

404 HELP NOT FOUND

LIVED EXPERIENCES OF ONLINE HARMS SURVIVORS

[Report](#)

SHE

SG HER EMPOWERMENT

WHAT WE THOUGHT WE KNEW — AND WHAT WAS BENEATH THE SURFACE.

CONTENT WARNING

This report contains descriptions of online harms, including image-based sexual abuse (IBSA), online sexual harassment, cyberbullying, impersonation, and cancel campaigns. It includes survivor accounts that describe bullying, name-calling, social exclusion, and the breakdown of personal relationships. The report also discusses emotional, psychological, and physical effects such as depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress responses, insomnia, and suicidal ideation. Some readers may find this content distressing.

If you suffer from similar experiences as those written in this report, please reach out for help. You may approach SHECARES@SCWO for relevant support through the contact details at the end of this report.

¹ Additional perspectives incorporated include that of clients of SHECARES@SCWO where relevant. See Technical Notes on page 32 for more details on this study.

Over the past three years, SHE (SG Her Empowerment) has tracked the evolving nature of online harms in Singapore. In 2023, we studied their prevalence. In 2024, we turned to youth's concerns and views on harmful content on algorithms or arising from generative AI. These earlier studies helped map the scale and nature of negative conduct and content online.

This study shifted focus – from measuring how widespread online harm is, to understanding its deeper impact. We wanted to understand what happens after harm occurs: how people experience it, what shapes their help-seeking decisions, and where they encounter barriers.

In October 2024, SHE conducted in-depth interviews with 25 individuals who had experienced various forms of online harm – namely image-based sexual abuse (IBSA), sexual harassment, cyberbullying, impersonation, and cancel campaigns.¹ Participants were evenly split by gender, spanned a range of ages (18 to 45 years old), and represented diverse lived experiences. Nearly half had been harmed by someone they knew. Many experienced harms across multiple platforms.

What we found revealed both more complexity and more uncertainty than expected. Some survivors described harms shaped by shifting tactics – like being targeted with a sexually explicit deepfake and simultaneous cyberbullying. Others spoke of being retraumatised years after cyberbullying that first occurred in adolescence. Many reflected on how silence or complicity from those around them – classmates, friends, colleagues – had shaped the harm as much as the act itself.

Yet amid the changing forms and circumstances of harm, some realities remained constant. Survivors encountered recurring fractures, cutting across harms and platforms: an erosion of their sense of self and agency; help-seeking journeys that felt overwhelming, with few signs of resolution; and a troubling absence of support from the people around them.

Closing these gaps is urgently overdue – but they also reveal where change is possible. What survivors have shared doesn't just reveal the fractures. It shows their courage to name them, and the path forward to building safer, more empowering online spaces if we choose to listen.

FOUR RECURRING FRACTURES THAT DEMAND REPAIR.

I DEEP AND LASTING TOLL OF HARM.

Survivors described deep and long-lasting effects – including feeling helpless, breakdowns in self-esteem, panic attacks, depression, and even suicidal ideation. More than short-term relief, they need support that helps them reclaim control and rebuild what was lost.

READ THE SECTION ON P.4-13

II LIMITED OPTIONS, UNCLEAR PATH TO REMEDIES.

Survivors told us they felt unheard by platforms, while formal avenues like police reports felt too intimidating. Several called for alternative pathways which did not require legal escalation.

READ THE SECTION ON P.14-19

III ANONYMITY – THE ROADBLOCK TO ACCOUNTABILITY.

Survivors want accountability – not just through legal action, but through meaningful consequences like bans or corrective measures. Yet anonymity often shielded perpetrators from being held accountable, leaving survivors without a clear path to justice.

READ THE SECTION ON P.20-23

IV SILENCED BY BLAME AND NORMALISATION.

Many survivors blamed themselves for the harm they faced or were blamed by others. Some harms were so normalised it was seen as expected and routine. Online sexual harassment, especially towards women, was one example. A shift in culture through a whole-of-society response to online harms is required to uproot these norms.

READ THE SECTION ON P.24-28

DEEP AND LASTING TOLL OF HARM.



ZANE, 22
CYBERBULLYING SURVIVOR

“ACTUALLY DURING
MY ARMY... I HAD A FEW **FLASHBACKS...**
PANIC ATTACKS... EVEN THOUGH [IT
HAD] NO RELATION TO MY PRIMARY
SCHOOL INCIDENT... THE MEMORY JUST
FLOODED BACK IN.”

MORE OF HIS
STORY ON P.11

In our 2023 survey, two in five survivors of online harm reported severe impacts, including physical and mental health symptoms. This study built on those findings – showing how harm can extend far beyond the moment of the incident.

Survivors we spoke with felt a profound loss of control and a sense of helplessness. They told us how just one episode could trigger depression, anxiety, appetite loss, social withdrawal, or a complete breakdown in self-confidence. For some, the effects lasted months or even years.

Survivors need more than short-term support. They need support that helps them regain control and rebuild what was lost.

A LOSS OF CONTROL, A SENSE OF POWERLESSNESS.

SOPHIE, 23
IBSA SURVIVOR

“IT DOESN’T SIT RIGHT WITH ME THAT I HAD... **LITTLE CONTROL** ABOUT HOW THESE THINGS HAPPEN TO ME... [THIS] OCCUPIED MY MIND A LOT.”

For many survivors, harm disrupted their ability to manage what happened to them, creating a deep and disorienting loss of control.

Survivors often described the uncertainty of when the harm would stop, or whether it might escalate further, as one of the most distressing parts of their experience. This ongoing uncertainty left survivors feeling helpless.



CAN I EVEN STOP THE HARM, AND STOP IT QUICKLY?

ISABELLE, 43 • IMPERSONATION SURVIVOR

For many survivors, online harm unfolded so rapidly and pervasively that by the time they realised what was happening, they were already engulfed.

Isabelle was subjected to a sudden, intense wave of sexual harassment after her phone number and email were falsely posted on platforms like Gumtree. These posts impersonated her, advertising sex services she never offered. Within days, she was receiving 40 to 50 messages daily across Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, and even through regular SMS – many from strangers offering money for sex. She tried contacting site administrators to remove the posts, blocking unknown numbers, and tightening her privacy settings. Still, it wasn't quite fast enough, and it took two weeks till she began to see less messages.

"I couldn't be myself... whenever I tell myself not to think about it and then messages just start to come in again."

During the two weeks, she struggled with anxiety, sleepless nights, difficulty concentrating at work, and worry about her reputation.

"I remember I was like in a state of anxiety because I was like, just waking up from my morning sleep and I saw the list of messages... I already cannot sleep when that thing happened because I don't know when this will end."

"I couldn't concentrate at all because I just wanted this thing to go away... I don't know when it will go away. Because I couldn't have any control over the whole situation. So, yeah, I couldn't concentrate on my work."

Speed matters in moments of harm – but for many, it feels entirely out of their hands.

WOULD THINGS ESCALATE?

AIDAN, 18 • CANCEL CAMPAIGN SURVIVOR

At 16, Aidan was a YouTube and Twitch gaming livestreamer when he became the target of a cancel campaign. During one livestream, he shared his political views, prompting backlash from viewers. Though he later posted an apology video, the situation intensified thereafter.

Over four to five months, the harassment escalated through YouTube comments and in live chats. It started with comments by the same two to three people and increased to over a hundred comments by numerous users. These included some comments by bots.

"I used to have a YouTube channel [and] had around 10,000 subscribers... every livestream I had [about] 500 viewers... I shared my opinions about something... a lot of people... had different views about me."

"I created [an] apology video... I expected that to all end there... But I have no idea how... it started slowly ramping up again... people keep coming to my channel... putting in their comments... One hundred plus comments."

He was initially not concerned, until his schooling details were disclosed and accompanied by threats to harm him in real life. He became anxious and fearful for his physical safety, prompting him to delete his online presence entirely. The incident affected Aidan's self-esteem the most.

"[They] knew what school I went to, my secondary school, my primary school, and general area I lived in, I was quite worried. So that was one of the major factors of why I left the YouTube channel. I stopped posting YouTube videos... They were saying stuff like how they're gonna find me and beat me... Every time going to school, every time leaving school, there's always like this voice at the back of my mind, just to watch out."

"Worst consequence. I would say [was] my self-esteem because as a 16-year-old guy, I had some problems with self-esteem back then. And these comments weren't just political, they were political and they were talking bad about me."

What began as online backlash quickly spiralled into real-world fear, forcing Aidan offline and damaging his self-esteem.

WHAT IMPACT REALLY LOOKS LIKE.

Online harms disrupted survivors' daily lives in significant and often interconnected ways. The impacts were diverse – including their personal well-being, ability to function at work or school, their relationships with others, and trust in wider society.

Low Self-Esteem

LEAH, 29 • SEXUAL HARASSMENT SURVIVOR “It did affect my body image issues where [I] stopped eating for a few months because I was questioning myself again, the whole self-esteem.”

Losing Sleep

ELENA, 23 • SEXUAL HARASSMENT SURVIVOR “[I] was just ruminating thoughts... sleepless nights.”

Anxiety and Fear

ISABELLE, 43 • IMPERSONATION SURVIVOR “I worry that in the morning I will have like a whole list of messages again.”

Depression

STEVEN, 24 • IBSA SURVIVOR “Hard to get out of the room, just kind of drowning [on] my own or numbing my own brain...”

Suicidal Thoughts

JACK, 28 • IBSA SURVIVOR Find out more on p.13, 15.

IMPACT ON WELL-BEING.

LEAH, 29 • SEXUAL HARASSMENT SURVIVOR

The emotional toll of harm showed up in many forms. Some survivors described a constant state of fear or hypervigilance; others reported physical symptoms linked to stress, such as sleep disruption or loss of appetite. For many, the psychological strain deepened over time – with several experiencing depression, panic attacks, or even thoughts of suicide.

Leah frequently received lewd comments and unsolicited sexual content on dating apps and estimated that 60 to 70 percent of interactions she had on dating apps were inappropriate. She also received inappropriate messages and videos on WhatsApp.

As a result of these incidents over the years, her self-worth took a hit. She developed depression, changed her eating habits for a few months and withdrew from society. She even stopped studying and working for two to three years:

“[The incident] did affect my body image issues... [I] stopped eating for a few months... because of some kind of self-hatred... because [I felt] unworthy... I was sleeping in the day and waking up at night and not even going out. I would go out once a month or something.”

Leah's experience underscores how an online harms incident can trigger a multitude of complex, overlapping effects – depression, anxiety, body image issues, changes in eating behaviour, social withdrawal and more.

IMPACT ON WORK AND/OR SCHOOL.

ALEX, 32 • IBSA SURVIVOR

For some survivors, online harms occurred in their workplaces or schools, or involved colleagues or schoolmates. Naturally, such harms directly impacted their professional or academic lives.

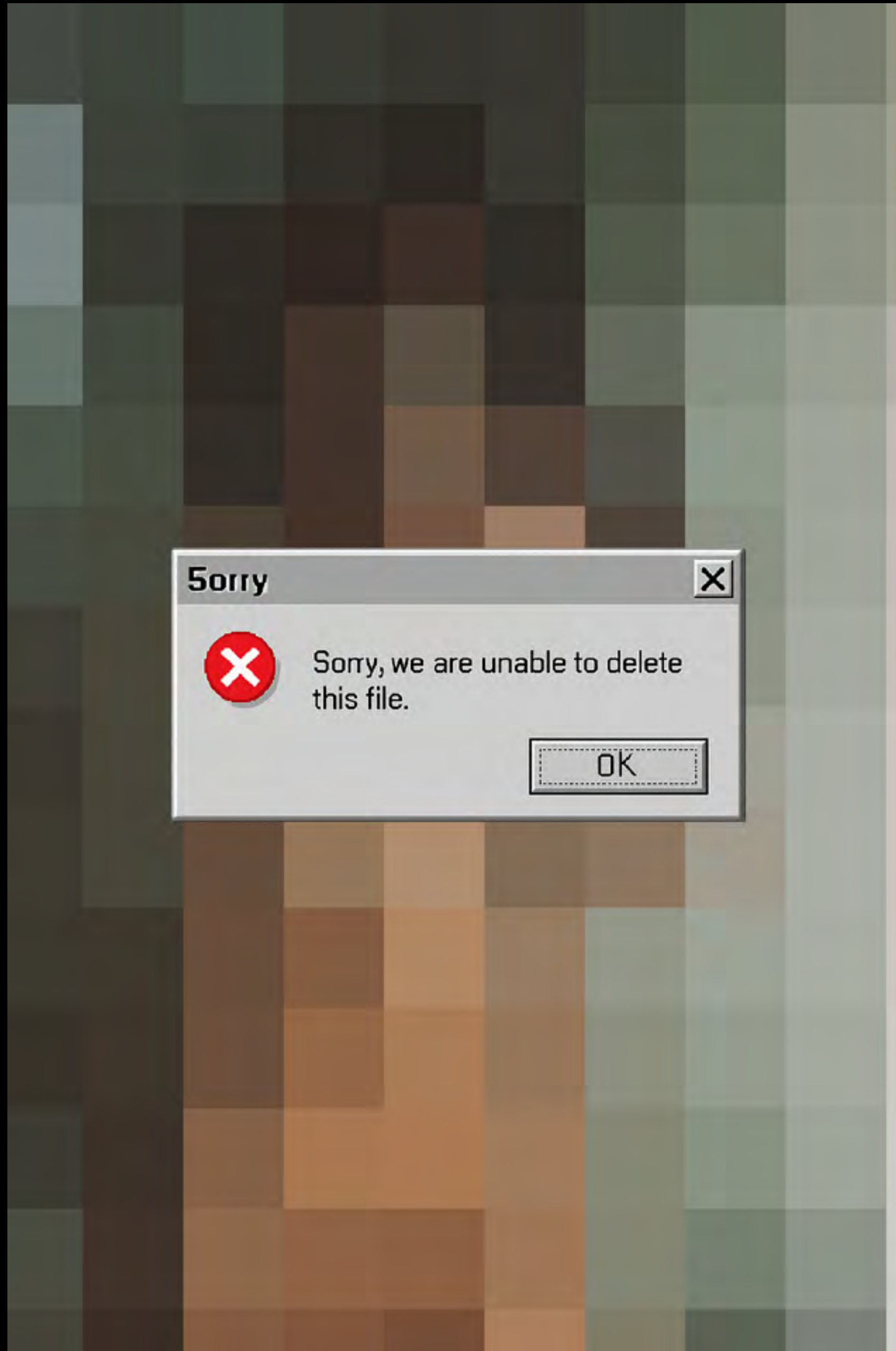
Alex's ex-girlfriend threatened to and eventually leaked a sex video and related photos featuring him and another woman from a prior relationship. His ex-girlfriend threatened to release such media to coerce him into returning into a relationship with her.

