodes and multiple harassers (see Figure 3).

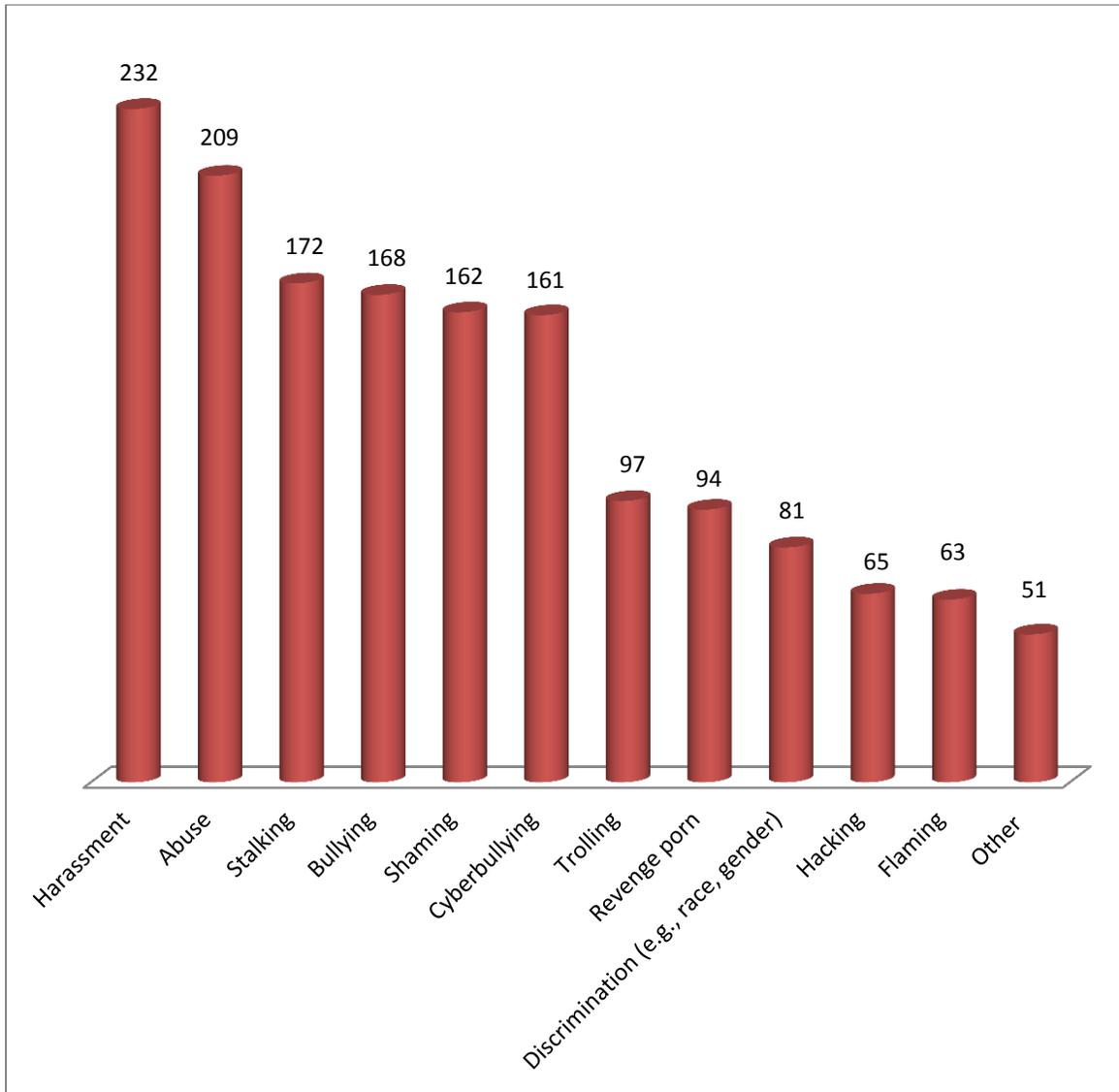
Figure 3. Number of Incidents and Harassers



What kind of harassment was experienced?

