Examining Perceptions of Online Harassment among Constables in England and Wales

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Examining Perceptions of Online Harassment among Constables in England and Wales

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Abstract:
The ubiquity of the Internet and computer technology has enabled individuals to engage in bullying, threats, and harassing communications online. Limited research has found that local line officers may not view these offenses as serious compared to real world crimes despite their negative physical and emotional impact on victims. The perceptions of officers can produce poor interactions with victims during calls for service, particularly victim blaming, which can reduce citizens' confidence in police agencies generally. However, local law enforcement agencies are increasingly mandated to respond to these cases, calling to question how their views may impact the community. This study examined the attitudinal and demographic factors associated with the negative views of online harassment and bullying within a sample of 1,348 constables from 34 local agencies across England and Wales. The study found that constables with negative views toward cybercrimes and worked in agencies with inconsistent messaging related to online crimes were more likely to view online harassment as less serious and believe that these offenses could be avoided by victims. The implications of this study for local police staff and command are discussed in detail.

The rise of the Internet and computer-mediated communication, such as email, text, and social networking sites, have transformed interpersonal communications (Wall, 2007; Yar, 2013). Individuals can readily share personal information, their interests, and activities with the world, creating unique opportunities for social connectivity. In fact, 68% of US adults use Facebook, and 78% of young adults use the image-based application Snapchat (Smith & Anderson, 2018). Similar trends have been observed in the UK, where 96% of adults aged 16 to 24 utilize social media services (Office for National Statistics, 2017).

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The benefits of these technologies have been subverted by those who wish to target an individual for bullying, harassment, intimidation, and threats via online platforms (Choi & Lee, 2017; Choi, Lee, & Lee, 2017; Crisafi, Mullins, & Jasinski, 2016; Navarro, Clevenger, & Marcum, 2016; Song, Song, & Lee, 2018; Wall, 2007). For instance, cyberbullying can be defined as any intentional, aggressive behavior performed through electronic means, such as threatening, mean, or hurtful messages via instant messaging, email, posts on social media, and text messages via cell phones (Hinduja & Patchin, 2015). Online harassment comprises similar activities, though the target may be either juveniles or adults, whereas cyberbullying is thought to mostly affect juvenile populations (Beran & Li, 2005; Rainie, 2017; Turmanis & Brown, 2006).

Despite the potential for misuse on these platforms, evidence suggests that victims are reticent to contact police for assistance. For instance, the US National Crime Victimization Survey found that 14 percent of online harassment victims reported their experiences to law enforcement (Catalano, 2012). Similar reporting rates have been observed among college student samples regarding online harassment and stalking (Fisher, Cullen, & Turner, 2000; Marcum, Ricketts, & Higgins, 2010; Nobles, Reyns, Fox, & Fisher, 2014). Additionally, victims of stalking and harassment do not contact the police because they perceive that their claims will not be taken seriously by the officers, may not be believed, or receive adequate assistance (e.g., Nobles et al., 2014; Rainie, 2017; Richards, 2011). Juvenile victims of cyberbullying are, however, largely unable to report their experiences to law enforcement, as Western nations such as the US and UK have inconsistent legislation criminalizing these activities (Hinduja & Patchin, 2015). Instead, they are more likely to inform their peers rather than their parents or teachers due to concerns that they may lose access to their computer or mobile devices (e.g., Hinduja & Patchin, 2015; Priebe, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2013).

These issues call into question how police officers view the threat of bullying and harassment, and victims of these crimes generally. The current body of research suggests that while local police officers should be capable of responding to cybercrime calls for service, they are less interested in these offenses and feel that specialized units should be responsible for handling such calls (e.g., Bond & Tyrrell, 2018; Broll & Huey, 2015; Holt & Bossler, 2012). This issue is particularly evident in the UK, where both Her Majesty's Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate (HMCPSI) and Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC) found that constables and prosecutors responses to stalking cases were inadequate. As a result, victims were dissatisfied with their experiences with the police and felt that the responding officer blamed them for the offense (Richards, 2011; HMIC & HMCPSI, 2017). Similarly, a study conducted by Bond and Tyrrell (2018) found that police constables in England and Wales have a limited understanding of revenge porn legislation and lack the confidence needed to effectively investigate and respond to revenge porn victims – that is, 39.5% of respondents reported that they had some knowledge of revenge pornography but with significant gaps, while a majority (44.8%) indicated that they had limited confidence when collecting evidence for a revenge pornography case. A recent qualitative assessment of a sample of constables reinforced this finding, as respondents felt that victims were partially accountable for their experiences because they were too transparent about their activities in online spaces (Millman, Winder, & Griffiths, 2017).