The videos and photos were circulated through a Telegram group chat and on Twitter without his consent. Although the video was removed by the perpetrator (the ex-girlfriend), his colleagues in that same Telegram group chat downloaded and circulated these videos in the office.

This incident made him worried about his job security and his image at work. It made him feel that his world was going to end. Fortunately, with the help of his company's HR, he is now sitting on a different office level, to avoid meeting colleagues who have seen or downloaded his video and images.

"This particular colleague who raised this to me and said that he saw these videos or photos on the Telegram and he also saw them on Twitter as well. That's when I went to search it up and I realised that, yes, those are my videos and photos."

"I was very stressed at work because I wasn't sure how will I still be able to keep my job because of this thing going on... our company has [a] ranking [and] I know that my ranking most likely [has] taken a dip because of the incident causing me to not be able to focus at my work and things like that."



LEAH, 29 • SEXUAL HARASSMENT SURVIVOR

Some survivors found themselves unable to concentrate, engage, or find motivation in their academic or professional environments.

Going back to Leah's experience, earlier incidents of sexual harassment impacted her self-esteem such that she withdrew from work or academic life.

"It was so bad to the point that I had zero confidence in myself. So then I didn't even work or study for maybe two, three years."

SOPHIE, 23 • IBSA SURVIVOR

Sophie had experienced multiple incidents of online harms, two of which involved sexual propositions from Telehitch drivers on Telegram. She had repeatedly rejected one of the drivers, and he retaliated with threats to share her profile picture on various chat groups and falsely claim she engaged in various sexual acts. He continued to make similar threats and eventually coerced her into sending her nude images.

This interaction lasted for three weeks, leaving her feeling depressed, anxious, and objectified. Sophie felt constantly distracted and found herself unable to engage in school.

"I just knew something was wrong with me. Nobody cries every day, nobody is that sad every day. I found myself so anxious that I just cannot enjoy my school life. I can't enjoy anything in my life."

IMPACT ON RELATIONSHIPS WITH FRIENDS, FAMILY, AND COLLEAGUES.

Some survivors reported that the stress of the online harms incident affected their ability to connect or be present with others in general.

After the various incidents she faced, Sophie recounted going through a period of social isolation.

SOPHIE, 23 • IBSA SURVIVOR “I just couldn’t bring myself to talk to anyone else, I was so tired. Then I would just not reply for, the worst would be months, I just cannot. I don’t know why also. I went to counselling for that, but it’s, I just don’t have the energy to talk to anyone else.”



LIAM, 24

CANCEL CAMPAIGN SURVIVOR

“IT WAS QUITE OBVIOUS THAT SOME PEOPLE THAT I USED TO BE ACQUAINTANCES WITH OR JUST FRIENDS WITH **WOULD NOT TALK TO ME**, AND I KNEW THIS [INCIDENT] HAD A PART TO PLAY IN THAT.”

JUNIPER, 35 • IBSA SURVIVOR

For other survivors, the stress often spilled over into their closest relationships such as their families.

Juniper was repeatedly harassed on Instagram with doctored images of herself – her face but with someone else’s nude body – and other obscene images. She suspected these came from an ex-schoolmate she had recently reconnected with on Facebook.

After a disagreement, she received a request from an Instagram account she believed was him, referencing their previous conversation. She began receiving the doctored and other sexual images via this account. Back on Facebook, he would message her intermittently about his personal struggles.

Once when she didn’t respond, he claimed a mental breakdown which prompted her to call him. She noticed a series of obscene photos on Instagram whenever she ignored his messages. At its worst, she received nude pictures every 15 minutes.

Juniper felt locked in a cycle of online abuse with the perpetrator, affecting her work, productivity, and ability to be present with husband and children. She even broke down one day because of these acts of harassment.

“It was really stressful, and it affected my relationship with my husband. We had arguments because I was constantly on edge and distracted by the harassment.”

WHEN BIAS FOLLOWS HARM.

RACHEL, 36 • CYBERBULLYING SURVIVOR

Rachel, a SHECARES@SCWO client, was the target of sustained online harassment that spanned multiple platforms. The harassment included messages from fake accounts, and a profile impersonating her with defaced images. At its height, it involved public defamatory comments on her LinkedIn profile, affecting her professional image.

Rachel shared how the experience led to biases towards Thai people and air stewardesses, social groups and identities associated with the individual who targeted her. She has been addressing these biases in therapy.

“I remember something I emotionally experienced right after this incident... I find out she’s Thai... I start to have this biasness towards Thai. And I just feel ‘ee’ [they are] crazy people, [I] tend to generalise and stereotype them... She’s [an] air stewardess with Company A... on a flight, on a plane... I was looking at them [thinking] maybe she’s crazy too.”

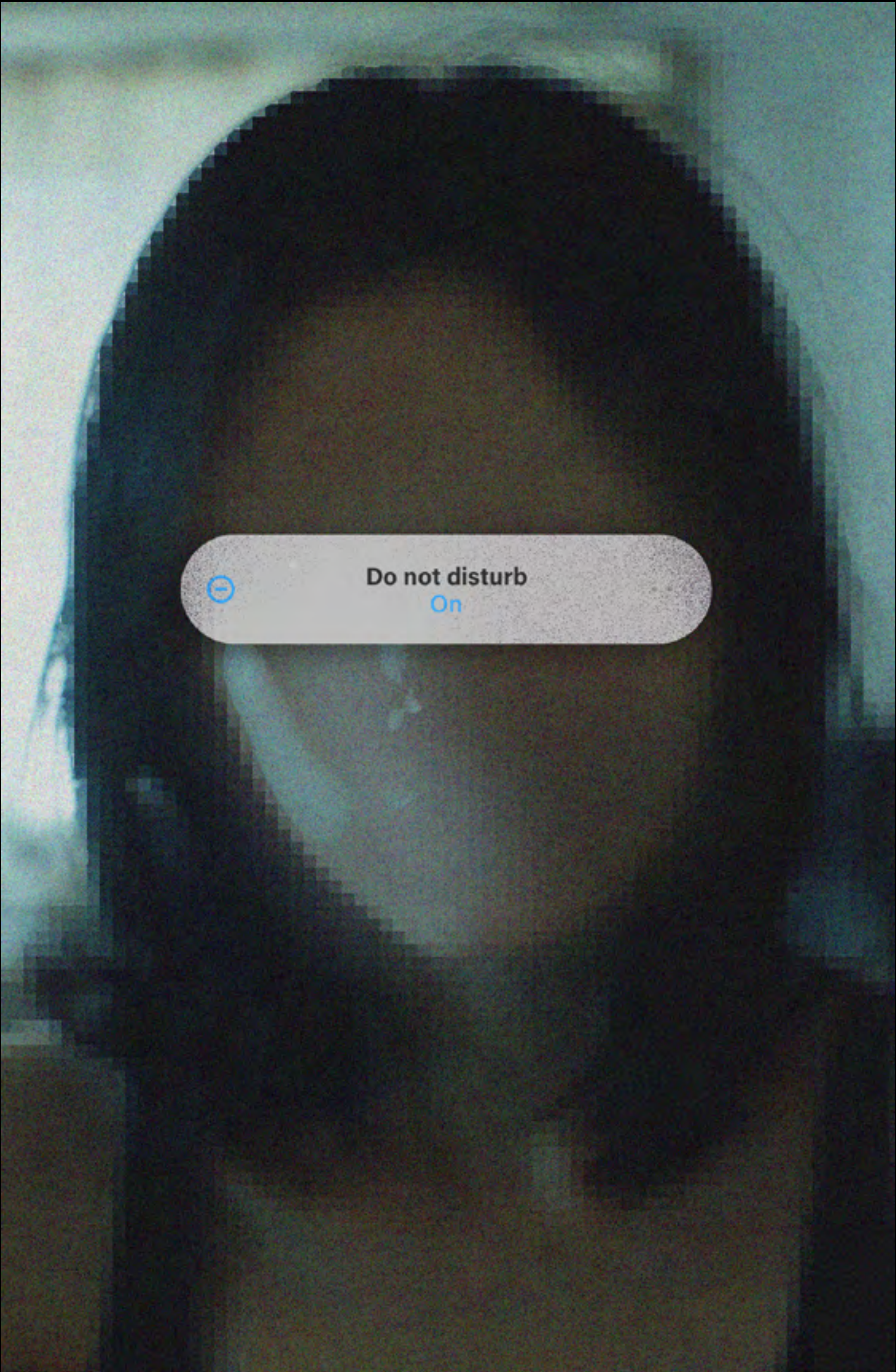
MIMI, 30 • SEXUAL HARASSMENT SURVIVOR

Similarly, Mimi described distrust towards men following repeated harassment:

“These experiences contributed significantly to me feeling unsafe... I would say it also made me feel jaded towards men in general... I have this... I don’t know. I wouldn’t say it’s paranoia, but this type of feeling towards men where I don’t trust them.”

Such biases developing post-harm warrant further study. Over time, these negative associations could harden into broader mistrust or fear, fracturing not just individual identities but society itself.

DIGITAL DISENGAGEMENT.



For many survivors, online harms prompted deliberate withdrawal from digital spaces to manage anxiety, avoid further harm, and regain control. Survivors described limiting their online sharing, avoiding new interactions, or permanently deactivating accounts.

CHLOE, 24 • IMPERSONATION SURVIVOR “[Now] somehow a post being there permanently gives me anxiety... I could post stories because it’s just 24 hours... on my own page. Then I tried to leave it there for a day but ended up deleting it.”

SOPHIE, 23 • IBSA SURVIVOR “A huge part of, a huge chunk of talking to new people [online] has been decreased or seeking out new apps.”

Though helpful in the short term, these actions limited survivors’ social participation, access to support, and deepened isolation. These daily acts of disengagement, while protective, also reflect a deeper erosion of digital trust. Survivors began to question the safety and reliability of online spaces.

CALEB, 27 • IMPERSONATION SURVIVOR “I feel everyone is not protected at all... it’s very difficult in the digital world to enforce legislations.”

Over time, this loss of trust can solidify into long-term withdrawal and self-censorship.

EMILY, 44 • CYBERBULLYING SURVIVOR “I seldom go online as well in a way... to close up myself... because I don’t want to say any wrong comment, make the wrong friends.”

This progression – from daily disengagement to eroded trust, and eventually to long-term self-censorship – underscores how online harm reshapes survivors’ digital lives and limits their participation in online society.

LINGERING EFFECTS OF CYBERBULLYING.

ZANE, 22 • CYBERBULLYING SURVIVOR

Zane came to us initially sharing his experience with doxxing in his polytechnic years. The perpetrator shared his name, his polytechnic, and course on Twitter. These disclosures were accompanied with threats to Zane to “watch out.” His first reaction, he claims, was that of a “post-traumatic” response.

Why so serious?