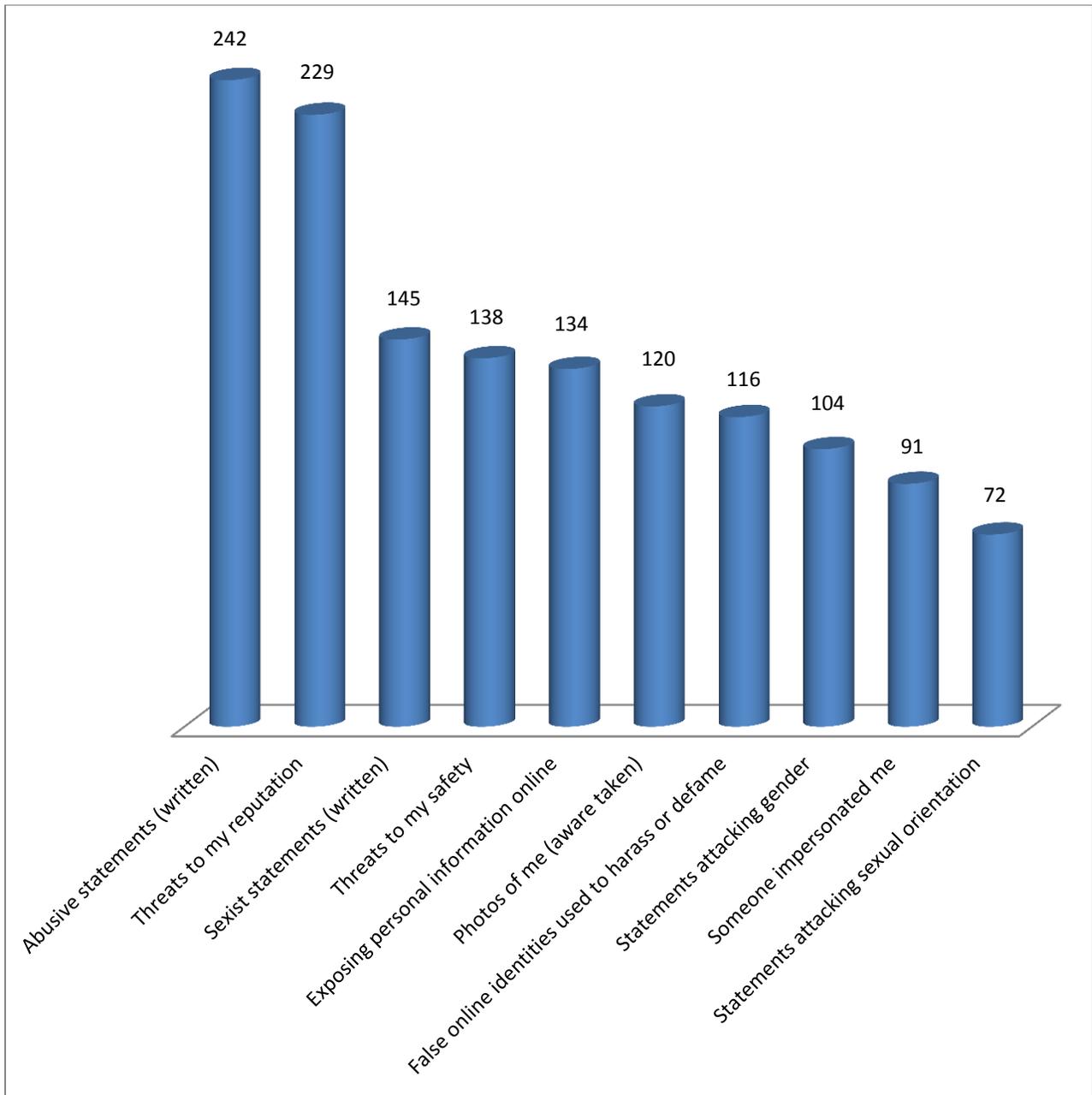
All participants ($n = 232$) who responded to the question regarding the nature of their experience described it as harassment (see Figure 4).

Figure 4. Nature of Incident



As Figure 5 shows (below), abusive written statements were the most common type of episode. Though not shown in the figure, participants' experiences of other kinds of harassing conduct were not infrequent: these included the posting of photographs and videos taken when the participant was unaware, posting digitally manipulated images involving participants, exposing family members' personal information online and stalking and impersonating family members online, among other things.

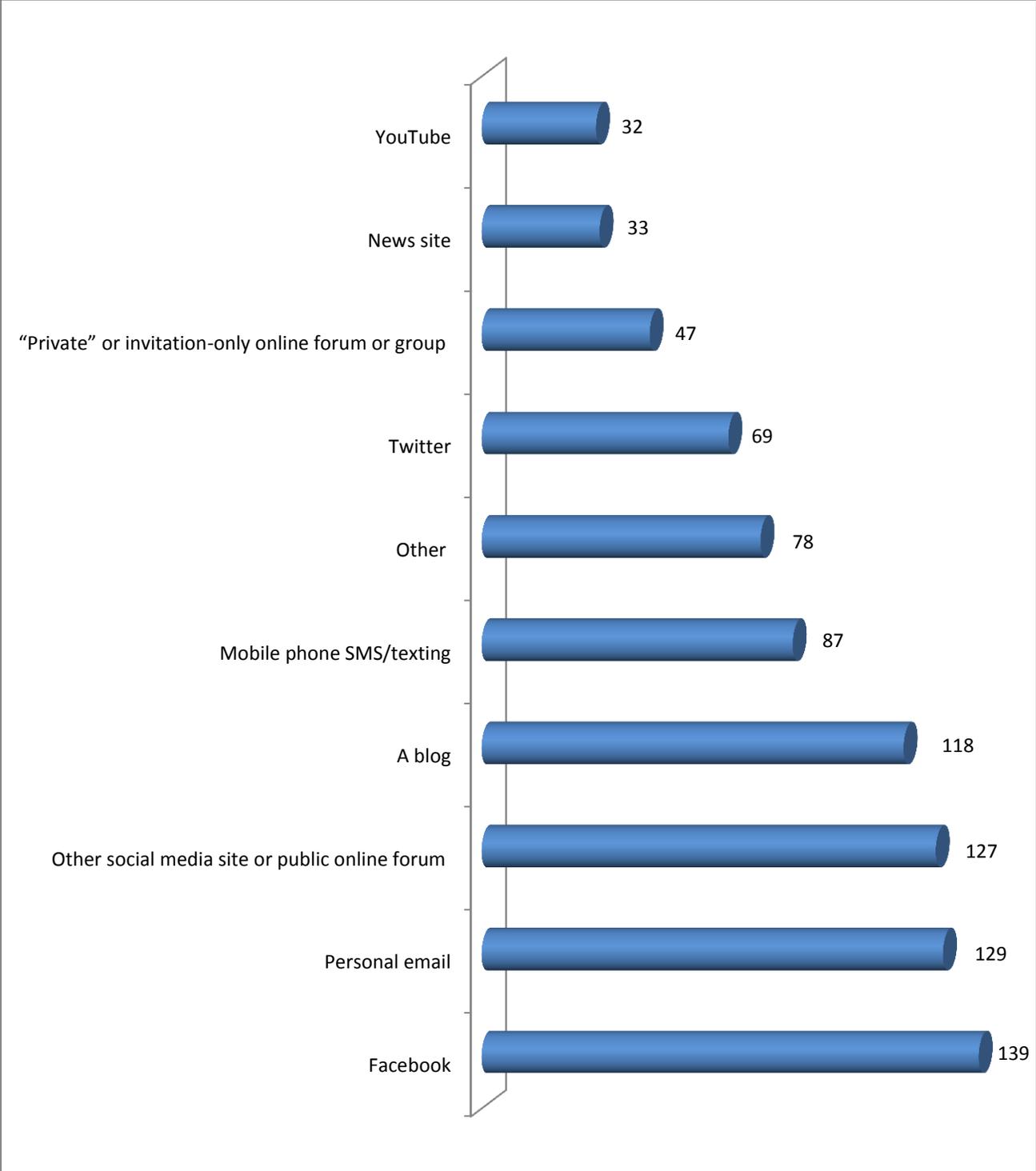
Figure 5. Most Frequent Focus and Method of the Harassment



Where did the harassment occur?