The limited empirical evidence on constables' views of bullying and harassment requires additional research with larger samples of line officers to assess their attitudes toward these behaviors. Such research is essential in the UK as the constabulary is increasingly empowered to investigate all forms of cybercrime (Bond & Tyrrell, 2018; HMIC 2017; Levi, Doig, Gundur, Wall, & Williams, 2016). Identifying the attitudinal and demographic factors associated with the negative views of these offenses among constables can provide insight on how to target training and resources to improve citizen en-

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counters. Thus, this study attempted to expand the literature through an analysis of a sample of 1,387 constables and sergeants from 34 agencies across England and Wales. This inquiry used binary logistic regression analyses to examine constables' perceptions on the severity of online harassment and the extent to which these offenses can be avoided by victims relative to their general views of cybercrime, their agency resources, and demographic factors. The results provide direct implications for both the constabulary and management to improve line officers' perceptions of these offenses, as well as ways to interact with the community during calls for service.

Policing Cyberbullying and Harassment

The ubiquity of the Internet and social media have made it possible for individuals to target potential victims for bullying and harassment from anywhere at any time (Hinduja & Patchin, 2015; Navarro et al., 2016). Research suggests that the risk of cyberbullying victimization has increased over the last decade (Jones, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2012), though rates of victimization vary between six percent in nationally representative samples of youth (DeVoe, Bauer, & Hill, 2011; US Department of Education, 2015) and 33 percent in convenience samples of youth (Hinduja & Patchin, 2015). Rates of online harassment are higher, with 11 percent of juvenile samples reporting victimization experiences (Jones et al., 2012) to as much as 30 percent among college samples (e.g., Marcum, 2010).

The negative outcomes of cyberbullying and harassment have real world impacts, including depression, stress, and anxiety (Hindjua & Patchin, 2015; Marcum, 2010; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004). Social withdrawal and school failure can also occur, particularly among youth who experience persistent or repeated victimization (Katzer, Fetchenhauer, & Belschak, 2009; Robers, Zhang, Truman, & Snyder, 2012; Turner, Exum, Brame, & Holt, 2013; Ybarra, Mitchell, Finkelhor, & Wolak, 2007). Some victims of cyberbullying report having suicidal thoughts, or suicidal ideation, as a result of their experiences (Hinduja & Patchin, 2015; Nansel et al., 2001; Turner et al., 2013). Victims of harassment report similar experiences including serious emotional distress (Blaauw, Winkel, Arensman, Sheridan, & Freeve, 2002), anxiety, damaged reputations, and fear for personal safety (Rainie, 2017; Sheridan, Davies, & Boon, 2001).

In light of the prevalence and negative consequences associated with online harassment and bullying, scholars and police administrators have advocated for law enforcement agencies to increase their capacity to respond to these investigations (Bond & Tyrrell, 2018; Broll & Huey, 2015; Holt & Bossler, 2012; Marcum, 2010; Nobles et al., 2014; Stambaugh et al., 2001; Wall, 2007). In the last decade, the United Kingdom expanded the role of the local constabulary to cybercrimes generally (HM Government, 2016). Legislation has also improved to better incorporate online threats and harassment, particularly through adjustments to the Protection from Harassment Act (PfHA) of 1997 and the Protection of Freedoms Act (PoFA) 2002. The PfHA does not explicitly define cyber-harassment but includes a broad definition of harassment that highlights the pervasive nature of the behavior and the distressing impact it has on victims, allowing for easy adaption to cyber-offenses in court. However, new stalking provisions added to the PfHA in 2012 have included examples of cyberstalking (HMIC & HMCPSI, 2017). Similar updates to the PoFA have included specific cyber-harassment and cyberstalking behaviors as examples of the different manifestations of harassment.

Though the constabulary has been empowered to investigate these offenses, evidence suggests they do not view online threats and harassment victimization in the same light as other forms of crime. Millman and colleagues (2017) found that although constables believed cyber-harassment to be serious, many blamed victims for being too transparent online, which increases their risk of victimization. Additionally, constables were predominantly concerned with assessing risk in their investigations of

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cyber-harassment and stressed that victims needed to thoroughly describe the seriousness of their case in order for action to occur (Millman et al., 2017). Similar research with Canadian School Resource Officers found that they did not value additional legislation to prosecute cyberbullying, as existing harassment statutes could be applied if the event was serious enough (Broll & Huey, 2015).

