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Managing online harassment - public figure's perception of online social support

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Abstract. Online harassment against public figures is a widespread problem today. Nevertheless, few studies have examined what can be done to improve their situation. This study aims to contribute new valuable knowledge to the relatively unexplored research area. The purpose was to investigate public figure's experiences of online social support made in their defence. Nine public figures (five women and four men) were interviewed and interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was used to analyse the data. All participants perceived online social support as something overwhelmingly positive, but the level of significance ascribed to the support varied. These results suggest that online social support can function as an important contribution when it comes to reducing the problem of online harassment against public figures.

Threats and harassments have become an everyday reality for many public figures. Previous studies have shown that journalists, politicians and otherwise prominent people from all around the world are repeatedly subjected to stalking, verbal abuse, public defamation and/or harassment (Akhtar & Morrison, 2019; Clark & Grech, 2017; Every-Palmer, Barry-Walsh & Pathé, 2015; Hiltunen, 2017; Löfgren Nilsson & Örnebring, 2016; Reid Meloy, Sheridan & Hoffmann, 2008; The Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency, 2016). A recently published survey from The Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention (2019) showed that 30 per cent of Sweden's publicly elected politicians have been exposed to threats and harassments in the last year. Roughly, the same percentage can be seen among Swedish journalists (Department of Journalism, Media and Communication, 2019) and among those who work within the media sector (The Swedish Media Publishers' Association, 2016).

The term "public figure" is a debated concept that needs to be defined. In this thesis, it refers to people involved in current public debates, who advocates for change. Public figures usually have the power to influence others as well (see Chubb, 1980, for a review). Research has shown that public figures with high-profile jobs, especially those who talk about polarizing topics like international conflicts, racism or gender equality, are more exposed to threats and harassments (Hiltunen, 2017; Löfgren Nilsson & Örnebring, 2016; The Swedish Media Publishers' Association, 2016). Threats can be delivered via telephone calls, letters, e-mails or face-to-face (Every-Palmer et al., 2015; Hiltunen, 2017; The Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention, 2019) but with the rise of social media platforms, many hurtful or inappropriate messages are now delivered via different social networking sites (SNS) (Akhtar & Morrison, 2019; The Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention, 2019) such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Snapchat (Phillips, 2018; Scalora, 2014; Van Royen, Poels, Vandebosch & Adam, 2017).

In this thesis, I will use the term *online harassment* when referring to threats and harassments that occur on SNS. Online harassment is a broad concept that can include name-calling, physical threats, spreading harmful rumours, privacy invasions and

technological attacks (Citron, 2014; Lenhart, Ybarra, Zickuhr & Price-Feeney, 2016). With the growing development of SNS, it has become easier to create organised attacks against publicly elected politicians and journalists (Gelin & Pettersson, 2018). It has been suggested that public figures heightened accessibility (e.g. easy access to email addresses and open comment sections under articles) and the fact that there is a greater media focus on them today, makes them more vulnerable to online harassment (Löfgren Nilsson & Örnebring, 2016; Scalora, 2014). Others argue that public figures are themselves partly to blame for increased hostility against them. According to Holt (2019), many journalists have failed to convince a large part of the public about their impartiality in how they have dealt with various social problems, mostly relating to immigration.

Still, this does not explain why so many people take drastic actions and decide to threaten and harass public figures on SNS. To help us understand why this happens Suler (2004) may offer a guide. When being online, people feel less inhibited and it is common for them to behave in ways they would not do offline. Suler (2004) calls this phenomenon the *online disinhibition effect*. This effect goes two ways. The disinhibition can either be *benign* or *toxic*. Benign disinhibition occurs when people share personal information that they otherwise would keep private or when they showcase heightened altruism and for instance leave positive comments to strangers. Toxic disinhibition, in turn, means that people are rude, overly critical or threatening. Several factors account for why the disinhibition effect occurs. To mention some, it partly has to do with the fact that many times it is possible to maintain a hidden identity online, and this makes people more likely to express things they otherwise would suppress. This factor is usually referred to as *dissociative anonymity*. The disinhibition is also heightened because it is usually not possible to see each other's reactions to what is said (i.e. *invisibility*) and the internet also conveys a sense of equality. Authorities do not have the same status and influence as they do offline as non-verbal communication tools such as clothes and body language are no longer visible (i.e. *attenuated status and authority*). *Social facilitation* is another essential factor which comes into play when the online disinhibition effect is explained. Simply put, people are triggered by the generosity or evildoing of others and want to outdo them by posting even more extreme content (Suler, 2004; Suler, 2016).