The abusive conduct took place across a wide range of Internet settings. The most common was through Facebook ($n = 139$) or participants' personal email accounts ($n = 129$; see Figure 6).

Figure 6. Site(s) of Harassment



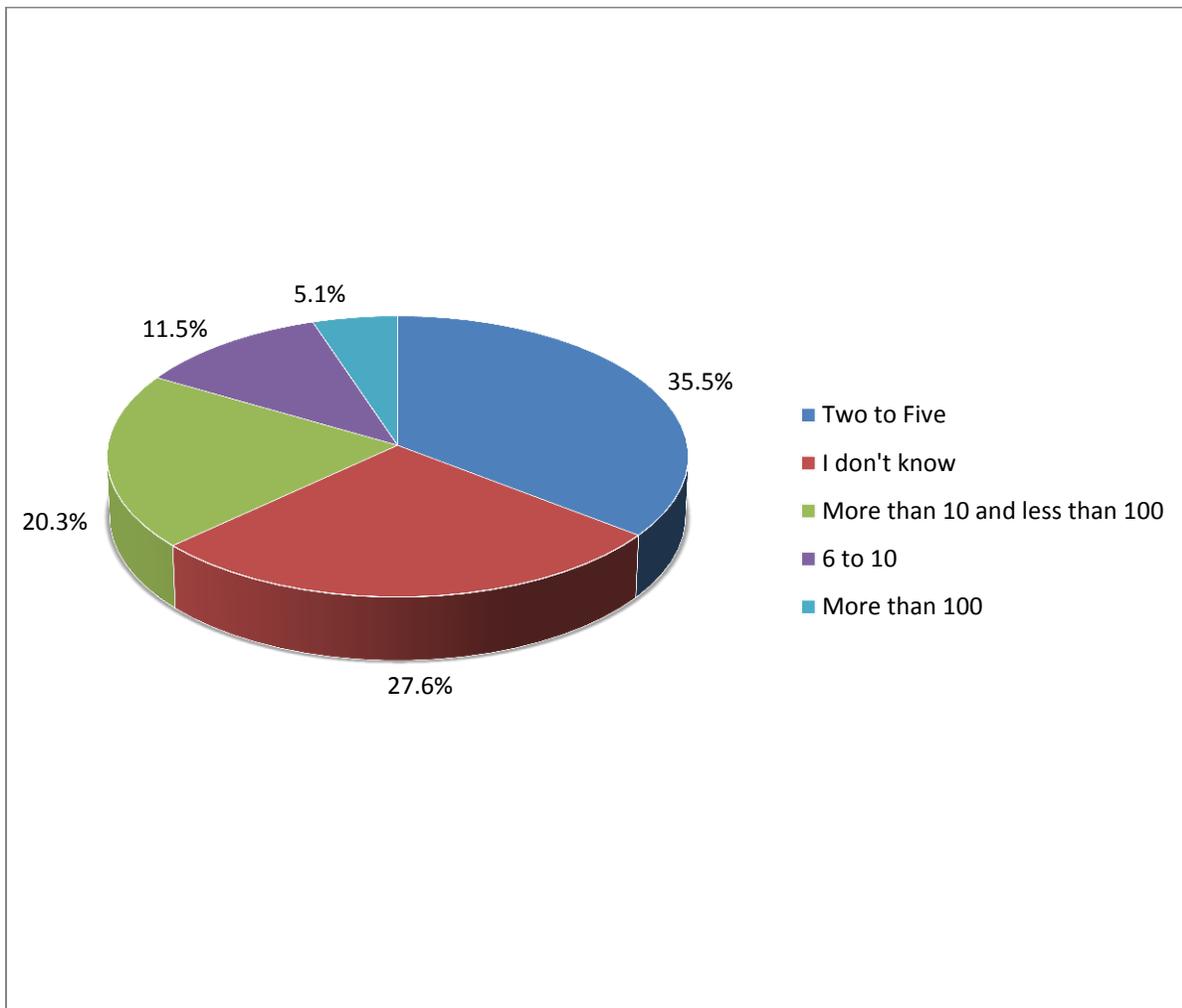
Among “other” sites, some participants reported that harassers staged pornography sites as if these sites were created by the person being harassed.

About half of the respondents experienced the harassment both on and offline (51%; $n = 169$). The rest experienced it online only.

Who was involved in the harassment?