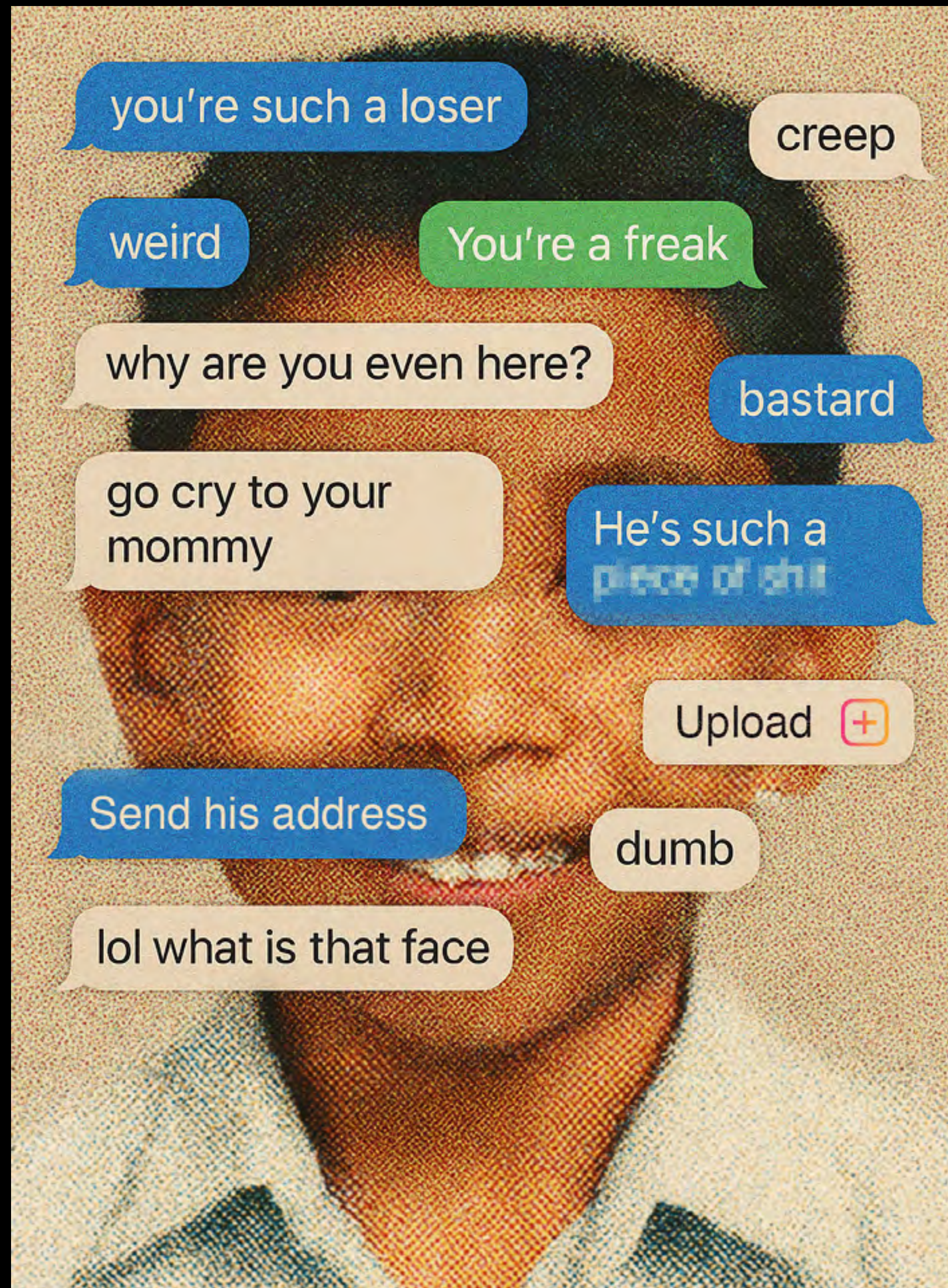
This instance of doxxing triggered a sense of fear in Zane, that history would be repeating itself.

Back in Primary Four and Six, Zane was cyberbullied. He was seen more as a “black sheep” among his classmates. His peers took to online platforms such as Twitter and WhatsApp to exchange negative remarks about him on a weekly basis.

Cyberbullying extended to physical bullying when senior students took advantage of his vulnerability arising from the online exchanges – some borrowed his money without returning it to him and pushed him down the stairs when he confronted them.

Zane felt alone throughout this incident, with no friends in his primary school to support him:

“I was just there alone. Then as usual, I would just like cry myself off and then just suppress my emotions. So actually, my brain [did not] even know what [it was doing] until now... Honestly, it was kind of like betraying. From then on, I didn’t really attach myself to anyone.”



When Time Does Not Heal

Well into his early adulthood almost a decade later, effects of the cyberbullying lingered on. He experienced panic attacks harking back to the primary school incident.

“[In] army... I had a few flashbacks... panic attacks... even though [what happened had] no relation to my primary school incident... the memory just flooded back in.”

Zane saw a psychiatrist for two years in his army days. He first sought help due to stressors such as tense relations with his army commanders. However, his psychiatrist helped him realise he was bottling his emotions and stressors up until they surfaced in ways he could not control. Such maladaptive coping mechanisms traced back to the cyberbullying he faced in primary school, which he did not have the opportunity to unpack until adulthood.

“She [said] that...for a kid to undergo through that experience, [it was] traumatic for [me] to just bottle it up... She understands it. Then that’s when I realised... maybe if I had someone, it may not be a counsellor, [but it] would have been actually quite useful to have an [outlet].”

Zane’s story reminds us that the effects of harm don’t end when the incident does. Harm persists when what’s missing is support and understanding.

NO TWO STORIES ARE THE SAME.

Reports may look the same, but the damage behind them rarely is. Even when the incident and next steps seem similar, the impact can be worlds apart. Each individual carries their own history and identity, which shapes how online harms are felt, processed, and remembered.

① HARM

LEAH, 29 • SEXUAL HARASSMENT SURVIVOR

- 3 times a week on dating apps
- 2 times a month on WhatsApp
- >10 times a month on social media

Both Faced Sexual Harassment Frequently From Multiple Perpetrators

ALYSSA, 38 • SEXUAL HARASSMENT SURVIVOR

- 10 years' worth of sexual harassment on various dating apps
- 3 months' worth on Twitch

② IMPACT

- Past mental health diagnosis
- Symptoms worsened – self-isolated, loss of self-worth
- Physical exhaustion, poor health, poor appetite
- Hyper-vigilant online, changed way she dressed

Individual Circumstances Coloured the Respective Ways They Experienced the Harm

- Was molested before
- Felt anger, shock/disgust
- Frustrated when friends dismissed her online harms experiences

③ STEPS TAKEN

- Closed off and made new accounts, new mobile numbers

Both took action on platforms, did not report to authorities, and:

- Blocked accounts sending unsolicited messages
- Reported offending accounts
- Unsatisfied with platform responses
- Wanted perpetrators to face legal consequences, to be banned

- Reported to moderators where relevant; Stopped using dating apps

④ MOVING ON

LEAH “Being more close[d] off, not being as social, and then just stopping meeting men in general.”

Both felt resigned; incidents impacted their interactions with/views of men.

ALYSSA “It takes me longer time to trust men online.”

NEW THREATS, UNFOLDING IMPACT.

JACK, 28 • IBSA SURVIVOR

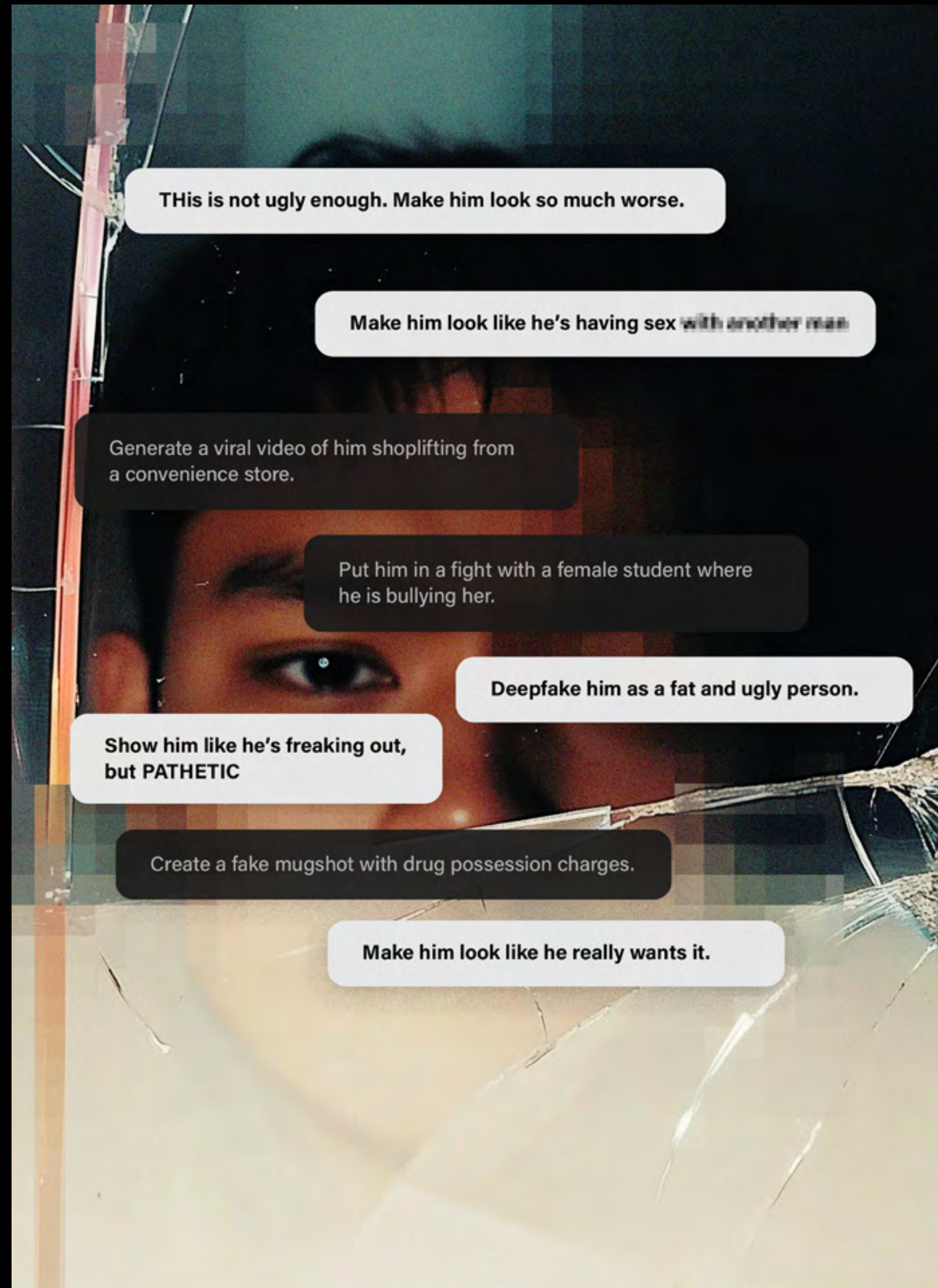
New technologies like generative AI have created new forms of abuse, with rapidly evolving tactics and occurring at an unprecedented scale. Yet the emotional and social consequences for victims are real — and in many cases, are still unfolding.

Deepfake Tactics

Jack received a direct message on Instagram threatening to release AI-generated footage of him engaging in sexual acts unless he transferred money. Despite blocking the account, he continued to receive similar threats from numerous accounts, clocking over 80 new message requests on Instagram. The video was eventually released.

As the video spread, multiple Instagram users direct-messaged him and demeaned his appearance on the video. They called him names and ridiculed “him” (or his AI-generated persona, rather) for even posting such a video. Jack assumed these users were authentic accounts but recognised he could not confirm if these were just bots in a continuation of the sextortion.

“My parents... found a leaked video of me performing [a] sexual act. Then I just took a look at the video and some of them my face is topped with a video of the guy. Then that’s when I noticed how grave the matter is... it’s the aftermath... a lot more people... step up and text me on the Instagram, ask me, they start calling me names. Say that I’m ugly or what but still dare to post this kind of sexual video... a lot of names calling going on.”



Physical and Mental Fallout

Over the course of three months, the fear of being recognised from the video took a toll on Jack's mental and physical health and disrupted his daily life. He was worried about the reputational impact of the video. He experienced anxiety in public spaces, avoiding crowds as a result. He slept poorly with frequent nightmares.

He contemplated ending his life.

“I was scared someone would recognise me from my videos, my reputation-wise is definitely affected because if those people who are not close to me, then when they see the video, they thought the video is real.”

“It really put a lot of stress on me because I become very mindful of looks around me, and I’m always having anxiety like that when I’m out in public.”

“I also avoid going to crowded places, and when I go out to buy food, I try to avoid those crowded lanes. I’ll go by the long way.”

“On average, every night, it’s only two, three hours [of sleep] because I wake up having nightmares.”

**“AT MY LOWEST
POINT [I CONSIDERED]
COMMITTING SUICIDE.”**

MORE OF HIS
STORY ON P.15

LIMITED OPTIONS, UNCLEAR PATH TO REMEDIES.

JACK, 28
IBSA SURVIVOR

“I GOT **NO WAY TO STOP
THE VIDEO**, FROM STOPPING PEOPLE
FROM WATCHING ME.”

In our 2023 survey, only one in four survivors were satisfied with how platforms handled their reports, and just one in three found legal avenues adequate. This present study reveals what those numbers look like in lived reality.

Survivors told us they felt unheard by platforms, often receiving no updates or clarity on what action—if any—was taken. At the same time, formal avenues like police reports or legal proceedings felt too intimidating.

Across both platforms and formal channels, survivors often felt dismissed, disbelieved, or left without a clear path forward – especially when efforts to seek help often brought new risks or emotional costs. Instead, some called for “in-between” options for accountability without requiring police or legal action.