Research on police responses to revenge pornography cases in England and Wales found that a majority of police officers and staff feel as if they are lacking knowledge of the behavior and the confidence needed to respond to calls of service (Bond & Tyrrell, 2018). Furthermore, the study found that relevant training responding to revenge pornography cases were limited across the UK, signaling an urgent need for further guidance and training on how to conduct an investigation dealing with revenge pornography and forms of online harassment more generally (Bond & Tyrrell, 2018).

Despite the proliferation of online harassment, bulling, and attempts to empower the constabulary, evidence generally suggests that police have been relatively slow in their response to online incidents (Bossler & Holt, 2012; Davis, 2012; Hinduja, 2007; Holt, Burruss, & Bossler, 2015; Millman et al., 2017; Senjo, 2004; Stambaugh et al., 2001; Wall & William, 2007). This is due in part to the generally mixed views of line officers toward cybercrimes, including the nature of the offense, the offender, and its victims (e.g., Bossler & Holt 2012; Broll & Huey, 2015; Holt & Bossler, 2012; Davis, 2012; Levi et al., 2016). Though the majority of survey research is based on US samples of line officers or management (see Holt & Bossler, 2015 for review) it is plausible that constables in England and Wales hold similar views (Bond & Tyrrell, 2018; Millman et al., 2017). To that end, officers' views toward offenses are likely to shape their attitudes toward the need for punitive sanctions such as arrest as noted in research on domestic violence (e.g., Robinson & Chandek, 2000; Stalans & Finn, 2000) organized crime (Lavorgna, 2015), and online fraud (Burns, Whitworth, & Thompson, 2004; Cross & Blackshaw, 2014). Thus, constables who view cybercrimes as generally less serious offenses may be more likely to feel that online harassment and bullying do not merit a response and could be avoided by some victims (Broll & Huey, 2015; Millman et al., 2017).

Constables' skill and comfort with technology may influence opinions toward harassment, as those with more personal experience with technology may be more aware of the potential risks of online bullying and harassment generally (e.g., Hinduja, 2007; Holt & Bossler, 2015). Prior cybercrime training may also affect views on harassment by improving awareness of the negative consequences of harassment and the difficulties victims face in avoiding their harasser (Bond & Tyrrell, 2018; Holt & Bossler, 2012). Prior research suggests that officers who had cybercrime investigation training were more likely to think that cybercrime was not taken seriously by law enforcement (Holt & Bossler, 2012). Moreover, those officers with cybercrime investigation training did not view cybercrime as affecting the future of policing compared to those without experience. Officers who had previous computer training were also less interested in additional training and conducting investigations (Bossler & Holt, 2012, 2013). This belief may be generated from officers thinking that additional computer training is redundant and/or unnecessary (Bossler & Holt, 2012).

The occupational and personal experiences of constables may also influence their views regarding online harassment. Bossler and Holt (2012) found that older officers were more likely to believe that state and federal level agencies were responsible for local cybercrime instead of local law enforcement agencies. Younger constables may have different views of cybercrime, as they may have more personal experiences with these offenses. In fact, it is possible that younger officers may have negative views of harassment and bullying because they may have had to deal with these offenses at some point in their own lives (Hinduja & Patchin, 2015; Millman et al., 2017). Constables with less time on the force may also have more negative views of cybercrimes as they may not have had to deal with these offenses in

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the community (Broll & Huey, 2015). Similarly, those with less formal education may be more likely to view harassment and bullying as less serious because they may have been given little exposure to these issues otherwise.

Race may have limited impact as studies found that white officers were more likely to agree that cybercrime was not taken seriously by law enforcement (Bossler & Holt, 2012). In addition, white officers were also more likely to believe that computer-based stakeouts were not as important as traditional stakeouts (Bossler & Holt, 2012). The impact of gender may be similarly mixed, as research has shown that men are more likely than women to deem stalking and harassment as less serious than other crimes (Rainie, 2017). This perceptual difference appears to stem from differences in the rates of stalking and harassment experienced on- and off-line generally. At the same time, male and female officers appear to differ in their opinions on the need for cybercrime investigation at the local level and the need to educate the public about cybercrimes (Bossler & Holt, 2012; 2013).