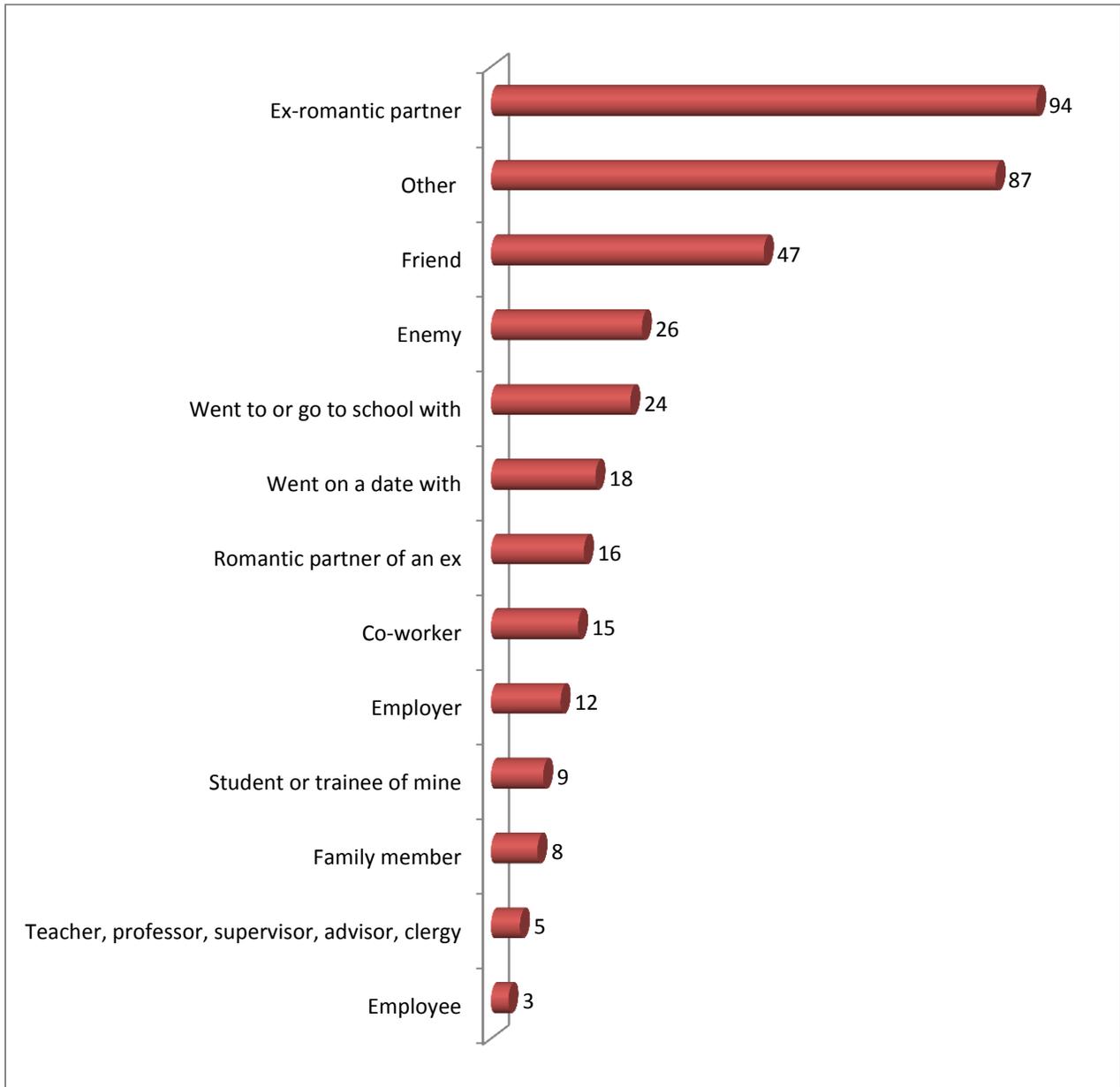
Fifty-seven percent of participants ($n = 181$) reported that members of online communities became involved in the harassment. Among those who reported that more than one person was involved in the harassment ($n = 217$), two to five harassers were most common (35.5%; $n = 7$; see Figure 7).

Figure 7. Number of Harassers



Most participants knew at least one of their harassers (67.5%; $n = 216$). Among those who did, the most common perpetrator was an ex-romantic partner (see Figure 8).