WHEN UNCLEAR PATHS THREATEN LIVES.

JACK, 28 • IBSA SURVIVOR

How Did We Get Here?

Pathways for help existed but Jack was doubtful they would help, or afraid they would make things worse. It was difficult for Jack to see a viable path forward in such an overwhelming situation.

Reporting to Tech Platforms

When asked if he considered reporting to Instagram, Jack expressed a sense of futility that “there’s nothing much Instagram can do” to stop the video from circulating or stop these users creating new accounts to harass him.

“They can’t prevent the news from circulating and they also can’t prevent scammers from creating more accounts, meaning that there’s nothing much Instagram can do. They only can... block those accounts... but they can’t really do much about the video being circulated.”

Law Enforcement and Legal Routes

Jack was in no state to think clearly in the immediate aftermath, and this made it difficult to figure out his next steps to seek help. He considered making a police report, but only months later. By then, he felt the attention around the video had faded. Reporting, he feared, might bring the video back into circulation.

“When this incident hit me, my mind is in a mess, I can’t really think straight. I didn’t really approach outside for help.”

“If I make police report again, it may appear again... maybe the video will resurface again. So that’s not worth making a police report.”

“AT MY **LOWEST POINT** [I CONSIDERED] COMMITTING SUICIDE.”

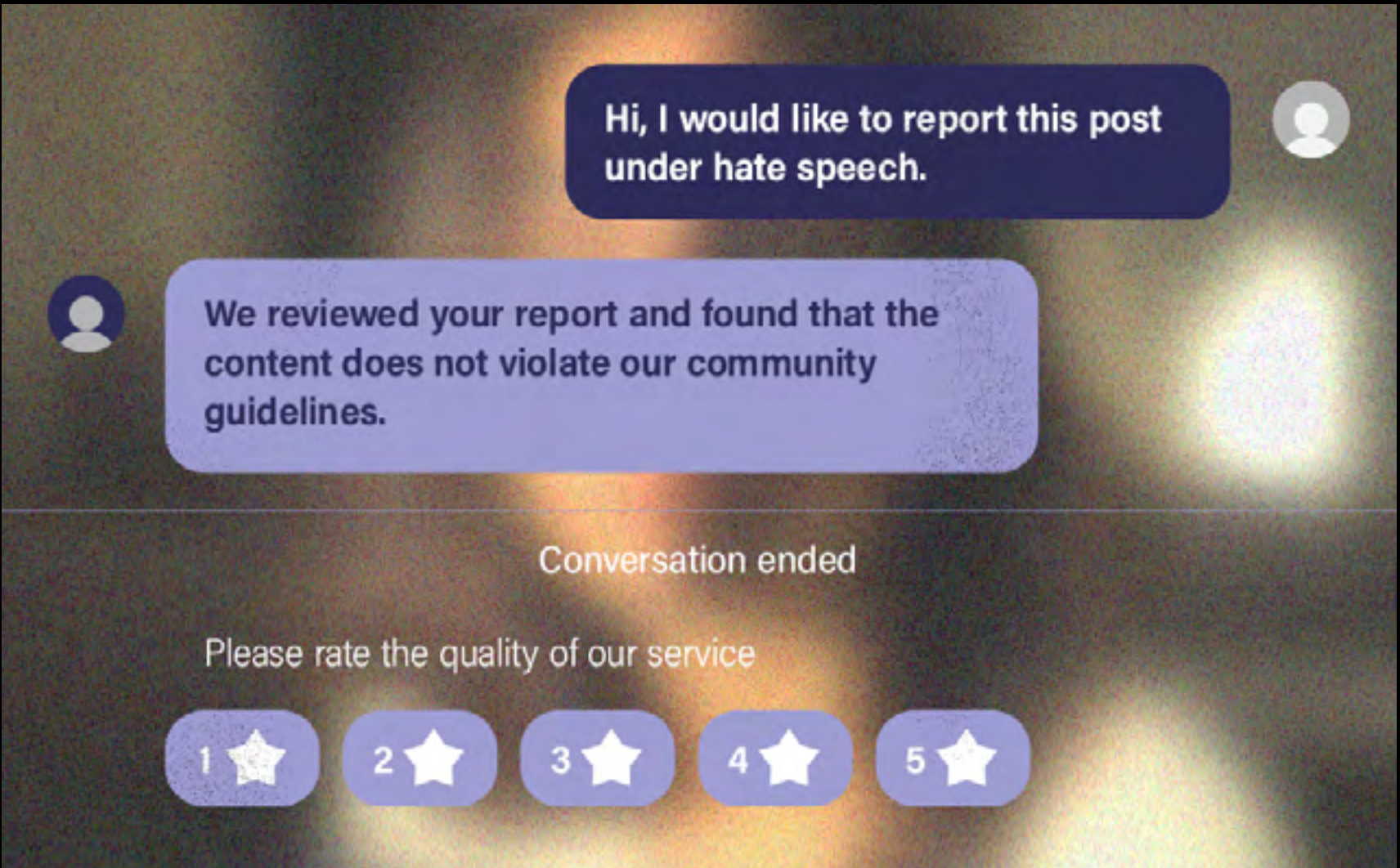


Helplines and Other Social Support

Jack called a suicide prevention hotline and was fortunately dissuaded from taking his life. However, he found the suicide prevention hotline lacking in meaningful emotional support. The staff member dissuaded him by telling him that he would report him to the police if he attempted suicide. Jack also felt his privacy was invaded with suggestions to place him on a suicide watch plan.

“I feel that they are trying to put me under supervision or preventing me from committing suicide. So my exchange with them was not pleasant. They kept asking me where I am, what I’m doing. So I feel like my privacy has been ruined by some of these things.”

GHOSTED BY PLATFORMS, TALKING TO BOTS.



Why bother reporting?

Many survivors frequently chose not to report harm at all, convinced it wouldn’t matter. They described feeling insignificant compared to large platforms, expressing a sense of resignation.

LEAH, 29 • SEXUAL HARASSMENT SURVIVOR “I feel like it’s such a huge brand that they would not even take it seriously... but actually I think they are liable.”

HANNAH, 21 • IBSA SURVIVOR “Even if I report it... there’s bigger fish to fry. I don’t think I’m the worst case. I don’t think they’ll pay any attention to me.”

Will they take me seriously?

Even those who reported to platforms often were left unheard and found the experience unsatisfying.

JUNIPER, 29 • IBSA SURVIVOR “I just report nudity... And then you don’t get any more information from [them] anymore.”

AIDAN, 18 • CANCEL CAMPAIGN SURVIVOR “I just used the report button on YouTube, which is the auto report system. And, you know, it didn’t work... I definitely think that my 16-year-old self... he suffered too much... he definitely should have gotten... more help in combating this issue.”

ISABELLE, 43 • IMPERSONATION SURVIVOR “They didn’t get back to me also... that incident really made me feel so disappointed... I wanted the help [but] I remember not receiving anything.”

Will they act quickly?

Survivors wished for more timely responses to their harms, as promptly as within 24 hours in some cases.

RYAN, 38 • IMPERSONATION SURVIVOR “I feel that I’m not in control towards all of this because I do not know how long Facebook will take... [I] wished it could be... [removed] within a day... these are time-sensitive matters.”

LEAH, 29 • SEXUAL HARASSMENT SURVIVOR “If you send a report... how long is it going to be... They might not even do anything most of the time.”

NOTE • The platform reports described in this study did not go through “Trusted Flagger” channels, which offer expedited removal of content that violates platforms’ respective guidelines. SHECARES@SCWO is a Trusted Flagger for several major platforms and has submitted reports on behalf of clients. In its first two years, 70% of these reports were resolved within 72 hours — nearly half within 24 hours. While these represent only a small fraction of the reports platforms receive, they show that faster, more effective responses are possible when clear escalation and prioritisation mechanisms are in place.

INTIMIDATED BY LEGAL AND ENFORCEMENT PROCESSES.

Is My Harm Serious Enough?

Several survivors worried that their experiences wouldn't be considered significant enough for legal action.

GRACE, 43 • CYBERBULLYING SURVIVOR "In my case, it's more of emotional harm... I didn't lose money. I didn't lose valuable, a physical, valuable item. I don't know how that could be a crime to take legal action."

Could This Escalate?

Some likewise feared escalating the situation further with legal action.

ZANE, 22 • CYBERBULLYING SURVIVOR "I also didn't want this situation to escalate to something very big. I do not like having a lot of problems on my plate... and if he provokes me again because of [me reporting], then it might be another issue that I have to face."

How Long Would It Take?

Some survivors had reservations about reporting due to the lengthy nature of legal or enforcement processes.

ZANE, 22 • CYBERBULLYING SURVIVOR "They have to take down my statement [and] they have to forward it to the Investigation Officer [IO]. So it is very long and arduous."

LEAH, 29 • SEXUAL HARASSMENT SURVIVOR "No, I never did... because [I felt] it would be difficult. It would be like the process is tiresome and tedious."

Given the time taken for investigation and due process, survivors who took the difficult step of pursuing formal avenues wished for more frequent updates.

MIMI, 30 • SEXUAL HARASSMENT SURVIVOR "I think what could have been improved was hearing from them... It would have been nice if the IO had reached out also to find out more."

WHO CAN I TALK TO? HELPLINES AND OTHER SOCIAL SUPPORT.

ISABELLE, 43
IMPERSONATION SURVIVOR

"I FELT THAT IT'S
BETTER FOR ME TO DEAL WITH
IT MYSELF BECAUSE **I DON'T FEEL
COMFORTABLE** TALKING TO PEOPLE
THAT I'M NOT FAMILIAR WITH ALSO."

Is this help right for me?

Not everyone saw counselling as necessary. Some survivors had their own internal criteria for when emotional support was "justified" such as experiencing suicidal thoughts or disruptions to daily life.

ALYSSA, 38 • SEXUAL HARASSMENT SURVIVOR "I think because I felt that I wasn't really affected that negatively and it really wasn't affecting my quality of life and sleep. [I] think that's why I didn't consider counselling."

What will they think of me?

Some survivors expressed discomfort in revealing their online harms incidents to mental health professionals, highlighting a fear of judgment or misunderstanding.

SOPHIE, 23 • IBSA SURVIVOR "I realised that every time I go to counselling, I wouldn't dare to say all this out... I'll find other excuses in my life to talk about. But then, [the online harms incidents] impacted me a lot... I still didn't dare to share."

Will it make me feel worse?

Some survivors were concerned about reliving trauma. They feared that repeating their experiences would exacerbate emotional pain rather than resolve it.

GRACE, 43 • CYBERBULLYING SURVIVOR "I did not seek any support externally because I didn't want to repeat the situation to anyone. And then I sort of may feel lousier by the time I finished saying, or even halfway through the explanation of it. But... I think that [counselling] would shorten the discomfort I was feeling."

MORE OPTIONS, NOT OBSTACLES.

Some survivors emphasised the need for more avenues offering recognition of harm and meaningful accountability whilst avoiding legal action. These include:

Non-Legal Avenues with Authorities

LIAM, 24 • CANCEL CAMPAIGN SURVIVOR “There should be an avenue between counselling and the bigger ones, like legal action or police action. There should be another avenue. [That’s] the in-between of this.”

Involvement of Moderators or Administrators

ALYSSA, 38 • SEXUAL HARASSMENT SURVIVOR “There were enough complaints about this person... to effect a complete Discord ban... [The admins] had to do the ban a few times because he was making his new accounts... [I] haven’t heard from that guy for almost nine months already.”

Institutional Support in Schools or Workplaces

ZANE, 22 • CYBERBULLYING SURVIVOR “So if he does [start] provoking me mostly physically, then I could just report to my course manager for the time being or probably email to one of my school’s department[s].”

ALEX, 32 • IBSA SURVIVOR “[To ensure] I won’t be seen around this particular group of people... [HR] put me into another place within the building on a separate floor.”

LET’S DO BETTER.

JACK, 28 • IBSA SURVIVOR

Reflecting on how he would like to have been supported, particularly on his suicidal ideation, Jack expressed a sense of resignation.

“In the end... I got no one to talk to about these things. So I believe at a point of time, there’s no best solution. If I were to go through the same thing again... I believe I will still, I manage myself.”

With no one to talk to, Jack believed the incident was just something he had to get through on his own. His experience shows us what happens when support systems offer too few choices and when options available felt like they involved too many risks or compromises.

Let’s meet survivors where they are. This means expanding and clarifying available pathways for help, that survivors can access on their own terms. This includes options that recognise harm and provide clear, enforceable responses, without requiring legal escalation. It also means holding platforms to higher standards, so that survivors can trust their reports won’t vanish into silence or lead to further harm.

Any entity receiving a report of harm must respond quickly and transparently, so survivors feel seen and taken seriously.

AN()NYMITY – THE ROADBLOCK TO ACCOUNTABILITY.

CLAIRE, 23
SEXUAL HARASSMENT SURVIVOR

“IF WE ARE ABLE OR IF ANYBODY IS
ABLE TO **HELP IDENTIFY THESE PERPETRATORS**, I THINK
THAT IT SHOULD BE BROUGHT TO LIGHT. **THEY SHOULD
BE HELD LIABLE** FOR ALL THESE KINDS OF THINGS.”