Taken as a whole, there is a need to understand the views constables hold towards online abuse and harassment. These incidents occur frequently, affecting juvenile and adult populations with real consequences for its victims. As the UK government places a greater emphasis on the local constabulary to respond to cybercrimes (HMIC, 2017), it is unclear how individual constables consider these offenses compared to traditional street crimes. If constables view online harassment and bullying as minor nuisances or issues that do not merit an investigation, they may be less willing to take reports and empathize with victims. In turn, this may account for victims' generally poor views of police responses to both forms of harassment (e.g., Millman et al., 2017) and other forms of cybercrime generally (e.g., Bond & Tyrrell, 2018; Cross & Blackshaw, 2014; Levi et al., 2016). Measuring the baseline perceptions of constables and sergeants regarding cybercrime can identify the issues line officers may have with these offenses, as well as illustrate strategies to promote the importance of online harassment investigations that may be more readily accepted by line staff (e.g., Lurigio & Skogan, 1994). Thus, this study attempted to examine this issue using a sample of constables and sergeants working in police agencies across England and Wales.

Data and Methods

The research team worked in collaboration with police agencies across the two countries and began survey administration via an email distributed by the then National Coordinator for the Digital Intelligence and Investigation Strategy for England and Wales Police to the management of all forces in late December 2015. The message included a description of the study, the IRB protections afforded to participants, a justification for participation, and an endorsement from both the UK Home Office and Steven Kavanagh, the Chief Constable for the Essex Police and the National Policing Lead for Digital Intelligence and Investigation. The message also contained a link to a web-based survey explaining that the survey should be directed to all possible staff on the force to participate. Participation was voluntary and no enticements were provided for participation. A follow-up request was distributed via the same mechanism to police management in January 2016 reminding staff to complete the survey. Data collection was terminated on March 1, 2016, with a total of 1,554 constables and sergeants participating. A total of 1,387 responses were included in the final analysis due to listwise deletion of cases with missing responses.

This methodology provided a purposive, yet convenient sample of constables and sergeants from across both England and Wales. Respondents came from 34 total agencies across England and Wales, with the largest proportions from West Yorkshire (12.6%), Nottinghamshire (8.6%), and Lincolnshire

(8.2%), though a proportion also came from the Metropolitan Police Service (7.5%) in London. Thus, the population provides a broad representation of both nations.

Additionally, the sample reflects the demographic composition of the larger population of constables at the time. Specifically, our sample was 74% male and 26% female in keeping with 28.6% of all constables at this time being female. Our sample slightly underrepresents minority respondents, as 4% were minorities compared to 6.4% of the total population of constables. However, the similarities between the sample population and the larger force suggests this population resembles the broader constabulary of England and Wales.

Dependent Variables

The dependent variables for this analysis are the extent to which the constables and sergeants agreed with the following two attitudinal measures: (1) "Harassment online is less serious than traditional harassment", and (2) "Online bullying and harassment can be avoided by victims changing mobile phone numbers or email addresses." A five-point response category was provided (1 = strongly agree; 2 = agree; 3 = neither agree nor disagree; 4 = disagree; 5 = strongly disagree). Only 17.3% of respondents agreed with the first variable, while 52% agreed with the second statement (see Table 1 for descriptive statistics). Given the limited variation observed in the responses to both of these measures, the five responses were collapsed into binary measures reflecting those who either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement (1) compared to all other categories (0).

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics (n=1387)

Variable	Mean	Linearized SD	Min	Max
Online Harassment Less Serious	0.17	0.01	0	1
Online Harassment Avoided	0.52	0.01	0	1
Minor Annoyances	2.76	0.04	1	5
Serious Problem	4.10	0.03	1	5
Internet Problems	3.80	0.03	1	5
Foreign	2.77	0.04	1	5
Not Taken Seriously	2.80	0.05	1	5
No Police Response	3.25	0.04	1	5
Online Elements	3.90	0.03	1	5
Agency Practices	3.12	0.02	1	5
Agency Posted Policies	3.05	0.04	1	5
Agency Resources	2.79	0.04	1	5
Skill Level	2.55	0.03	1	4
Comfort	4.67	0.04	1	6
Training	0.38	0.02	0	1
Rank	0.77	0.01	0	1
Age	3.10	0.03	1	5
Years of Experience	3.32	0.06	1	6
Education	1.87	0.04	1	4
Race	0.04	0.01	0	1
Gender	0.26	0.44	0	1