Inappropriate messages have several negative consequences. News articles with more uncivil comments have been found to have a lower perceived formal quality (Prochazka, Weber & Schweiger, 2018). Online victimisation has also proved to have negative impacts on both health and well-being. People who regularly are exposed to some form of online harassment are at greater risk for experiencing low self-esteem (Nick et al., 2018), struggle with stress, anxiety, sleep difficulties (Clark & Grech, 2017), depression (Feinstein, Bhatia & Davila, 2014; Wang, Nansel & Iannotti, 2011), and even suicidal ideation (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010; Schenk & Fremouw, 2012). Furthermore, it has become apparent that many public figures, due to online harassment, are concerned about their own personal safety (Akhtar & Morrison, 2019; The Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention, 2019) as well as the safety of their friends and families (Clark & Grech, 2017). A consequence of this is that many resort to self-censorship. They consciously choose to frame stories differently in order not to upset readers or decide not to write and talk about "controversial" topics altogether (Adams, 2018; Clark & Grech, 2017; Hiltunen, 2017; Löfgren Nilsson & Örnebring, 2016; The Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention, 2019). Even those who have not been exposed to threats and harassments themselves can be discouraged from engaging in certain issues. Seeing what others must go through makes observers hesitant, as they do not want to end up in

the same position (Reporters Without Borders, 2018). Another serious consequence of online harassment is that some people feel like they have no other choice but to give up their professions, temporarily or permanently (Adams, 2018; Gelin & Pettersson, 2018). The fact that threats and harassments occur online often increases the suffering of the victims. Unlike hateful letters that can be thrown away, online harassment in some sense has eternal life. Older harmful posts are easily accessible through a quick internet search and can be misused by those who want to harm others (Citron, 2014).

Online harassment against public figures is undoubtedly a current issue that may have serious consequences. It can influence journalistic quality (Prochazka et al., 2018) and have negative impacts on physical and mental health (e.g. Nick et al., 2018) as well as perceived personal safety (e.g. Akhtar & Morrison, 2019). When online harassment leads to self-censorship and public figures consider leaving their jobs (e.g. Adams, 2018), it becomes evident that harassment is a serious threat to both freedom of speech and democracy. Simply leaving SNS is not an option for most public figures. Many journalists claim that they require it for research, networking and promoting their work (Cision, 2010; Hedman, 2019) and politicians have been found to use SNS to build and strengthen the relationship with voters (Bronstein, Aharony & Bar-Ilan, 2018). Various interventions have been proposed to reduce online harassment. Some suggest that showcasing community rules, and thereby influence what is considered socially normative, can prevent people from engaging in unruly and harassing conversations (Matias, 2019). On a similar note, Anderson, Bresnahan and Musatics (2014) argue that people are hesitant to stand up against bullies online because such behaviour diverges from social norms. They found that participants who were exposed to dissenting behaviour (i.e. someone standing up against a bully or supporting the victim) were more likely to leave supportive comments to victims themselves. Other researchers advocate for more technological solutions like so-called collective blockbots where SNS users can subscribe to lists of people they do not wish to see or hear from (Geiger, 2016). There is also a growing development of Artificial intelligence (AI) technology that can learn to identify harassing content and either send users reflective messages urging them to reconsider their wording (Van Royen et al., 2017) or filter it directly (Golbeck, 2018). The latter method is for instance used by Facebook (Rosen, 2019). Using algorithms to detect hateful speech has proved to be a challenge though. Such approaches often rely on specific words for identifying harassing content. The systems do not consider that words have different meanings depending on in which context they are used (MacAvaney et al., 2019).