Figure 8. Nature of Relationship with Harasser

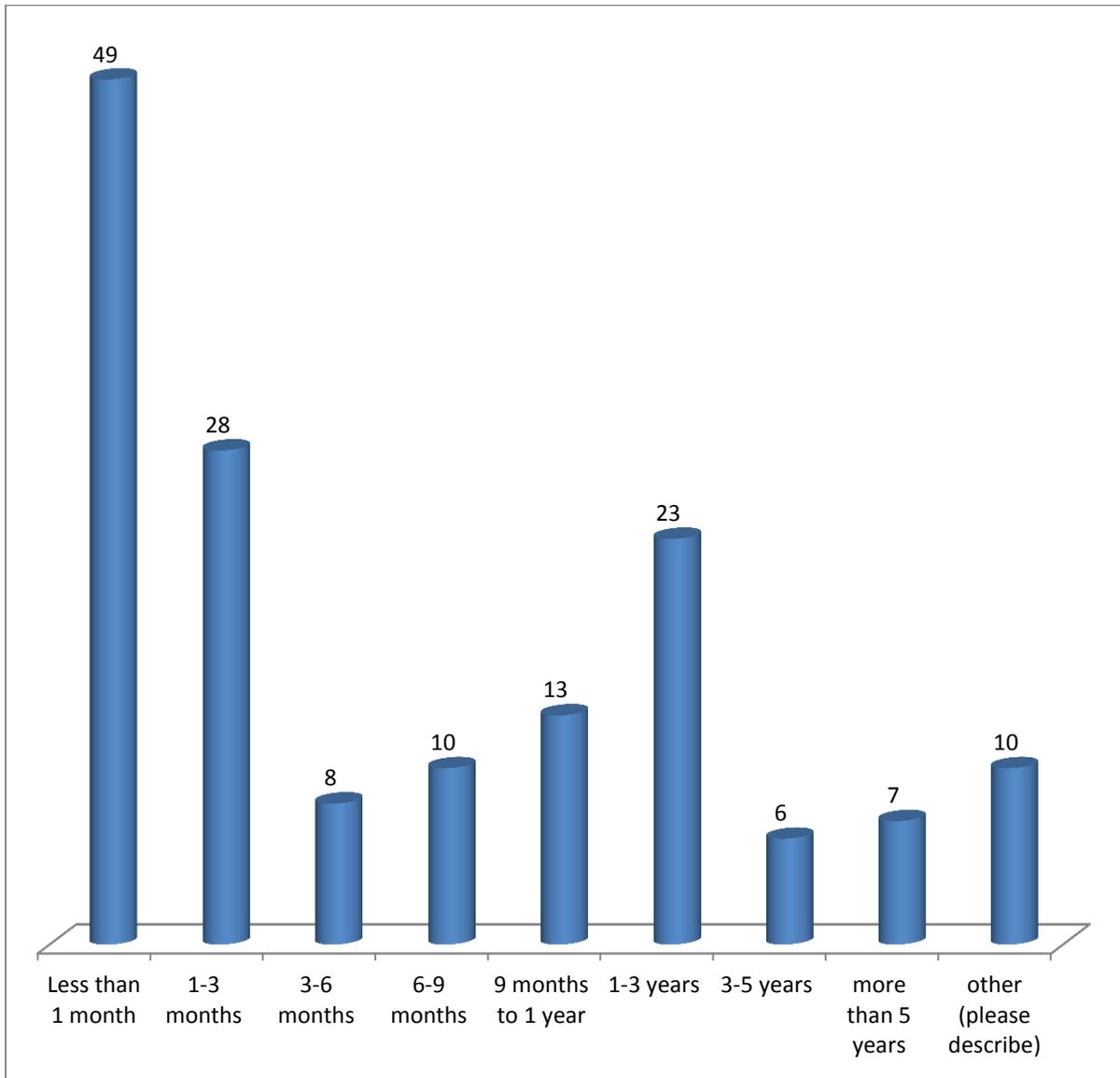


The second most common group—“other”—involved a wide range of people who harassed participants. Some of the more common categories included individuals with whom participants had work-related contact (e.g., clients, ex-clients, people who had complained about an organization, professionals in the same field; $n = 20$), and someone with whom the participant previously had online contact or who was part of an online community ($n = 11$).

When, how long and how often were participants subjected to the harassment?

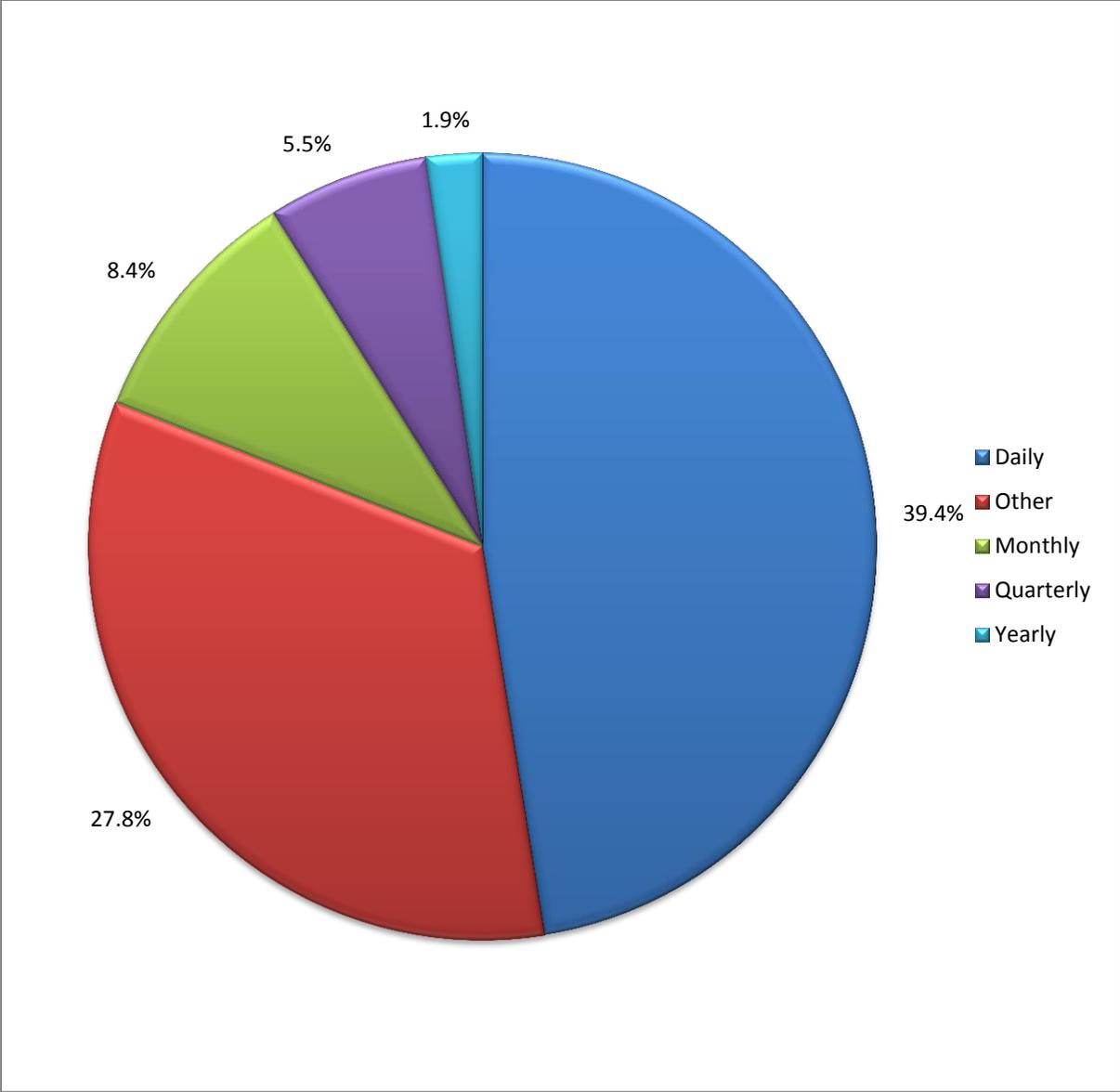
About half of the respondents were continuing to experience the harassment (51%; $n = 161$); for the rest (49%; $n = 157$), it had occurred in the past. Most (61.6%; $n = 95$) harassment episodes lasted 9 months or less (see Figure 9), but some continued for over 5 years (5%; $n = 7$).