Independent Variables

To assess constables' views on the role of technology in both offending and policing of harassment, respondents were asked to rate their agreement with seven measures using a five point scale (1 = strongly disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = neither agree nor disagree; 4 = agree; 5 = strongly agree):

(1) "Most types of online incidents are minor annoyances" (Minor Annoyances); (2) "Online crime is a serious problem in society today" (Serious Problem); (3) "The Internet has caused more problems for law enforcement than it has helped" (Internet Problem); (4) "Online criminals are often individuals living in foreign countries rather than here in England and Wales" (Foreign); (5) "Online crime is not taken seriously by law enforcement" (Not Taken Seriously); (6) "Most negative online experiences do not require a police response" (No Police Response); and (7) "Crimes that used to be offline now increasingly have online elements" (Online Elements). These measures were adapted from prior research examining officer and management views of cybercrime (Holt & Bossler, 2012; Senjo 2004).

Constables were also asked to identify their agency's resources to assist victims of cybercrime by rating their agreement with the following three statements using the same five item scale described above: (1) "My agency provides agreed upon practices to tell online crime victims how to minimize the risk of further harm" (Agency Practices); (2) "My agency has clearly posted information on policies and procedures related to online incidents and crime" (Agency Posted Policies); and (3) "My agency has readily available educational materials and resources that I can provide to victims regarding online incidents and crimes" (Agency Resources).

To measure constables' beliefs about their personal capacity with technology, they were asked to indicate their skill level with computers using a four-point scale adapted from prior research (Holt & Bossler, 2008; Rogers, Smoak & Liu, 2006). Respondents were also asked to indicate, "how comfortable are you using a computer in your daily activities?" (Comfort) using a six-point scale ranging from very uncomfortable (1) to very comfortable (6). The mean was 4.67, suggesting that most respondents were at least comfortable with technology. Constables were also asked, "have you ever received training dealing with online incidents and crimes? (0 = no; 1 = yes). Only 38% of constables received training, suggesting that it may be somewhat uncommon among line staff, reflecting broader trends in the academy and force-based training within England and Wales (HMIC, 2017).

Six demographic controls were included in these analyses as well. Rank was measured using a binary coding scheme (constable = 0; sergeant = 1), while age was a categorical measure (1 = 18-24; 2 = 25-34; 3 = 35-44; 4 = 45-54; 5 = 55 and older). A constable's total years of experience on the force was a categorical variable (1 = 1-5 years; 2 = 6-10 years; 3 = 11-14 years; 4 = 15-20 years; 5 = 21-30 years; 6 = 30 or more years). Education was also measured categorically (1 = other; 2 = O level/GC SE; 3 = apprenticeship or a/a; 4 = degree or diploma). ender was measured using a binary coding scheme (0 = male; 1 = female), with the majority of constables being male (74%). As noted earlier, the UK constabulary has limited minority representation, thus race was dichotomized (white = 0; non-white = 1) for this analysis. These demographics match the larger composition of the constabulary of England and Wales generally, suggesting this sample reflects the overall force.

Analytic Approach

Due to the clustered nature of the data within police agencies, there is potential that agency effects exist due to the non-independence of constables and sergeants within, but not across, their local agencies. These issues can generate biases that produce errors within larger statistical models. In order to control for these effects, hierarchical logistic modeling (HLM) techniques could be applied, though the variation in respondent populations across agencies limited the utility of this method by further increasing the potential for error.

Instead, binary logistic regression models were conducted for each of the two dependent variables in Stata version 13 software (StataCorp, 2013) using Taylor series linearization to account for the sample design and provide accurate testing of the coefficients and standard errors. This method

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has been applied in several criminological studies (e.g., Holt, Fitzgerald, Bossler, Chee, & Ng, 2016; Levy & Lemeshow, 2011; Rennison & Melde, 2014) and is used here to assess relationships between constables' attitudes and various individual and agency factors. Multicollinearity was not an issue for this analysis, as no tolerance level was below .445 and no variance inflation factor (VIF) was higher than 2.246. These values are well within acceptable ranges and suggest that there are no concerns regarding the relationships between variables.

Results

The first model predicting constables' perception that online harassment is less serious than traditional harassment found several significant attitudinal factors (see Table 2 for detail). Constables who viewed most types of online incidents as minor annoyances were more likely to perceive online harassment as being less serious, as were those who did not find online crimes to be a serious problem in society. This suggests that officers who trivialize all forms of online crime and offending may have similar views toward online harassment (Holt & Bossler, 2012; Senjo, 2004).