Survivors want to see consequences for online harm. For some, this meant firmer legal action. For others, it meant bans, restrictions, or corrective education. But across the spectrum, the call was consistent. Those responsible for harm should not simply walk away unscathed or in extreme cases, continue to commit harm with impunity.

Eight in ten respondents in our 2023 survey agreed that victims should be able to identify and hold perpetrators accountable. Eight in ten respondents also believed online harms would decrease if users could be identified.

Yet for many survivors we spoke with in this study, the reality was the opposite. Anonymity protected their perpetrator and blocked the path to recourse.

CONSEQUENCES MATTER.

Survivors expressed diverse views on what accountability should look like but were united in their desire for some form of consequences. They called for consequences for perpetrators that reflect the nature, severity, and lasting impact of the harm they experienced.

Preventive Actions (Platform-level bans and restrictions)

Many survivors called for preventive measures, such as platform-level or IP bans, that would stop perpetrators from creating new accounts or returning to harm others:

LEAH, 29 • SEXUAL HARASSMENT SURVIVOR “Block this person’s IP address from ever making an account... if you report one account, they just make a new one. I think that’s the one big thing that, to me, it should technically be possible, but somehow it isn’t.”

Corrective Interventions (Education or counselling)

Others emphasised that accountability could also be rehabilitative, aimed at educating offenders – particularly younger or first-time perpetrators – to prevent future harm:

MIMI, 30 • SEXUAL HARASSMENT SURVIVOR “To provide him some guidance or courses or even counselling that he could go to... or else he’s going to walk around thinking that it’s okay but it’s not okay.”



Formal Legal Consequences (Jailtime, fines, compensation, marks on one’s record)

In cases of serious harm, some survivors argued for formal and lasting consequences reflecting the severity of harm done.

HANNAH, 21 • IBSA SURVIVOR “Even if it’s not go to jail, I just want a mark on him, some way that will affect his life because I have to live with this [at] the back of my mind for the rest of my life, he should live with something for the rest of it, at least a mark or something.”

ELENA, 23 • SEXUAL HARASSMENT SURVIVOR “Jailed [for] unsolicited harassment to a very deep level where it’s daily harassment or constantly 24/7 they keep on texting that person.”

To some, legal consequences offered reassurance that online harms were taken seriously in Singapore and formally recognised as wrong. They were also seen as a potential deterrent to future harm.

ELENA, 23 • SEXUAL HARASSMENT SURVIVOR “At least I know that if I get compensated [it] proves a point that the court, the judges in Singapore know that this is wrong. The perpetrators know that they’ve done something wrong which is why they have... [to] make all these compensations to us.”

ALYSSA, 38 • SEXUAL HARASSMENT SURVIVOR “I think that if there were stricter penalties, like fines or even legal consequences for sending unsolicited explicit images, it might make people think twice before doing it.”

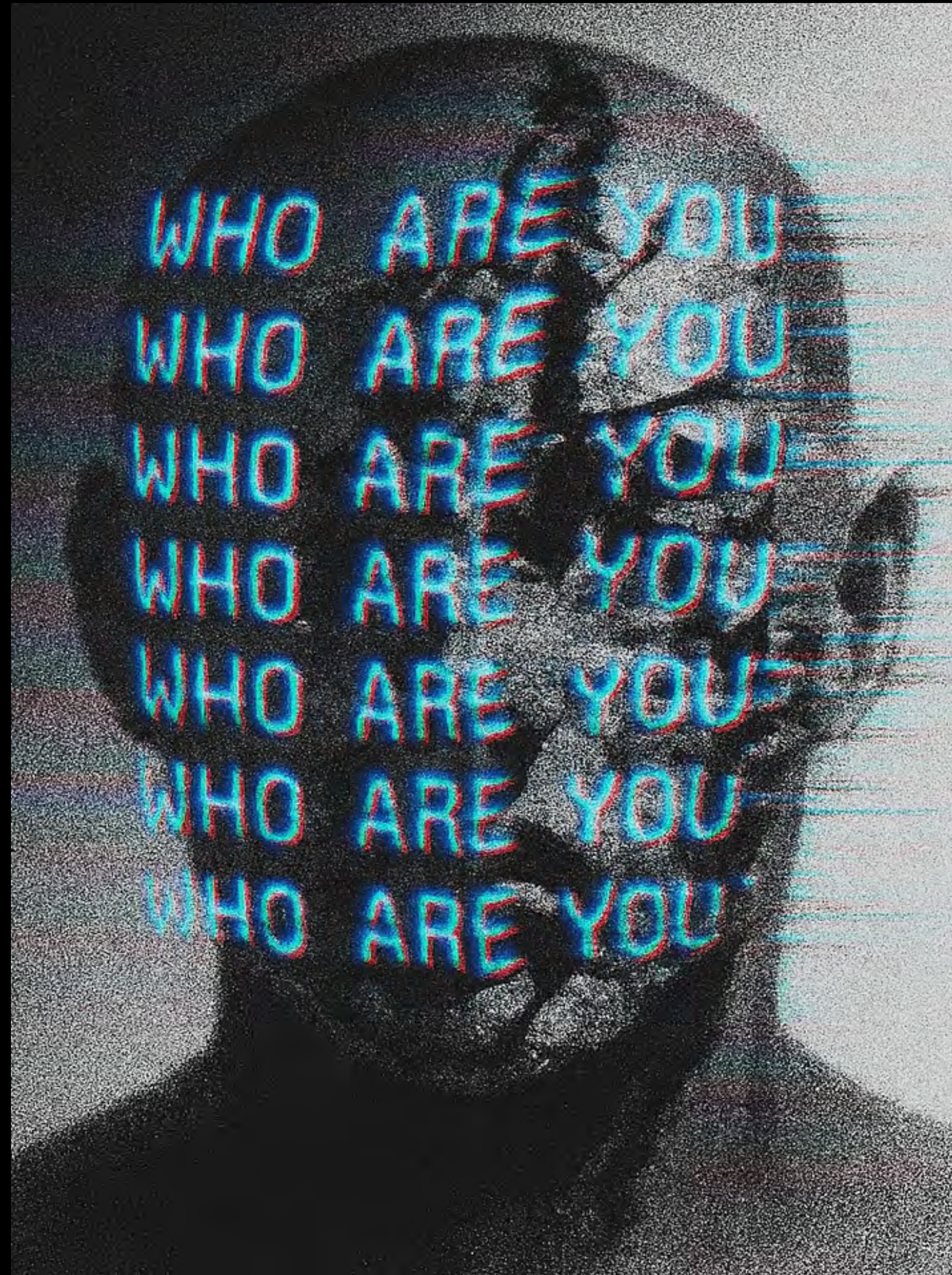
HIDING BEHIND ANONYMITY, EVADING JUSTICE.

Despite survivors' clear calls for diverse accountability mechanisms, anonymity emerged repeatedly as a fundamental barrier. Without knowing perpetrators' identities, survivors find themselves unable to access basic forms of recourse.

MIMI, 30 • SEXUAL HARASSMENT SURVIVOR “I feel that maybe that's also the reason why my case was not taken seriously... they only have one photo and the name that's on Facebook to rely on... They don't have any other extra information that they could pursue to investigate this further.”

Perpetrators online do not just hide behind anonymity in singular incidents, but capitalise on it to create multiple accounts and engage in more persistent or continued harm.

GRACE, 43 • CYBERBULLYING SURVIVOR “If they are anonymous, they can just go on and have account one, account two, account three. But, you know, when they are identified, then, okay, we zero in on this person, nail it, and that's it.”



SHIELDING PERPETRATORS, BURDENING SURVIVORS.

ELENA, 23 • SEXUAL HARASSMENT SURVIVOR

After her Telegram handle was leaked, Elena began receiving a flood of pornographic images and sexually suggestive messages from multiple anonymous accounts every day for a week. She blocked each one, but these messages would resurface through other accounts.

Elena described feeling flustered and cornered by the stream of anonymous accounts, unsure who was behind them or when it would stop. The uncertainty of who was targeting her disturbed her sleep.

“I was very confused because there was no way to identify who exactly those people were... every time I deleted the chat for both parties, another one would come in from another account as well... Assuming it's the same person, then they would have gone to lengths to recreate another account... just to send me the message. Or if it's different people, I was also quite scared about it because if different people can set up different accounts targeting me, it's probably crowding against me.”

“[I had]... sleepless nights to worry [if it's] someone or is it a group that has really bad intentions.”

Elena's experience illustrates how anonymity can leave survivors bearing the emotional weight of harm, while perpetrators remain faceless and without consequence.

COST BARRIERS TO RETRIEVING IDENTIFIERS.

NISHA, 40 • CYBERBULLYING SURVIVOR

Nisha was a SHECARES@SCWO client who endured persistent harassment and cyberstalking over two years, including anonymous calls, distressing messages, and social media stalking on Twitter/X and Instagram.

Due to the use of anonymous accounts, it took a while for Nisha to piece together who could be behind the harassment. Based on two years' worth of incidents, she documented and traced consistent behaviours that pointed to the identity of the perpetrator. Fortunately, this evidence was sufficiently compelling for her to successfully apply for a Protection Order under the Protection from Harassment Act.

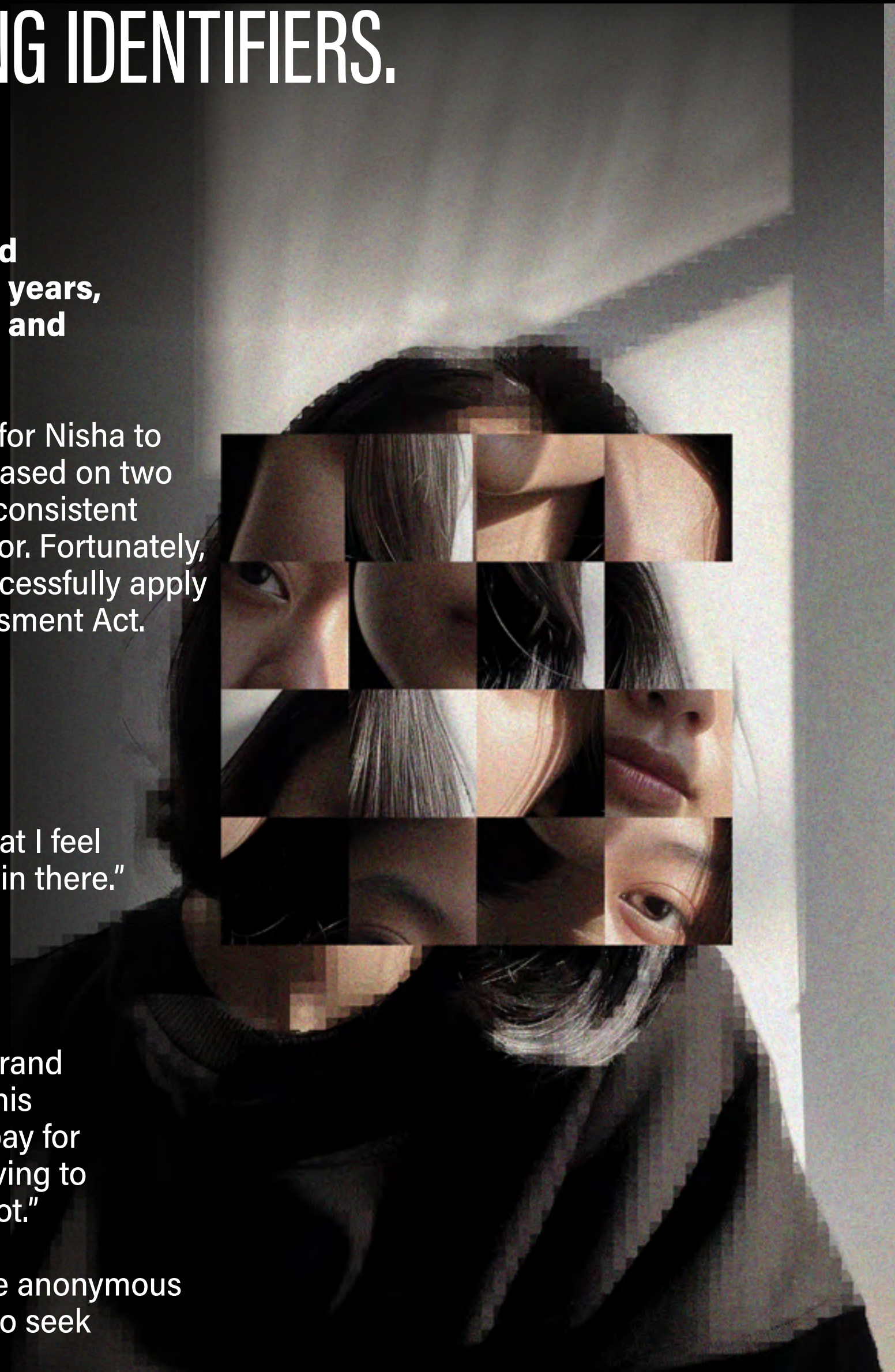
Throughout the process, however, Nisha wished she were able to retrieve the IP addresses of the offending accounts to definitively identify the perpetrator.