Framework for the current study

The term *social support* is often highlighted as an important factor when it comes to managing difficult life experiences. This idea builds on the *buffering hypothesis* by Cohen and Willis (1985). The theory states that social support can act as a sort of "buffer" against the negative impacts of stressful events. Helgeson (2003) defines social support as "supportive ways that different people behave in the social environment" (p.25). Social support can be about helping people with their self-esteem, to make sure that they know that they are valued and accepted. It can also be about helping people deal with problematic events and providing others with financial or material aid (Cohen & Willis, 1985). Social support has proved to have many advantages. Studies have shown that lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) youths who report a higher quality of

social support are less likely to be bully victims (Ybarra, Mitchell, Palmer & Reisner, 2015). Higher levels of social support have also been found to reduce the association between stress and depression (Cohen & Hoberman, 1983; Raffaelli et al., 2013).

Considering when the buffering hypothesis first was published, it is natural that Cohen and Willis (1985) solely thought of social support as something being provided in-person. However, with the development of SNS, it has become possible to both provide and receive social support online. Just like in-person social support, online social support has many advantages. It can increase subjective well-being among those with high social anxiety (Indian & Grieve, 2014) and ease exhaustion from SNS and improve SNS satisfaction, especially among lonely and emotionally unstable users (Lo, 2019). Besides that, online social support has proved to decrease stress on a stress test (Kothgassner et al., 2019), reduce the level of depression-related thoughts and feelings (Cole, Nick, Zelkowitz, Roeder & Spinelli, 2017) and enhance positive affect and life-satisfaction (Oh, Ozkaya & LaRose, 2014). Online support groups have also been found to reduce stress and depression among women suffering from breast cancer (Winzelberg et al., 2003).

Online social support has many benefits. Nevertheless, it is a relatively unexplored area of research. Very few studies have, for instance, investigated whether online social support could "buffer" the negative consequences of online harassment. Two studies have found that online social support can counterbalance some of the negative effects of peer victimisation online (Cole et al., 2017; Nick et al., 2018). Aside from these two examples, the research area has received little attention. A search on PsycINFO for "online social support" and "online harassment" only revealed 50 peer-reviewed studies (e.g. McLean & Griffiths, 2018; Risner, 2014). The lack of research does not seem to correspond to the public's interest and commitment to the issue. It has been made visible by the #iamhere initiative (#jagärhär in Swedish). #iamhere is a Swedish Facebook group founded in 2016 that conducts organised actions, primarily in comment sections. The group's moderators or administrators urge their 74,000 members to support victims exposed to online harassment by leaving uplifting comments or liking their posts as well as to stand up against those who post hateful or threatening content. By posting unadulterated fact-based comments the group aims to create a more respectful and including climate on SNS (#iamhere, n.d.). According to the theory of Suler (2004), #iamhere uses one form of benign disinhibition to lessen the negative effects of toxic disinhibition. In my study, I have intended to contribute new valuable knowledge to the relatively unexplored research area of online social support. The purpose of the study was to develop insights into how public figures, exposed to some form of online harassment, perceived online social support. Thus, the following research question was examined.

RQ. How do public figures who have been exposed to online harassment experience online social support made in their defence?

Method

Participants

The study included nine participants: five women and four men. All participants could be considered public figures in Sweden. Some had a paid job that was public while

others had more "regular" jobs as their main employment but were publicly engaged in their spare time. In addition to being public figures, all participants were also active on at least one social media platform. Most commonly, participants claimed to use their platforms to spread opinion about issues close to their hearts or to promote themselves and their work. The number of followers on SNS varied a lot. The most popular participant had just under 47,000 followers on Twitter and the one with the least followers had slightly over 400. To ensure that the participant's responses could be used to answer the purpose of the study, I made sure that all had experienced online harassment of some sort and had received online social support. Thus, four criteria were established in the recruitment process to help determine whether a person was relevant to the study. Participants had to be 1) public figures, 2) active on at least one social media platform, 3) victims of some form of online harassment and 4) had received online social support.

Participants came from different parts of Sweden, had been in the public spotlight for a different amount of time and varied in age. All were adults (18 years and older) and it was roughly 30 years between the youngest and the oldest participants. Furthermore, participants reported that they had been exposed to different amounts of online harassment. Some stated that the quantity and intensity varied depending on which topics they temporarily chose to engage in. Others experienced online harassment daily. Relevant information about each participant is provided in Table 1. As all participants were public figures and therefore are easily identified, I have been quite restrictive, careful not to give up too much information about them. To maintain confidentiality, participants have been given fictitious names.