Table 2. Binary Logistic Regression on Attitudes That Harassment Online Is Less Serious (n=1387)

	B	SE	OR
Minor Annoyances	0.629	0.103	1.877***
Serious Problem	−0.245	0.056	0.782***
Internet Problems	0.248	0.100	1.281**
Foreign	0.320	0.087	1.377**
Not Taken Seriously	0.107	0.080	1.114
No Police Response	0.900	0.119	2.459***
Online Elements	0.063	0.168	1.065
Agency Practices	−0.271	0.116	0.762*
Agency Posted Policies	0.172	0.111	1.188
Agency Resources	−0.213	0.114	0.807
Skill Level	−0.073	0.148	0.928
Comfort	−0.009	0.064	0.990
Training	0.160	0.140	1.174
Rank	0.377	0.252	1.458
Age	−0.178	0.169	0.836
Years of Experience	0.202	0.093	1.225*
Education	−0.085	0.070	1.088
Race	−0.144	0.526	0.865
Gender	−0.560	0.157	0.571***
Constant	−7.699	0.874	0.000***

F= (19,16),26.22***; *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.

Additionally, constables who agreed that the Internet has dramatically changed police work were more likely to perceive online harassment as less serious, as did those who perceived cyber-criminals to be spatially distant and removed from England and Wales. Specifically, those who believed that online criminals are mostly individuals living in foreign countries were significantly more likely to perceive cyber-harassment as being less serious. In addition, officers who believed that most negative online experiences do not require a police response were also significantly more likely to view cyber-harassment as being less dangerous (Bossler & Holt, 2013; Millman et al., 2017).

Constables working in agencies with no agreed upon practices to communicate to victims to minimize victimization risks were also likely to view harassment as less serious overall. Males and con-

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stables with more years of experience were also more likely to view online harassment as less serious compared to offline harassment.

The second model predicting officers' perception that online harassment can be easily avoided shared some common predictors to the first model. Specifically, officers who believed that most types of online incidents are minor annoyances, and that the Internet changed the nature of policing felt that online harassment could be avoided (see Table 3 for detail; Holt & Bossler, 2012). Those constables who felt that online criminals are often individuals living in foreign countries rather than here in England and Wales, and that most negative online experiences do not require police responses, were all significantly more likely to believe that online harassment could be easily avoided (see also Broll & Huey, 2015).

Table 3. Binary Logistic Regression on Attitudes That Online Harassment Can Be Avoided (n=1387)

	B	SE	OR
Minor Annoyances	0.282	0.066	1.327***
Serious Problem	−0.072	0.060	0.930
Internet Problems	0.238	0.069	1.268**
Foreign	0.195	0.062	1.215**
Not Taken Seriously	0.002	0.057	1.002
No Police Response	0.374	0.060	1.453***
Online Elements	−0.169	0.105	0.843
Agency Practices	0.059	0.102	1.061
Agency Posted Policies	0.189	0.079	1.208*
Agency Resources	−0.067	0.083	0.934
Skill Level	−0.193	0.119	0.823
Comfort	−0.078	0.038	0.924*
Training	−0.346	0.161	0.707*
Rank	0.141	0.126	1.152
Age	−0.203	0.086	0.815*
Years of Experience	−0.132	0.052	0.876**
Education	−0.201	0.045	1.222***
Race	0.432	0.249	1.542
Gender	−0.094	0.128	0.909
Constant	−0.375	0.611	0.687*

F= (19,16),26.22***; *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.

In addition, constables whose agency clearly posted information on policies and procedures related to online incidents and crime were more likely to feel that harassment could be avoided. This may be a function of agency-level priorities, although officers who had not received computer training were more likely to believe that cyber-harassment could be easily evaded. In addition, officers who were younger, with fewer years of experience, and less education were significantly more likely to think that online harassment could be avoided.

Discussion and Conclusions

The increasing societal dependence on technology created myriad opportunities for harassing messages and threats to be sent online through various social media platforms, text, and emails (Hinduja & Patchin, 2015; Navarro et al., 2016; Wall, 2007). Though online harassment, stalking, and cyberbullying have consequential impacts on victims' physical and mental health, evidence suggests that local law enforcement officers are not adequately prepared to respond to these cases (Bossler & Holt 2012; Broll & Huey, 2015; Cross & Blackshaw, 2014; Holt & Bossler, 2012; Millman et al., 2017).