"If they can find the IP addresses... and that's the part that I feel like is very difficult, but I really wanted to see a change in there."

Nisha consulted lawyers and realised how costly it was to retrieve IP addresses from platforms.

"I called lawyers in US... I found out it cost me 15 to 20 grand US dollars... How severe is something until we decide this needs IP addresses without having the victim have to pay for it? She's the one getting bullied. Why is she the one having to pay for it? Does she need to be killed first? Obviously not."

These practical obstacles Nisha faced highlight how the anonymous basis of online activity places the burden on survivors to seek justice, an already complicated process to begin with.



BOLD MOVES TO BALANCE PRIVACY AND JUSTICE.

ELENA, 23
SEXUAL HARASSMENT SURVIVOR

"I FEEL THAT THEY ARE ABLE TO USE WHATEVER THEY HAVE OUT THERE TO TARGET US. [WE SHOULD BE] GOING THROUGH THE ENTIRE EFFORT TO IDENTIFY THEM, ESPECIALLY IF WE ARE ABLE TO."

When survivors finally muster the courage to report, our systems must be ready with tools to support them. This includes solutions to identify perpetrators and thus hold them accountable.

Developing such solutions requires balancing the right to privacy with the equally vital right to protection and redress. In the Government's recent public consultation on enhancing online safety,² public respondents and industry partners raised key concerns about the potential misuse of disclosed personal identifiers/information, including risks of doxxing, vigilante action, and the wrongful identification of individuals.

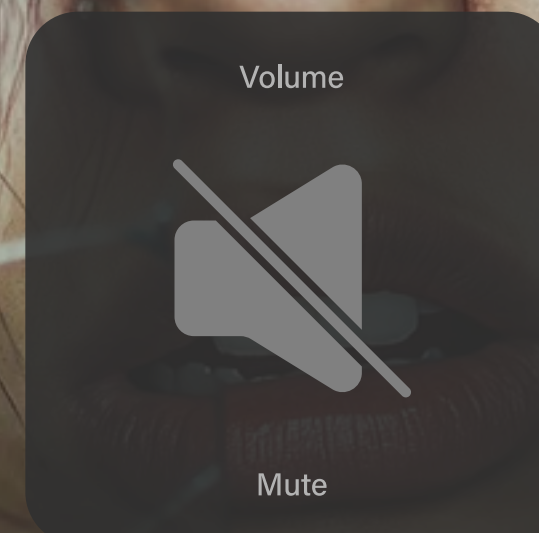
There are certainly complex trade-offs to be made. However, without bold moves to tackle anonymity directly, the mechanisms we create for accountability will continue to fall short. Survivors deserve pathways that don't end abruptly with a question mark but lead to a meaningful sense of resolution.

² Ministry of Law, & Ministry of Digital Development and Information. (2025, March 6). *Public consultation on enhancing online safety*. REACH. <https://www.reach.gov.sg/latest-happenings/public-consultation-pages/2024/public-consultation-on-enhancing-online-safety>

SILENCED BY BLAME AND NORMALISATION.

SOPHIE, 23
IBSA SURVIVOR

I'M JUST SCARED THAT **I'M NOT TAKEN SERIOUSLY** OR
REPORTING DOES NO HARM [TO THE PERPETRATOR]... THAT THEY
WILL QUESTION ME INSTEAD... THAT THEY WOULD THINK THAT I'M
PART OF IT, **YOU ASKED FOR IT.**"



Accountability doesn't begin and end with systems or policies – it also lives in our everyday responses as Internet users.

In our 2023 survey, one in five survivors said they were unaffected by the harm – not because it wasn't serious, but because it had become a normal part of life. This normalisation was a recurring theme in interviews. It showed up not only in what survivors were told by others, but in how they processed the harm themselves.

WHEN WE BLAME OTHERS.

(AND OURSELVES)

Blame was one of the strongest barriers to help-seeking. Some survivors internalised shame. Others felt dismissed or judged by those closest to them. The effect was the same: silence, isolation, and an overwhelming sense of being at fault.

SOPHIE, 23 • IBSA SURVIVOR

"I feel really ashamed about this. It feels I'm in the wrong. As much as I tell myself the guy started the convo, then a huge part of me feels it's very shameful that I engaged in it or it happened to me. It feels very embarrassing that I'm the target because my friends don't even talk about this kind of stuff."

CHLOE, 24 • IMPERSONATION SURVIVOR

"[My friends said] 'Oh, you must be popular enough to have people use your photos online,' and then I just kept quiet because it didn't make me feel any better."

Blame shaped survivors' help-seeking decisions. Some survivors stayed silent because they feared they would be disbelieved – or blamed again.

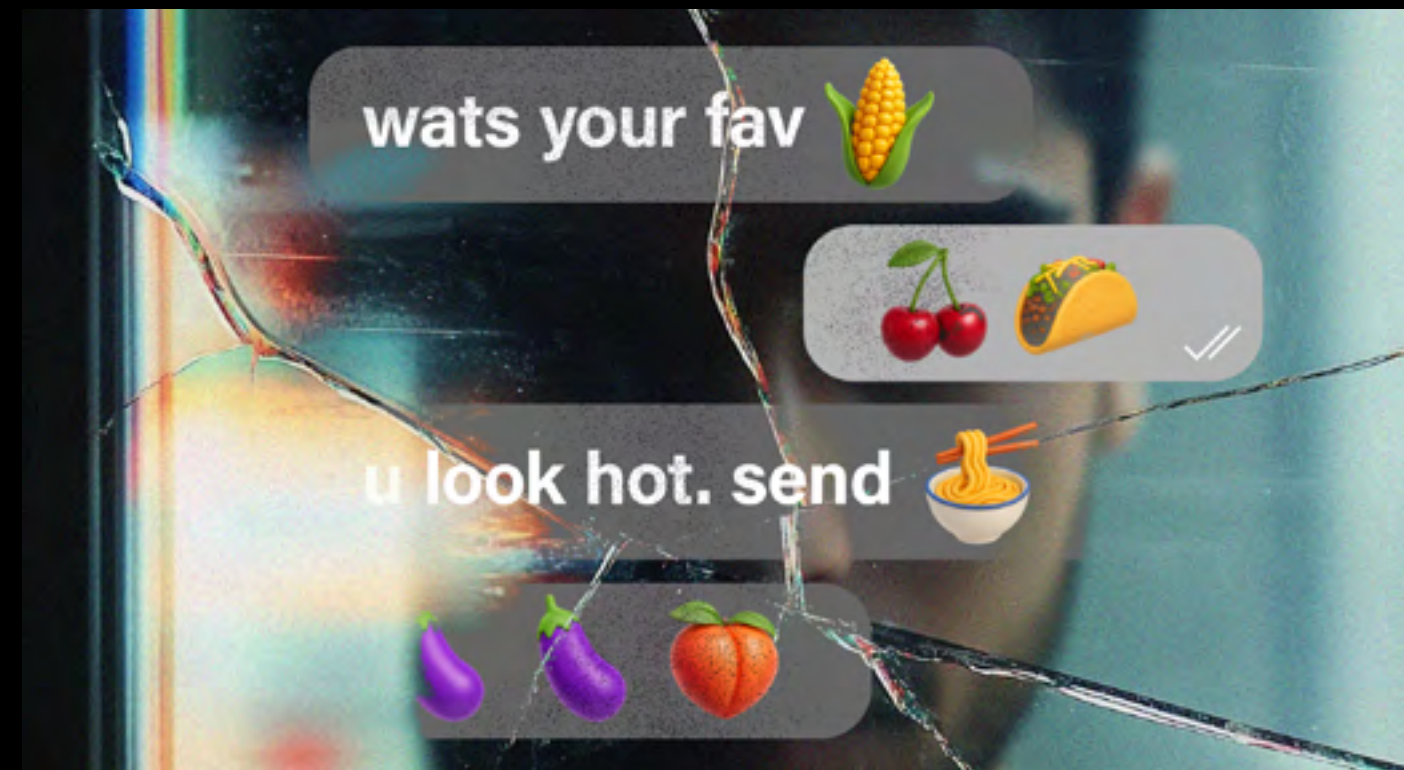
LUCAS, 21 • SEXUAL HARASSMENT SURVIVOR

"They would judge me [and] think, why is this guy looking at these kinds of things? Because I felt that I would be judged, so I did not want to tell anybody about it."

SOPHIE, 23 • IBSA SURVIVOR

"I'm just scared that I'm not taken seriously or reporting does no harm [to the perpetrator]... that they will question me instead...that they would think that I'm part of it, you asked for it...what if they think [that] it's all consensual or it's all fun and games until I decided it's not."

WHEN WE NORMALISE.



LEAH, 29 • SEXUAL HARASSMENT SURVIVOR

Survivors also described how certain online harms – especially sexual harassment – had become so common that people no longer saw them as wrong. They were treated as inevitable or even expected. This too became a barrier to speaking up.

"It's an unspoken understanding that if you're a hot girl [or] just anybody mildly attractive... [you] must be ready for anything creepy... It's the same from all my friends that I have spoken with."

Concerningly, this same survivor, Leah, described how normalisation was in fact a coping mechanism.

"Because you process it to [say] it's normal. But in actual fact, it isn't. It's very not normal... Yeah, desensitise it... you have to do that mental work to tell yourself to not take it too hard."

HANNAH, 21 • IBSA SURVIVOR

Hannah expressed similar sentiments surrounding the non-consensual dissemination of her nude images and videos. The content was disseminated without her consent by a man she met on a dating app. As a result, she started receiving relentless unsolicited messages on Telegram such as "Hi, beautiful" and "I saw your video, how much?".

In the aftermath of the incident, Hannah acknowledged a lingering fear that she may encounter the perpetrator again or that the video would resurface. She reflected that she was more cautious online than she used to be, yet also tried to cope by rationalising that she was just one among the multitudes of women whose images get leaked.

"I just try to compartmentalise it. Worst-case scenario, I'm just one in hundreds of thousands of girls who get leaked online. The grand scheme of things, the likelihood of it impacting my life is kind of low, but it's not zero. So I just was more cautious."

She reiterated how paradoxical it felt, to minimise the threat of something so serious to herself.

"[It feels like] the threat doesn't even exist. It feels all in my head, but I know it's not."

The fact that individuals feel forced to accept harms doesn't diminish the harm. If something causes this much pain, surely it's time to say clearly: we do not accept this.

A THOUSAND HANDS IN THE DARK: ONLINE SEXUAL HARASSMENT UNCOVERED.

MIMI, 30 • SEXUAL HARASSMENT SURVIVOR

Sexual harassment online doesn't always follow the patterns we recognise from the physical world. Instead of sustained targeting by one individual, it can take the form of repeated, one-off incidents – unsolicited messages, comments, or images – coming from multiple people across different platforms.

Mimi received unwanted messages including inappropriate photos and comments from different strangers on Facebook. She described how one stranger on the platform sent her a topless photo and made inappropriate comments about his fitness to her. Another started making lewd, inappropriate comments about her out of retaliation when she ignored comments he left on her Facebook posts.

"He [said]... "Why are you so arrogant?"... [I said,] "Why would I respond to a random stranger's message? I don't even know you". And then he [said,] 'So you're one of those girls... who are into status or money'... [he later said] 'I find your face cummable.'"

Cumulative Effect

While these interactions were often one-off incidents from different male strangers, they cumulatively left Mimi disgusted and angry. Through therapy she initially sought for other personal matters, Mimi learnt to name and process these negative emotions she felt towards men in general. Her therapist helped her realise such feelings arose from these instances of sexual harassment.

Culture of Complicity

Mimi initially questioned whether she was overreacting to these interactions online. She spoke with her friends and some validated her experience while others asked her to ignore the behaviour, thinking it was normal:

"I've had some very close friends in my corner who's like 'Report him, give him hell' and that kind of thing. And then I have other people [who] would say 'Oh, men. I always get this from men. It's normal. Just ignore it.' Like, huh? It's not normal."

"There are people who think that it's normal for men to behave that way. If you continue thinking that's normal... these men are continuously going to be enabled to behave that way."

