

Impact of online hate

Introductory 'T&Cs'

Hi [participant name],

Before we begin and get to know each other a bit better, there are a couple of formalities I need to go through.

Firstly, everything you say today will remain anonymous unless you say something that represents a safeguarding concern such as harm to yourself or others. In this case we may need to report it to the relevant authorities.

Secondly, your wellbeing is really important to us, and you should have received information on what's on offer to look after your wellbeing in the information sheet. Don't worry if you can't remember it in detail now as I'll be able to talk you through it shortly.

Rapport Building (5 minutes)

Be upfront about the relationship/rapport building element of the interview – sharing power and managing expectations. General discussion before the introduction to the interview. This can be altered between interviews based on the interviewer's style and preferences but should generally be informal 'chit-chat'. The aim of this short session is to:

1. Allow the participant to introduce themselves
2. Allow the interviewer to introduce themselves (as a person, not an employee)
3. Allow the participant to settle into the session before giving them information
4. Give opportunity to participant to ask any questions they may have at this stage
5. If the participant requires an interpreter/support to be on the call, make sure they are fully up to speed on the project.

Note to interviewer: If participant mentions topics or discusses anything relevant to the research objective then move straight onto the 'intro and context'/consent and illegal behaviour policy.

Introduction and context (5 mins)

This first section is going to explain what we are here for today.

So, firstly, thank you for agreeing to take part in this interview, we fully appreciate you taking time out of your day to talk to us. As you know, my name is (name), I work for Traverse and I'm one of the researchers on this project.

Did you have any questions about the information sheet you received as part of the recruitment process?

To give you a bit of background about what I do, Traverse is an independent research and evaluation organisation. This means we talk with people from across the UK to find out about their unique opinions and experiences which we then feed back to the people we work with. This is often charities and public sector organisations, or larger institutions such as utilities companies or government bodies. In this case it is Ofcom, the UK's communications regulator who are responsible for regulating areas such as TV, radio and online video sharing platforms such as TikTok, Twitch, Snap, Vimeo and BitChute.

Ofcom is currently in the process of expanding their regulatory responsibilities, which may include the creation of a duty of care for online platforms towards their users to protect them from online harm. This will include prominent platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube as well as any services that allows users to directly share content.

This is why Ofcom have asked Traverse to carry out research to understand the impact that online hate has on people from different backgrounds. As a reminder, online hate is hateful content directed at a group of people on the basis of a particular protected characteristic. We are carrying out around 30 interviews. Once we have carried out all of the interviews, we will write up a report which will help Ofcom in their expanded role.

Please know that there are no right or wrong answers. I am only interested in your personal views and experiences.

In the interview we are going to cover three main areas:

1. The first is talking about what happened,
2. the second is about how you felt when it happened and anything else that you would like to share.
3. The third thing is if there has been any impact on you in the longer term, on how you feel, what you feel, what support you may or may not have had?

Exploring these sensitive topics can be potentially upsetting, so if you would like to take a break, talk about something else or end the discussion at any time please let me know – you don't need to give a reason and are free to do so. Please also know that our research team includes an independent professional counsellor who can provide follow-up sessions if you feel like you would benefit from some support within any of the topics we discuss today. These sessions are completely free, confidential and separate from the research. You should also have received a signposting sheet with a list of organisations can give further support should you feel you need it.

Lastly, everything you say will be anonymous and there will be no way for anyone to know what you have said, unless something that you say indicates that you or somebody else is at risk of harm in any way, in which case I will have to report this to our designated safeguarding lead. In some rare cases, the safeguarding lead may be required to report safeguarding concerns to the relevant authority. Likewise, any illegal behaviour may be reported to the authorities . Any personal information that

you share will be stored securely, and only Traverse as the research organisation will have access to your data. Your personal information will not be used for any other purpose, and your answers will remain anonymous – no one will know who has said what.

- Before we start, do you mind if I audio record this interview to help capture a detailed note of what you say? [Note to interviewer: if the participant does not consent to recording, then ensure consent is given to proceed with the interview without recording.]
- And do you have any questions for me?

Begin recording, then ask for consent to continue so that audio consent is captured in the recording

Before we start the interview, we'd like to share some important terms that will be used during this interview. If you need us to remind you of what these mean at any point in the interview please do let us know:

1. **Protected characteristics** – A protected characteristic is a characteristic that someone may have or be perceived to have which means they might be discriminated against. Examples of protected characteristics include gender, disability, race, religion or belief, sexual orientation or whether someone is transgender.
2. **Online Hate** – hateful content directed at a group of people on the basis of a particular protected characteristic
3. **Hateful Abuse** – hateful content directed at an individual on the basis of a protected characteristic they have or are perceived to have.
4. **Online harms and offline harms** – This can mean a range of impacts including physical/behavioural, psychological and social impacts, both online and offline. **Ofcom** - Ofcom is the UK's communications regulator responsible for regulating TV, radio, telecoms, postal services and online video sharing platforms.

In some cases, there can be overlap between different protected characteristics. For example often islamophobia targets the race of the victim as well as the religion, a person with a learning disability might also be part of another minority community.

Introductions and about you

OBJECTIVE: Gain an understanding of the participants online activity and behaviours, give them time to warm up to the subject.

In this section we are going to discuss your online activity habits. This means the way that you access online content in a normal week.