Figure 9. Length of Harassing Episode



Among those who responded to this question ($n = 310$), the largest percentage had experienced the harassment on a daily basis (39%; $n = 122$; see Figure 10). In the next largest group (“other”), participants mostly noted that the harassment involved single or sporadic episodes, began as a “barrage” and then waned somewhat (e.g., hourly or more tapering to daily harassment), or was constant and ongoing.

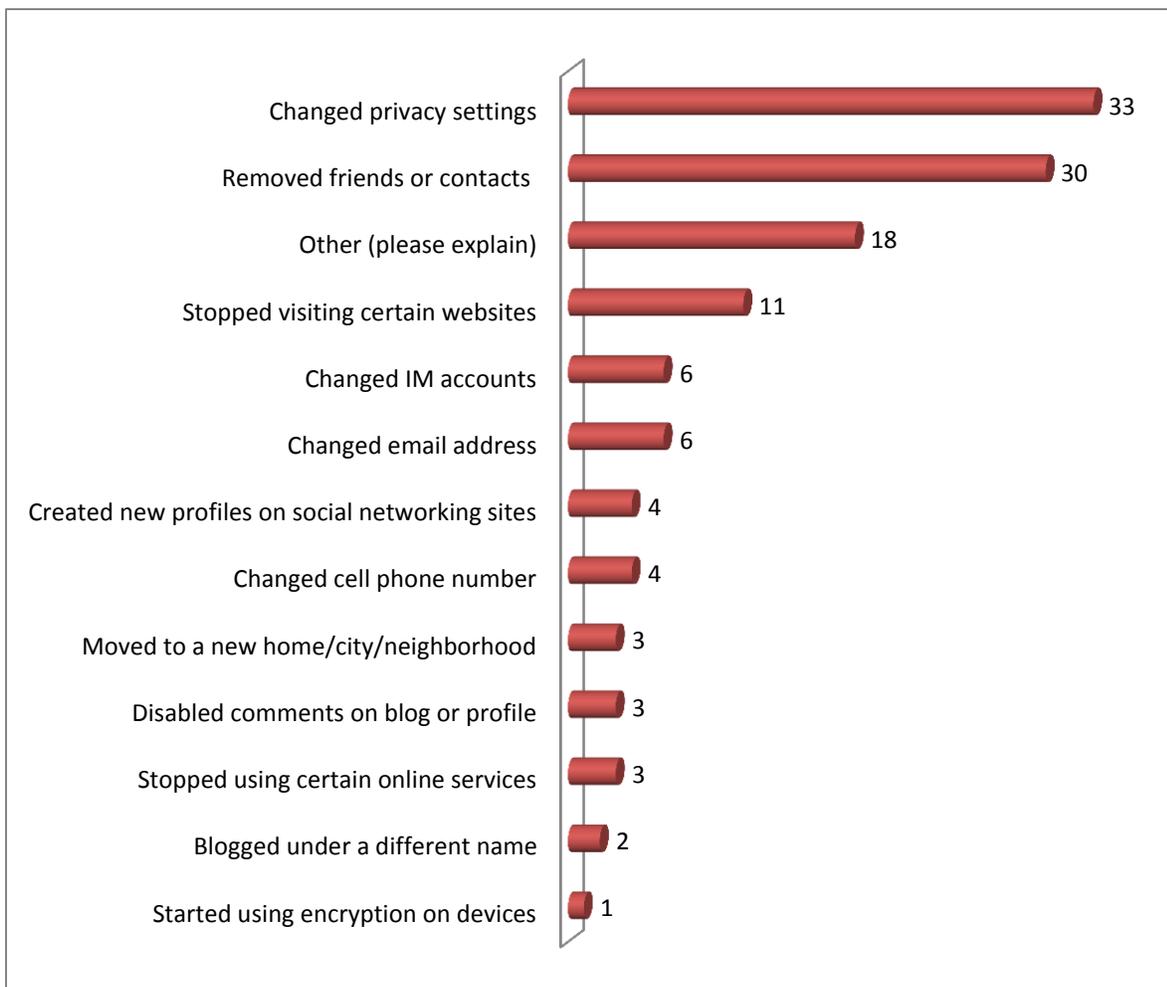
Figure 10. Frequency of Harassing Conduct



Did the harassment affect respondents' use of technology?

Seventy-one percent ($n = 219$) of 307 participants reported that their harassment influenced their use of technology. (See Figure 11 for descriptions of the types of effects it had; $n = 124$.) Among the “Other” category, respondents noted that they deleted Facebook pages, had phone numbers blocked, removed photographs from the Internet, and even moved to a new address or changed jobs.