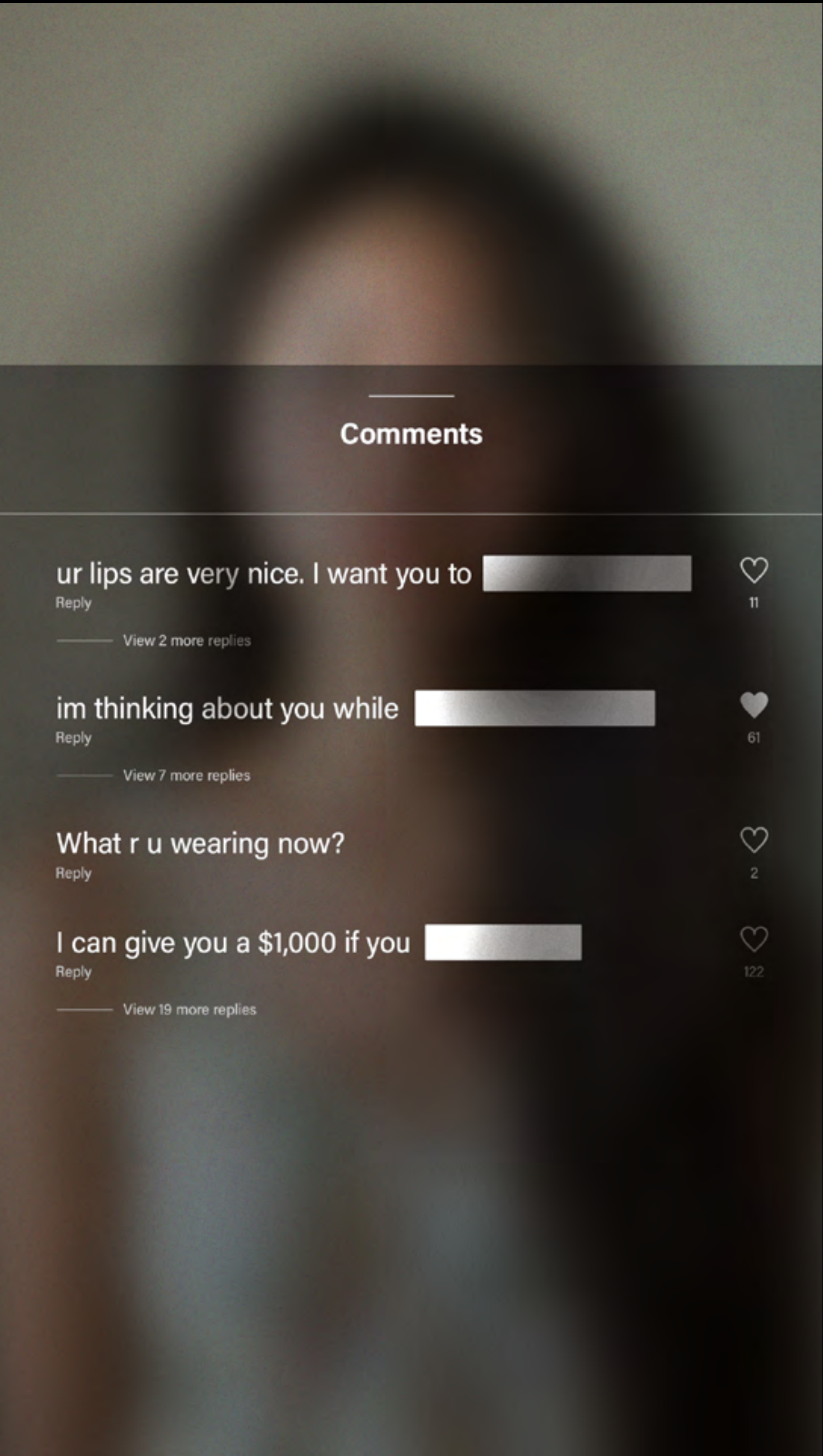
Until we – as friends, colleagues and loved ones – stop treating online harassment as routine or harmless, we will continue to leave victims like Mimi to make sense of harm on their own.

NORMALISED MISCONDUCT TOWARDS WOMEN.

Cases like Mimi’s may seem like brief, isolated incidents. When such incidents occur repeatedly and are brushed off, they risk entrenching online norms where targeting women with sexualised content has become routine.

In SHE’s Safeguarding Online Spaces Study (SOS Study), one in four youth felt that if a woman uploads an image of herself, she should accept all forms of comments directed towards her, including disrespectful ones. A significantly higher proportion of male youth – four in ten (37 percent) – harboured this misconception.

Abusive or disrespectful comments are never warranted. It is important that such harmful misconceptions are addressed early, especially among youth. If left unchallenged, they risk not only enabling future perpetrators but deterring female targets of online harm from seeking help at all, believing this treatment is simply part of being online.



WHEN WE LISTEN, THINGS CHANGE.

While many survivors faced dismissal or blame, those who were met with care and validation described a different path forward. Support from trusted individuals – friends, family members, even a boss – offered emotional grounding and a renewed sense of control.

Small, consistent acts – being present, listening without judgment, offering reassurance – signalled that survivors weren’t alone, and that what happened to them mattered. Such acts helped survivors make sense of what happened without internalising shame.

ZANE, 22 • CYBERBULLYING SURVIVOR “The good thing was I had friends that time who actually comfort me and their comfort was more indirect. Me and my friends will go online every time after school to just chat online. Or if not after school, we would have dinner instead.”

GRACE, 43 • CYBERBULLYING SURVIVOR “Eventually I told my boss about it... Definitely a load off my shoulders. I felt lighter, and then he told me that I was doing the right thing. So for that was like a big nod and a big yes.”

WE DECIDE WHAT HAPPENS NEXT.

These patterns – of blame, silence, and normalisation – do not emerge on their own. They are learned, repeated, and reinforced in everyday life. But they can be unlearned.

Survivors spoke about what a safer, more preventive culture could look like and what they wished had been in place:

Clear norms around what is unacceptable online, with ways to hold perpetrators accountable when those norms are violated

Survivors expressed the need for clear, public definitions of what constitutes harm, especially for conduct that has been normalised. Such norms and clear definitions of unacceptable behaviour must be matched by meaningful consequences for perpetrators – essential not only for accountability, but for reinforcing and upholding these standards.

ALYSSA, 38 • SEXUAL HARASSMENT SURVIVOR “I still feel very strongly that this kind of behaviour should not be accepted... this kind of behaviour, if you cannot accept that offline, should not be accepted online as well.”

MIMI, 30 • SEXUAL HARASSMENT SURVIVOR “Like, physically it's unacceptable to say this to a particular person or hurl insults at that person. But having all of these online platforms kind of like blur... like things that you wouldn't normally do in person, you get away with virtually.”



Early, and ongoing, age-appropriate education on respectful conduct

Several participants stressed the importance of instilling these healthy online norms early before these behaviours become entrenched.

NATHAN, 33 • SEXUAL HARASSMENT SURVIVOR “They should educate them early, educate people from young age that these things are not right. Because if we don't correct all this behaviour when they are young, I think it gets out of hand when they are in their teens.”

ISAAC, 31 • IMPERSONATION SURVIVOR “Maybe a lot of education is needed that the person doesn't do this for fun and it's not something that you should do because it causes a lot of harm to others.”

Guidance on what to do when online harm occurs

Many survivors, even when aware they were harmed, were unsure what to do next. They called for visible, accessible guidance – especially contact points that feel as intuitive as calling emergency services.

ISABELLE, 41 • IMPERSONATION SURVIVOR “Because when the thing happened, I really don't know what to do. I only wanted the messages to go away... I think if there's awareness on such support services around then I could like just call that person just like, you call 999.”

Public education must be more than awareness. It must name what harm looks like, interrupt it early, and empower everyday people to act when they see it.

FROM FRACTURES TO SOLID GROUND – WHAT A SURVIVOR-CENTRED SYSTEM MUST DELIVER.

SHE's cumulative research points to four urgent reforms. These reforms speak to the pressing need for responses that match the speed, scale, and impact of online harm.

They also address the barriers that allow harm to continue – including the difficulty of holding perpetrators accountable when they act anonymously. Ultimately, SHE calls for broader cultural shifts to challenge the norms, silences, and expectations that make online harm feel ordinary.

Online harm and its impact are not inevitable.

① RESTORE AGENCY TO SURVIVORS THROUGH CLEAR, ACCESSIBLE SUPPORT OPTIONS.

As shown in Section 1 and 2 of this report, survivors often experienced a deep loss of control – not just from the harm itself, but from the confusion, fear, and frustration of navigating unclear support systems. Many felt overwhelmed, disbelieved, or left without viable options.

Support systems must give survivors back a sense of control, especially amid the swift spread of harmful content and conduct online. This begins with support that is not only available, but intuitive, safe, and designed around survivors' needs.

This means:

- Clearly delineated support pathways offering prompt recognition of harm, timely action to address the harm, and accountability – without requiring police or court involvement, unless a survivor chooses.
- Timely, survivor-facing responses when they do reach out: acknowledgement of harm, clear guidance on next steps, and follow-up support.
- Support embedded in schools, workplaces, and community settings – not just emergency services.
- Trauma-informed, gender-sensitive mental health support with professionals trained to handle online harms without judgment or retraumatisation.
- Long-term support for emotional and digital recovery, not just short-term crisis help.
- Community-led spaces where survivors can share without judgement and rebuild confidence.

These are features of survivors' experience that new measures – such as the Online Safety Commission – and other efforts to strengthen the online harms support ecosystem will need to address.

② REQUIRE PLATFORMS TO RESPOND IN A TIMELY AND TRANSPARENT MANNER.

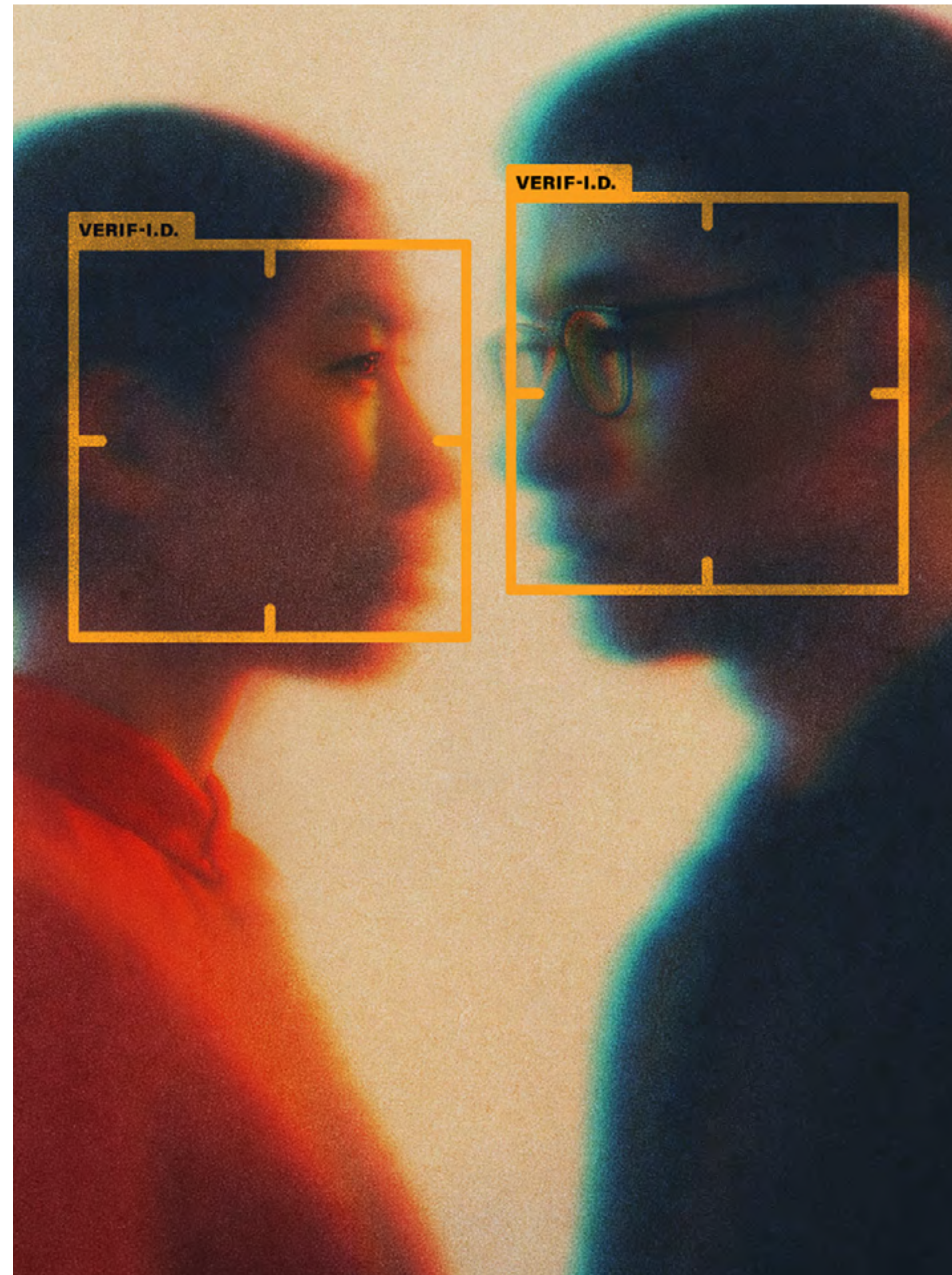
Section 2 illustrates how survivors often felt platforms' responses were slow, opaque, or dismissive. When survivors don't expect to be heard, they don't reach out.

Platform responses must be fast, transparent, and credible – with outcomes that reflect the seriousness of harm and the lasting impact it can have.

This means:

- Faster removal of harmful content through transparent escalation and prioritisation channels – especially for verified reports or repeat offenders.
- Regular updates throughout the reporting process, not just an automated reply.
- Systems that flag users who repeatedly harm others, even across new or linked accounts, and take action against them.
- Consequences for platforms that fail to act on harms brought to their attention.

Survivors deserve to know that when they report harm, their voices will not disappear into a void, and that the harm will be taken seriously.



③ CLOSE LOOPHOLES ALLOWING ANONYMITY WITH BOLD MOVES.