Measure and procedure

All participants except one were identified by going through #iamhere's Facebook feed. I scrolled through posts and discussions made by moderators and members between 2016-2020 and wrote down names of public figures that #iamhere had decided to support. By doing this, all four criteria mentioned in the previous section was met as #iamhere encourages their members to support those exposed to online harassment by for instance leaving positive comments or liking content on some social media platform that the person is active on. One participant was identified later by recommendation from another participant. The first participant gave me the name of someone they knew had been exposed to online harassment. I searched for that name online and found that they indeed had a public occupation and were active on several social media platforms.

Most of the public figures were contacted via email. However, in some cases, email addresses were not available. In such cases, messages were sent via Facebook Messenger instead. Potential participants were informed about the purpose of the study and how the study would be conducted. They were offered to do face-to-face interviews, interviews via Skype or telephone and they were also allowed to carry out the interviews in writing, in which case the interview guide would be emailed to them so they could answer the questions in their own pace. Ultimately, six participants requested to do telephone interviews, one chose to answer questions in writing, one to do a Skype interview and one to meet up in person. The interview that was done face-to-face took place in a public setting, in a central café that the participant and I agreed on. Further information about which type of interview each participant selected can be found in Table 1. In addition to being informed about the study's purpose and methodology, potential

participants were promised confidentiality and informed that they had the right to withdraw participation at any time. A copy of the complete information letter may be found in Appendix 1. 26 public figures were contacted and among those 9 agreed to participate in my study.

During the interview sessions, a semi-structured interview guide was followed (see Appendix 2), meaning that certain questions were used as a foundation for each interview but the exact course of the interview much depended on participant's answers. In other words, I was open to the idea of changing the order of the questions as well as adding follow-up questions asking participants to develop their reasonings. Examples of questions from the interview guide were: "What is it like to be a public figure/opinion-former on social media?" and "How does it feel to receive online social support?". The interviews were between 19 to 42 minutes long and were conducted in Swedish. Quotes presented in the thesis are therefore translated from Swedish to English. All participants who have been cited in the thesis have been offered to control translations and give their approval.

Table 1

Information about the participants and how each interview was conducted

Participant's pseudonym	Gender	Public occupation	Type of interview
Emma	Female	Politician	Telephone
Erik	Male	Opinion-former	Skype
Johan	Male	Podcaster/Chronicler	Telephone
Karin	Female	Lawyer	Telephone
Lena	Female	Editor-in-chief	Email
Maria	Female	Columnist	Telephone
Mattias	Male	Columnist	Face-to-face
Peter	Male	Editor-in-chief	Telephone
Yvonne	Female	Editor-in-chief	Telephone

Data analysis

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was used to analyse the data. The method comes from the tradition of phenomenology and hermeneutics and it is concerned with people's lived experiences and how they make sense of those. The researcher tries to understand things from the participant's point of view, even though complete access never will be possible (Eatough & Smith, 2008; Smith, Jarman & Osborn, 1999). The aim is to explore the chosen research area with an open mind rather than to test theory-driven hypotheses. Semi-structured interviews are probably the most used method for data collection, as it enables the researcher to immerse themselves in interesting and important topics that might arise during the interview sessions (Smith & Osborn, 2009). The level of interpretation within IPA may vary. The researcher can choose a more descriptive interpretation of what is said or adopt a more critical analysis where they try to understand what is left unsaid (Eatough & Smith, 2008). IPA is suitable when one is interested in how individual participants perceive certain situations or phenomenon (Smith & Osborn, 2009). As the purpose of my study was to get an *understanding* of how public figures,

exposed to online harassment, *experience* online social support, IPA was considered an appropriate method. In my thesis, the IPA guide outlined by Smith et al. (1999) was followed. I used an idiographic case-study approach, meaning that the analysis started with individual examples and then slowly built up to more general claims for the complete group of participants. The level of interpretation was generally more descriptive in nature.