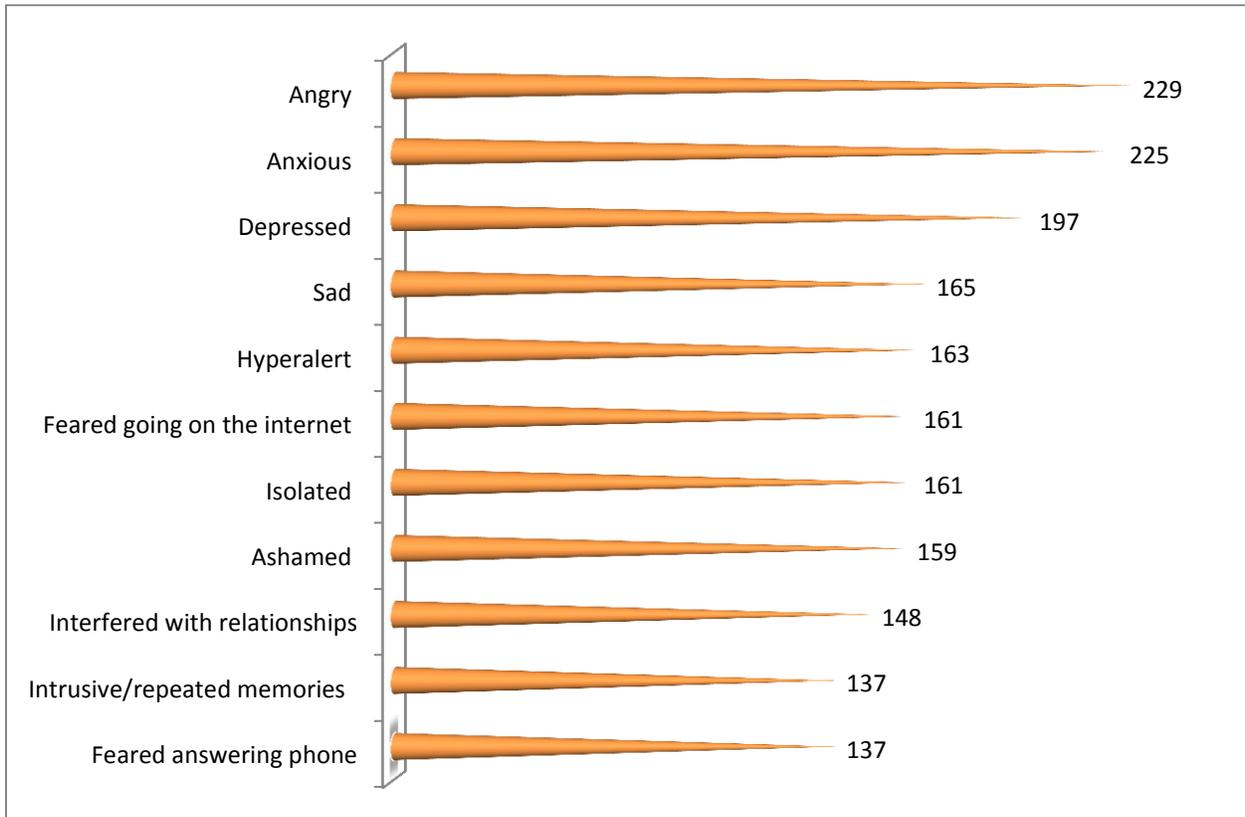
Figure 11. Effects of the Harassment on Technology Use



Did the harassment have an emotional impact on participants?

Ninety-two percent ($n = 280$) of participants reported emotional effects of the harassment. Anger, anxiety, depression, sadness, and being hyper-alert were the most common responses (see Figure 12).

Figure 12. Emotional Reactions to the Harassment



Did the harassment affect participants financially?

Fifty-three percent ($n = 163$) of respondents reported that the harassment had cost either nothing or less than \$100.00. Another 10% ($n = 29$), however, reported that the harassment cost \$10,000 or more (with some saying it cost in excess of \$100,000 because, for example, they lost employment or a career as a result). A majority (54%; $n = 161$) did not expect that the harassment experience would exact financial costs in the next 5 years, though 15% ($n = 45$) thought it might cost between \$100 and \$9,999, and 11% ($n = 34$) thought it might cost between \$10,000 and \$100,000.

Did the harassment affect participant employment or educational experiences?

Of the 78.5% ($n = 238$) who were employed at the time of the harassment, 53.4% ($n = 127$) reported that their employment was affected by the harassment. In the qualitative responses to our question about the nature of these effects, a broad range was reported. These included preventing some participants from obtaining future employment, contracts being terminated, having supervisors receive false information about participants, undergoing investigations at work, failing to be promoted, having to resign in an attempt to end the harassment, loss of clients or patients, decreased ability to focus, and negative effect on job performance.

Of the 37.5% ($n = 111$) participants who were in school at the time of the harassment, 58.6% ($n = 65$) reported effects on their academic experience. Effects spanned a wide range: from dropping out of school, being asked to leave a program, avoiding enrollment in particular classes because the harasser was in these classes, and missing classes, to having significant difficulties concentrating, being unable to engage in professionally important activities, and experiencing significant reductions in performance. As one participant put it, “I went from Dean’s list to devastated.”

Were there other effects of the harassment?