1. So firstly, can you tell me a bit more about yourself?
 - What does a normal week look like for you?
 - What types of interests and hobbies do you have, including online?
 - What apps do you use the most?
 - How would you describe your use of the internet? How important are different sites and platforms to you?
 - How long would you say you spend online or using apps on average in a week?
 - What benefits / enjoyment do you get from being online?
 - How do you interact with friends or family online?
 - What do you think are some of the biggest risks associated with spending time online?
 - And what about the benefits?

Experiences and impacts of harmful content

OBJECTIVE: What type of experience did they have and what was the context

We are now going to discuss your experiences of hateful content online, talking first about the events themselves, your response to the event(s) and any impacts.

2. What have been your experiences of harmful online content?

Here we would like to hear about specific examples where you were exposed to online hate or have experienced hateful abuse (referring back to definitions). Interviewer to focus on experiences of online hate in the first instance given that hateful abuse may be more upsetting:

What happened

- What happened?
- When did this happen?
- On what type of site or platform did you have this experience?
- Could you describe what sort of content or behaviour you were exposed to?
- Were you alone or with others when this happened?
- What was the context of the experience, for example, was the content/abuse from a stranger, someone you had interacted previously, someone you actually know, was it a one off or a repeated pattern of abuse etc)?
- Referring back to specific incident, how visible were you as a person on the platform (e.g., profile)? And how visible was the person who shared the hateful content?
- Was the hateful content aimed at any protected characteristic you identify as having?
- (prompt – if no, explore why they felt impacted by the incident – e.g. have relationship with someone with PCs, or identify with a cause that supports individual groups)

- What is it about your relationship with this person makes you feel strongly about the impact of hateful content?
- Why do you think the content was directed at you/this person/this group?
- Was the hateful content targeted at people with several protected characteristics?
- To what extent do you believe what you saw is within the platform rules?

Immediate response and impact

- What happened next? Was it a one-off experience or something that went on for an extended period of time, or which happened more than once?
- How did you react (both on and offline)?
- Did you share your experience with anyone else, either offline or online? Did the person you shared the experience with have any of the protected characteristics that the hateful content was aimed towards? Why?
- How did others react (both on and offline)? What was helpful/unhelpful from others' reactions? What was the outcome from other people reacting?
- What kinds of impacts did the experience have immediately after it happened? And how about more long-term?

Long-term impact

- Has the experience resulted in you changing any online behaviours?
- What about offline behaviours (e.g. delete accounts)?
- Has it affected your outlook or how you feel about yourself in any ways?
- Has it affected the way you think or feel or act? E.g., fear for your safety, or worried about going out, where to go/how to behave?
- Has it changed the way you view other people? E.g., levels of trust.
- Has it changed the way you view yourself? (note to interviewer – if participant identifies as having several protected characteristics, then use the following probes:)
 - o Do you feel like the long-term impact of the experience has been increased by the fact that you identify as both X and X?
- Did you experience any physical repercussions, for example confrontations or acts of violence?
- Thinking about how you responded, in retrospect were you happy with how you reacted? If you could go back in time, would you react differently in any way and why?
- Did you speak to anyone about it? Or access any forms of support? Did you report the incident?
- Were any actions taken by the platform providers or anyone else? (if applicable)
- If any actions were taken, do you think these made a difference? (if applicable)
- And did your experience have any longer-term impacts on anyone that you discussed or shared the content with?

Understanding online hate

OBJECTIVE: Explore how participants frame the severity of online hate.

In this section we will discuss what you feel makes online hate have more or less impact.

3. When you first were contacted about joining this project you were asked to rank on a scale of 0 (no harm or distress) to 10 (severe harm or distress) the impact that exposure to hateful content has had on you. You answered [interviewer recall participant score]. Does that score still feel right in relation to the incident we have been discussing today?
4. If you can, please think of different examples of online hate and/or hateful abuse? What factors might make some experiences/behaviours/content more harmful than others? (probe – check if these example experiences are first hand, or hypothetical)
 - ⊖ What is it about these examples that makes them more or less bad?
5. How does viewing hate aimed at someone with different protected characteristics from yours impact you?

Addressing online hate

OBJECTIVE: Explore what participants think platforms, regulators and others could or should be doing to address online hate and hateful abuse

In this section we will discuss what (if anything) you think should be done to address online hate and hateful abuse.

6. Is it anyone's responsibility to address hateful content online? Are there any risks with limiting what people say online?
7. What can the platforms do to help with this? Is there anything about the way platforms currently work that makes hateful content worse?
8. Do you think online platforms and services need to play a role in minimising harmful online behaviours? If yes, in what way?
9. What roles should the following have in helping to reduce harmful behaviours online?
 - Online platforms
 - Users
 - Regulators/policy makers
 - Who else?

Final thoughts

OBJECTIVE: Give the participant the opportunity to share any thoughts, ask questions, or generally wind down after the discussion.

10. Thank you so much for your time. Taking into account all the areas we have spoken about today, is there anything else you would like to add or ask me?

Next steps

Interviewer to:

- Highlight the support offer that we have in place and spend a few minutes winding down the conversation Interviewer should ask: How do you feel having spoken about these difficult experiences? We want to support you to feel safe leaving this conversation and to make sure that you have support moving forwards. How are they leaving the conversation? Is there anything I can do to support you before you go?
- Explain next steps in the research project – typing up notes, analysing the content to draw out key themes.
- Confirm the process for receiving incentive: the participant will receive an email from Ayda (formerly known as Particity) asking them to register and upload their bank details in order to process the payment.
- Explain the Recollective and Zoom workshop tasks and gauge interest in taking part.