As governments increasingly emphasize the role of local police in the response to cybercrime, particularly in England and Wales (HM Government, 2016), it is essential that policy-makers and police management understand existing officers' views of these crimes (Broll & Huey, 2015; Holt & Bossler, 2012; Levi et al., 2016; Stambaugh et al., 2001). Recognizing the factors affecting negative views of online harassment and cyberbullying can provide key information on how to develop targeted training and resources to improve citizen encounters among the constabulary to change their views (see also Holt & Bossler, 2015; Lurgio & Skogan, 1994).

This study attempted to address this issue through an analysis of officer views toward the seriousness of online harassment and the extent to which these offenses could be avoided by victims among a sample of 1,387 constables and sergeants across England and Wales. The findings demonstrated that constables' attitudes toward cybercrime generally affected their views toward bullying and harassment. Beliefs that cybercrimes are minor annoyances and are performed by foreigners were associated with the opinions that online harassment and bullying were less serious and could be avoided by victims. These findings are consistent with prior research using samples of US line officers who maintained generally negative views toward cybercrime and diminished views on the importance of responding to these cases (e.g., Bossler & Holt, 2012; Holt & Bossler, 2012; Senjo, 2004).

In addition, constables' perceptions of the police response to cybercrime were associated with negative views of online harassment. Specifically, constables who felt the Internet had a negative impact on policing were more likely to feel online harassment was less serious and avoidable. In addition, negative views toward harassment were held by constables who felt that the majority of negative online experiences do not require a police response. These findings reinforce prior research that line officers' negative conceptions of cybercrime diminish their willingness to respond to these cases (e.g., Cross & Blackshaw, 2014; Holt & Bossler, 2012; Holt & Bossler, 2015; Millman et al., 2017). Additionally, these results may help account for recurring complaints from victims of cyber-harassment, who often state that police officers do not treat their victimization as serious, are rarely helpful, and place the burden of solving the dispute on the victim (HMCI & HMCPSI, 2017; Millman et al., 2017; Richards, 2011).

This analysis also demonstrated the importance of constables' knowledge of agency-level resources on their attitudes toward harassment. An absence of clearly communicated risk reduction strategies that constables could provide to victims was associated with the perception that online harassment was less serious (Cross & Blackshaw, 2014). At the same time, constables working in agencies with clearly posted policies regarding online incidents were more likely to perceive online harassment as something that could be avoided. It is possible that certain online activities like trolling may be acknowledged as a form of harassment that police cannot respond to, though it is unclear how such information shapes constables' opinions (Broll & Huey, 2015). These results suggest that there is a need for police management to provide clear direction to constables as to the nature of cybercrimes and best practices for victims in order to minimize their risk of subsequent victimization (Bond & Tyrrell, 2018; Holt & Bossler, 2012; Stambaugh et al., 2001). In turn, they may more effectively empower their staff and minimize negative citizen encounters that could result from personal biases clouding their response to citizens.

The potential utility of this finding is limited as this analysis did not explicitly identify the content of any materials provided at the agency level. There may be great variability in the nature of posted materials and their location, thus future research is needed to consider the methods by which police agencies communicate ideas to constables. Improving the specificity of these measures is essential to understand the extent to which cybercrime messaging is ineffective in changing constables' views (see also Cross & Blackshaw, 2014; Holt & Bossler, 2015; Senjo, 2004; Stambaugh et al., 2001).

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The significant gender effect found in attitudes towards the seriousness of online harassment supports prior research that men perceive offline and online harassment and stalking less seriously than women (Navarro et al., 2016; Rainie, 2017). This effect may be due to the fact that women are more likely to experience the most severe forms of online abuse (Navarro et al., 2016; Rainie, 2017), and may therefore be more sympathetic towards the distress engendered by such encounters. Prior research on police samples in the US have noted similar gender differences in the perceived severity or effect of certain forms of online crime (see also Bossler and Holt 2012; Holt and Bossler 2012). Thus, further research is needed to examine the potential influence of occupational and personal experiences on constables' perceptions of criminality generally.

Similarly, there was a significant effect of age and years of experience on views related to online harassment and cyberbullying. Constables with more years of experience felt online harassment was less serious than offline harassment, while younger constables and those with fewer years of experience felt cyber-harassment can be easily avoided. It is possible that those with more years in the field may have had exposure to more heinous crimes or incidents which may increase the perception that online harassment is less serious overall (see Holt & Bossler, 2015).