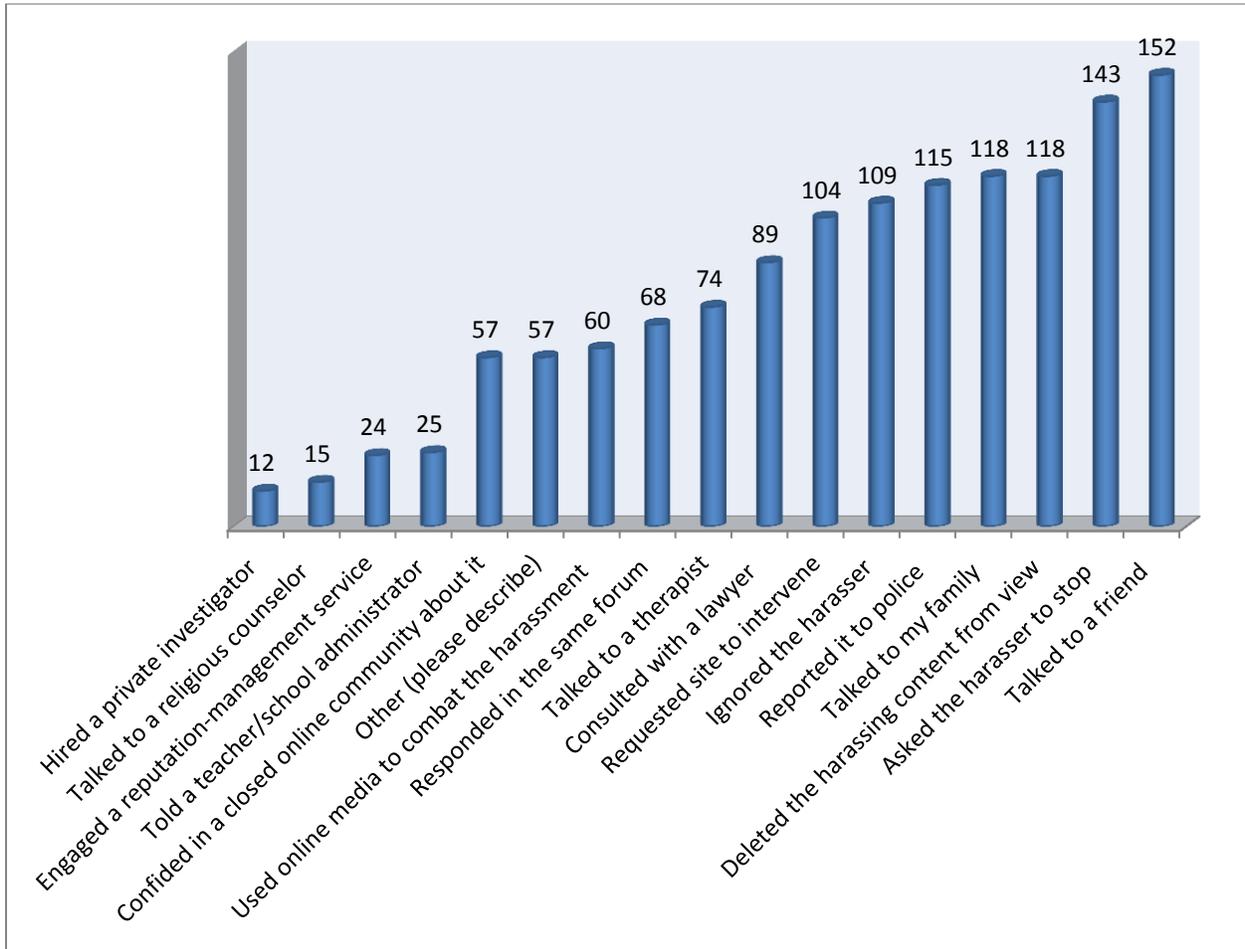
When asked whether there were other effects of the harassment that had not been addressed in the structured questions on the survey, participants recounted many. These included trauma diagnoses and symptoms (e.g., nightmares, flashbacks), the loss of relationships and social support (e.g., divorce, friends and family members disengaging or shunning the participant), being blamed, having one’s time and energy engulfed by court battles, shame, self-destructive behavior for some (e.g., alcohol use), losses in self-esteem and confidence, worsening of medical conditions, weight loss or gain, decreased trust in other people (especially men), a sense of paranoia, becoming more reclusive, and even considering suicide. As one participant said, “I [veer] between extreme motivation to learn and problem-solve, because I recognize now this is a cutting edge topic, cyberbullying related to workplace (especially a gov’t workplace) that few seem to collectively understand; and the other side of the coin where every day I wish I could just stop living at all, and escape what is seemingly unescapable (sic), unending torture.”

What did respondents do about the harassment?

Over two thirds (69%; $n = 215$) of our participants attempted to address the harassment in some fashion. Of the 31% ($n = 96$) who had not yet taken any steps to curb it, 39% ($n = 34$) decided on their own not to pursue action, or they were still contemplating what course of action to take (25%; $n = 24$).

Among those who attempted to address the harassment, many took more than one action (see Figure 13). These included speaking to friends ($n = 152$) or family members ($n = 118$), asking the harasser to stop ($n = 143$), deleting the content from view ($n = 118$), and reporting it to the police ($n = 115$). Most participants (86%) had decided on their own to take these actions.

Figure 13. Frequency and Type of Actions Taken to End Harassment



What seemed to be effective?

For the 196 participants who had the harassment end, 45% ($n = 89$) had a sense of the nature of the action on their part that contributed to its termination. Ignoring the harasser, reporting it to the police, requesting intervention on the online service or social media site where it occurred, and asking the harasser to stop were viewed as the most effective strategies to end the harassment.

What would participants suggest to someone else who is experiencing online harassment?

Respondents were generous in the advice they offered others. Some 48 suggestions were made, seven of which were suggested by five or more respondents. By far the most frequent suggestion (45.8%; $n = 22$) was to get support from others. Participants suggested talking to friends, family members, victim/advocacy groups, online groups, and attorneys. The second most frequent suggestion (33.3%; $n = 16$) was to report the harasser to site administrators and to agencies that track such incidents. A smaller proportion (29.2%; $n = 14$) urged people who are being harassed online to contact or report to the police or other authorities, or to fight back and not be afraid

(e.g., do not show that the harassment is having an effect, as that can invite more attacks; 27.1%; $n = 13$). Three participants (6.3%), however, said that one should not go to the police or authorities. Nine participants (18.8%) urged others to document everything that had happened, including all emails, texts, conversations, and blogs, and taking screen shots where necessary. Seven participants (14.6%) suggested blocking the harasser and securing/locking down all identifying information and contacting an attorney to assist in taking legal action.

A few participants clearly felt helpless and believed that nothing could be done. That said, the general sense of the advice our participants would give to someone else was to actively seek support from others, engage in combatting the harassment, and avoiding blaming oneself for the harasser's behavior.