Section 3 highlights a key roadblock, anonymity, which often prevents survivors from accessing recourse. While anonymity has value in protecting privacy and expression, it should not prevent accountability – especially in repeated, serious, or coordinated harm.

Anonymity should not shield perpetrators from consequences when harm is severe or ongoing.

This means:

- Stronger systems to detect repeated abuse, even when accounts change.
- Clearer escalation channels for cases involving multiple or coordinated actors.
- Account verification measures for users flagged for high-risk or repeated harm.
- Mechanisms that allow perpetrators to be identified responsibly, without compromising survivor privacy.

Any serious policy reform must tackle this challenge head-on, balanced with privacy and misuse concerns. Survivors should not have to relive the same harm from the same person – without a way to stop it.

④ SHIFT CULTURE WITH A WHOLE-OF-SOCIETY RESPONSE TO ONLINE HARMS.

Section 4 shows that harm is not only enabled by gaps in systems – it is also sustained by the silence, blame, or normalisation survivors face from those around them. These cultural responses deter help-seeking, reinforce stigma, and make recovery harder.

Prevention must go beyond awareness. It must challenge harmful social norms, promote respectful digital behaviour, and equip people with the tools to act when harm occurs.

This means:

- A ground-up movement to educate and inform the public – especially youth – about what online harms are, their impact, and how to actively support those who encounter them.
- Public education content within this movement which makes clear what behaviour crosses the line, why it matters, and what to do next in cases of harm.
- Early, age-appropriate education on respect and digital boundaries, including how gendered beliefs and stereotypes contribute to harmful online behaviour.
- Continued research on how online harm affects school-going youth, to inform targeted interventions in schools and youth-facing platforms.
- Practical tools – e.g., for peers, parents, and teachers – to support survivors and challenge harm.

Online harm should never feel inevitable – or invisible. Everyone has a role to play in changing what we accept, excuse, or challenge online.



At SHE, we believe that change begins with listening. We must understand survivors' experiences and listen to what they need, and what gaps remain. These recommendations are grounded in that listening through research. Together with a broader ecosystem addressing different pieces of the online safety puzzle, SHE has been on the frontline – delivering direct survivor support, undertaking research, convening cross-sector partnerships, and leading public conversations that tackle the deeper drivers of harm, including entrenched gender norms and biases.

Online harms are not inevitable. SHE believes the way forward calls for an all-of-society groundswell for change. As such, SHE calls for urgent reforms, a ground-up movement for change that is centred on survivor voices, and for society to see online safety as our shared responsibility.

Definitions of Harms in Study Screener

This study touched on five different types of online harms, defined as follows:

- 1.**Cyberbullying/Harassment**
Online bullying, harassment, threats, insults or abuse (including body shaming and hateful comments based on race, religion, sexuality, etc.)
- 2.**Image-based sexual abuse (IBSA)**
Distribution of nude, intimate, or sexually explicit images or videos (including altered images or videos, such as AI generated deepfakes) of a person without his/her consent
- 3.**Sexual Harassment**
Unwanted messages of a sexual nature or obscene images [Note: These messages/images could be from a range of platforms including SMS, though our interest is in other channels excluding SMS e.g., Whatsapp, Telegram, etc.]
- 4.**Impersonation/Identity Theft**
Someone posing as you online (e.g., setting up a social media account using your identity)
- 5.**Cancel Campaign**
Others calling for and creating pressure to ‘punish you’ for what you may have said or done (e.g., punishing you by pressuring employers to fire you, or calling for a boycott)

This report was copy-edited with the assistance of AI tools to enhance clarity and language. Minor edits were made to direct quotes and selected verbal fillers (e.g., “I think”, “you know”) were omitted for readability and clarity. The essence and intent of each statement remain unchanged.

Other Key Terms Used In This Study

- Generative AI**
It refers to artificial intelligence (AI) models that use machine learning to produce novel content such as text, images, audio, and video in response to prompts. Examples include text-based chatbots (e.g., ChatGPT, Google Bard), image or video generators (e.g., DALL-E 2) and voice generators (e.g., Microsoft VALL-E) .
- Deepfake**
A digitally altered photo, video, or audio file that uses artificial intelligence to falsely depict a real person saying or doing something they never actually said or did. Deepfakes are generated by training AI models on numerous existing images or recordings of a person, resulting in highly realistic but deceptive content.
- Cyberstalking**
Having a person’s whereabouts tracked through his/her social media accounts.
- Defamation/Falsehoods**
False or misleading statements, images, or videos about a person.
- Doxxing**
Publishing a person’s identity information to cause harassment, alarm or distress, fear of violence, or to provoke or facilitate the use of violence.

About Our Participants

25 survivors were approached and interviewed for the purposes of this study. Survivors were Singapore residents (either citizens or permanent residents aged 18 years old and above, English speakers, had experienced any of the five online harms listed in the key definitions section of this report, and were not currently a client from the SHECARES@SCWO centre.

Survivors were recruited primarily through a commercial recruiter to whom they had given prior consent to be contacted for research studies. The recruiter applied the screener on potential survivors to select survivors belonging to the five key online harms for this study.

To ensure the psychological safety of interviewed survivors, language used in recruitment and interviews was adjusted to be sensitive and trauma informed. During interviews conducted either in-person or online, a SHECARES@SCWO counsellor was available for activation in the event that participating survivors exhibited signs of distress during the interview.

The names of all participating survivors were changed to aliases in this report for the protection of their identities.

The protocol for this study has been approved by the National Council of Social Service’s Ethics Review Committee.

Frequency of Cases by Main Online Harm Observed*

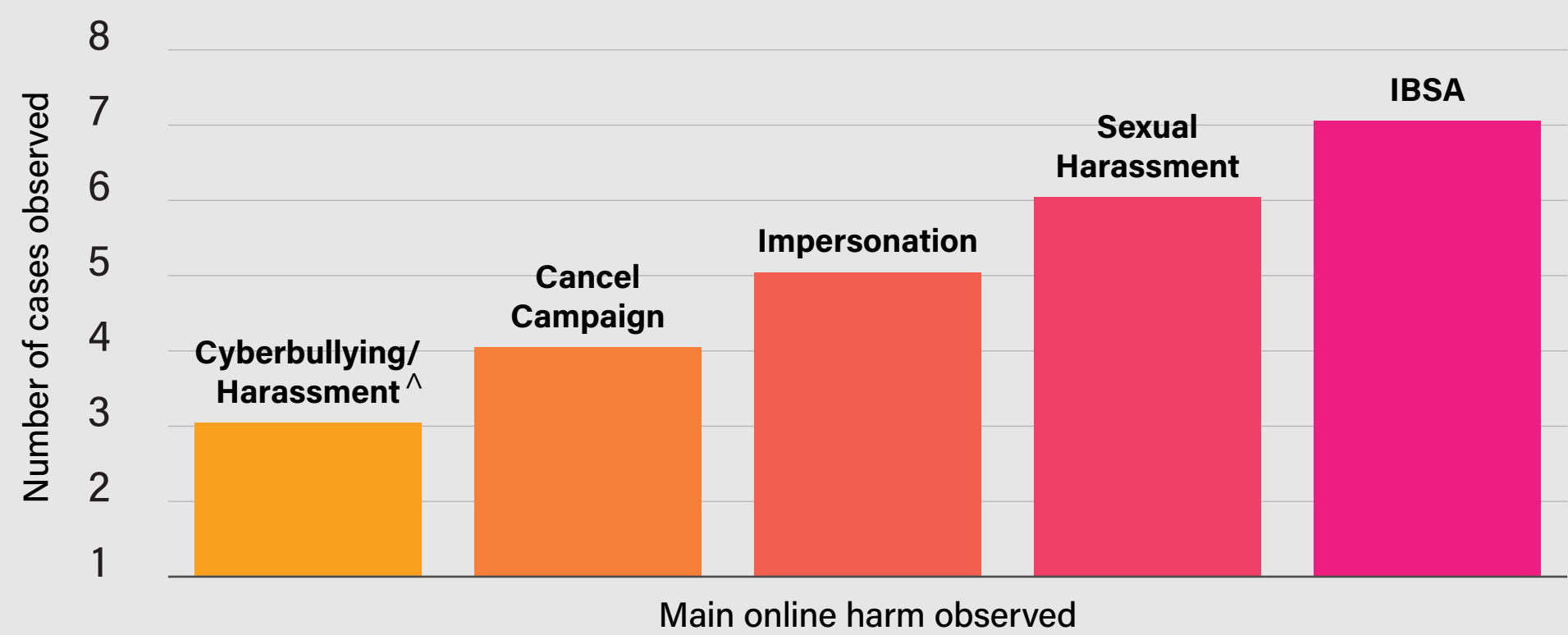
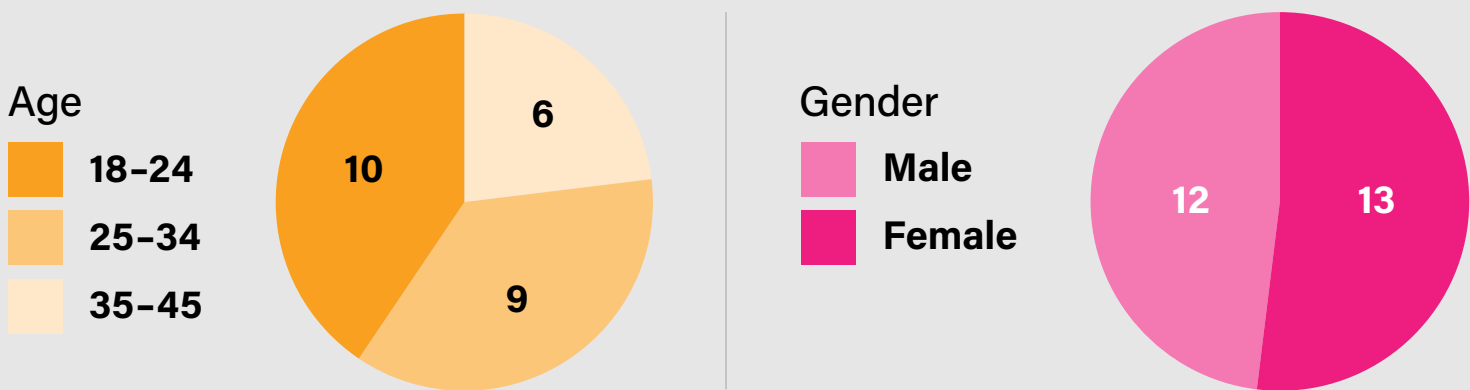


Figure 1: Number of cases by main online harm observed in this study (n = 25)
* 14 of 25 survivors we spoke with faced multiple online harms at the same time
^ Several cyberbullying cases co-occurred with other harms thus the relatively low count for cases experiencing it as the “main harm”

Breakdown of Participants



Where did the harms occur?

Incidents occurred on platforms such as Instagram, Telegram, Facebook, WhatsApp and Dating Apps. **11 of 25** cases occurred on *two or more platforms*.

Acknowledgments

This Study was brought to you by the SHE Team with the support of the SHE Board, SHECARES@SCWO and likeminded partners. This Study would not be possible without the bravery of our survivors to share their experiences. This report was designed by Fantastic Bureau. We thank all who have contributed to this effort.



SG Her Empowerment (“SHE”) is an independent non-profit organisation, with Institution of a Public Character status, that strives to empower girls and women through community engagements and partnerships, and advocating for gender equality and equity in Singapore. SHE facilitates conversations, listens to the community, and gives voice to their views. We take a rigorous, research-based approach to defining solutions, forging partnerships with and between key interest groups, organisations and the government to advocate for change. In this way, we drive conversations and partnerships to effect meaningful change. Establishing equality. Building equity. Shaping a better Singapore for all.

More info on www.she.org.sg.

SHECARES@SCWO is **Singapore’s first support centre for targets of online harms**. Launched in collaboration with the Singapore Council of Women’s Organisations, the centre provides holistic support and a safe space for targets of online harms, particularly girls and women, to turn to when they encounter harmful behaviour on the internet.

The centre offers support for those affected by online harms through a telephone helpline and WhatsApp textline, where trained counsellors guide individuals on next steps, including access to trauma-informed counselling or legal clinics. Free counselling is available for those impacted by internet-related abuse, and pro bono legal assistance is provided through legal clinics in partnership with Pro Bono SG.

If you or anyone you know has been a target of online harm, reach out for support through the following channels below.

REACH US

Monday – Friday, 9am – 9pm

Helpline 8001 01 4616
Textline 6571 4400 *via WhatsApp*

Email shecares_scwo@she.org.sg

SCWO, 96 WATERLOO ST, SINGAPORE 187967 (2/F)

Monday – Friday, 9am – 6pm

5-minute walk ▪ Bras Basah (CC2) and Bencoolen MRT (DT21)
10-minute walk ▪ Dhoby Ghaut MRT (NS24/NE6/CC1)
15-minute walk ▪ Bugis MRT (EW12/DT14)

SERVICES (BY APPOINTMENT ONLY)

Counselling

Monday – Friday, 9am – 6pm

Legal clinic

1st, 3rd, and 5th Wednesday of every month,
7pm – 9pm, *excluding public holidays*.