The association between age and perceptions of avoiding harassment may, however, be a function of constables' personal experiences with online communications generally. Younger populations are more likely to use social media platforms (Rainie, 2017), and be familiar with the experience of harassment, bullying, and trolling via computer-mediated communications. As a result, they may be more likely to view such negative experiences as a function of the online experience that must be avoided to some extent in the absence of third-party regulation on sites like Facebook and Twitter (McLaughlin & Vitak, 2012; Navarro et al., 2016; Rainie, 2017).

Taken as a whole, this study demonstrated that there is a need for resource development and training to improve the views of the constabulary of England and Wales regarding online harassment and bullying behaviors. The presence of dismissive views among first responders may increase the likelihood of negative citizen encounters during calls for service and discourage victims to contact police for assistance with cybercrimes (Cross, 2015; Millman et al., 2017). Negative outcomes would be particularly deleterious for the constabulary in light of their mandated role in the investigation of both serious economic and interpersonal cybercrimes in England and Wales (HM Government, 2016; HMIC, 2017).

The most immediate way to improve constables' views would be through training programs that increase individual feelings of competence and preparation to respond to cybercrime calls for service. In fact, constables with no cybercrime training were more likely to believe that online harassment could be avoided. Informing constables of the realities of these offenses may improve their ability to respond to victims with compassion and improve community confidence in the constabulary, which is essential when dealing with cybercrimes (Bond & Tyrrell, 2018; Cross & Blackshaw, 2014; Levi et al., 2016; Millman et al., 2017).

In order to increase the capacity of law enforcement to respond to online offenses, agencies should seek out additional training in cyber-abuse, cyber-harassment, and cyberstalking behaviors. There are in-depth training programs in place around financial cybercrimes, such as the Economic Crime Academy training series offered by the City of London Police (2019). Offering similar training for interpersonal cybercrimes should outline the nature of the offense and frame police responses in the context of the offenders' behavior and victim responses in a way that avoids victim blaming (Bossler & Holt, 2012; Cross & Blackshaw, 2014; Millman et al., 2017; Patchin & Hinduja, 2012). Educating

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constables on the best practical steps victims can employ in order to minimize risk, while continuing to use online platforms, is also essential in order to avoid simply telling individuals to avoid using technology overall (Broll & Huey, 2015; Cross & Blackshaw, 2014). Such a program could improve line staff attitudes toward these offenses and increase the overall quality of interpersonal abuse investigations that take place both in the online and offline realms.

Assessments of the College of Policing training programs would prove invaluable for determining how local forces are being prepared to respond to cybercrime. A research agenda should be included in police training that continually measures both the capabilities and attitudes of constables toward cybercrime. Quantitative analysis of surveys, like the one used in this study, could track the changes in both trainers and trainees. Qualitative interviews would also provide insights into how constables view their ability to respond to cybercrimes as well as implement new policies and practices. Finally, tracking the capabilities of individual units and departments would help develop an overall assessment of how the country is addressing the problem.

Training is not a perfect solution, as Holt and Bossler (2012) found that training did not improve police officers' interest in or confidence regarding investigating cybercrime. There is also a need for tandem public education programs to ensure citizens realize the risks of cybercrime, regardless of age (Holt & Bossler, 2015; Patchin & Hinduja 2012; Stambaugh et al., 2001). Implementing campaigns via schools could be particularly useful to ensure that youths realize online threats and take steps at an early age to minimize risky online behaviors and understand when and why it is necessary to contact police (Hinduja & Patchin, 2015; Stambaugh et al., 2001). Acceptance of these messages could also help abate potential generational differences in constables' views of cybercrime before academy training.

Though this study provides potential direction for police policy and practice, it is limited by the fact that the sample population does not reflect the full body of local constables in England and Wales. The geographic distribution of agencies and respondents is a reflection of the voluntary nature of survey participation. This is, however, tempered by virtue of the demographic composition of the sample closely resembling that of the larger constabulary at the time of data collection (UK Home Office, 2016). Additionally, if a volunteer bias existed in the sample, more officers would have had stronger opinions, leading to fewer responses of "neither agree nor disagree." Additional research using more tailored sampling techniques (e.g., Dillman, 2007) to better reflect line staff would be essential to improve our knowledge of constables' views of cybercrime and their ability to respond to these unique offenses in a productive fashion.

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