The analysis started with throughout reading and re-reading of the interview transcripts. During this process comments and preliminary themes were noted in the margin. All themes were thereafter listed on a separate sheet and sorted based on common denominators. The cluster of themes was given names which summarised the content, i.e. *subordinate themes* were created which in turn were clustered together based on similarities into *primary themes*. This process then started anew with each new interview transcript. Eventually, a master list was created with subordinate and primary themes for the entire group. Lastly, quotes that best illustrated each theme were chosen. Smith and Osborn (2009) recommends transcription at a semantic level and quotes are therefore recited in its entirety word-by-word, even though it becomes somewhat incoherent now and then. When doing the IPA analysis, it is important to remind oneself to go back and re-check the transcripts multiple times and ensure that the emerging themes are true to the original data (Smith et al., 1999).

To illustrate the work process, I will give an example from the first interview that was analysed. After careful reading, preliminary themes like "Reminded of love", "Not alone" and "Gets perspective" were identified. They were later clustered together and became part of the subordinate theme "Sense of community". This subordinate theme, together with "Being able to ignore the hate" was eventually listed under the primary theme "Prerequisite for continued work". For an illustration, see Table 2.

Table 2

Illustration of the coding process

Preliminary theme	Subordinate theme	Primary theme
Reminded of love; Not alone; Gets perspective	Sense of community	Prerequisite for continued work

Ethical considerations

According to guidelines on research ethics from the Swedish research council (2002), four requirements must be met. Participants should be informed about the purpose of the study, how the study will be conducted and why the participant's contribution is crucial (i.e. "information requirement"). The Swedish research council also emphasises that participants always should be given the right to withdraw participation at any time without negative consequences (i.e. "consent requirement"). In addition to this, the researcher must ensure that information that can be linked to individual participants is treated confidentially and that such information is anonymised before publication (i.e. "confidentiality requirement"). The fourth requirement, "usage requirement", means that personal information about each participant may only be used for research purposes. In my study, I followed all requirements stated by the Swedish research council. For more information about how the first three requirements were met, see Appendix 1. I have no

financial interest within the research area for my thesis and have not used personal data for commercial purposes. Thus, the "usage requirement" was met too.

The Swedish research council also stresses that participation in a study should not entail mental or physical harm. I am aware that my chosen research area could potentially bring up unpleasant memories and traumas for the participants. During the interview sessions, participants were asked to explain how online harassment against them had been manifested and how they had been affected by it. This was done to get a detailed understanding of each participant's unique experience. The intention was to gain insight into their personal thoughts and attitudes, which is also in line with the fundamental ideas of IPA (e.g. Smith & Osborn, 2009). To reduce potential mental harm for participants several interventions were made. One of the questions was phrased: "Would you like to tell how you have been affected by hateful/threatening comments?" The "Would you like" was added to ensure that the participants knew that they had an option to say no. Some participants told me detailed stories of what they had been exposed to, I let them talk freely because I thought it important that participants, at the end of the interview, felt like they had given me a complete picture of the situation. At the same time, I did not press for follow-up questions asking them to develop their reasoning in detail, as I did not want them to share more than they felt comfortable doing. All interviews also ended with questions on online social support and what they thought could be done to reduce online harassment against public figures. By doing this, I hoped that my participants walked away from the interviews with a positive feeling.

Results

The purpose of the study was to develop insights into how public figures, exposed to online harassment, perceived online social support. To achieve the purpose, the following research question was asked: How do public figures who have been exposed to online harassment experience online social support made in their defence?

Three primary themes were identified using an IPA analysis: 1. Prerequisite for continued work, 2. Positive but not essential and 3. Double sidedness. An overview of the themes and their associated subordinate themes is provided in Table 3.

Table 3

Summary of identified themes

Primary themes	Subordinate themes
1. Prerequisite for continued work	1.1 Being able to ignore the hate
	1.2 Sense of community
2. Positive but not essential	2.1 The experience of hate is still the same
	2.2 Managing on one's own
3. Double sidedness	3.1 Feeling like the odd one

Primary theme 1: Prerequisite for continued work

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Many participants argued that online social support had helped them a lot during difficult times. Some withheld that they would not have been able to continue with their public work or continue being active on their SNS if the support would stop. An expression that was often used was that online social support helped to "balance the hate". Participants claimed that this was important for them on a personal level but also for the continued survival of the public conversation in general. Several emphasised that the support did matter and that it was an efficient method for dealing with online harassment. Online social support made it easier for some of the participants to set aside hateful or threatening comments and it also reminded them that they were not alone. This, in turn, was described as prerequisites for them to continue with their public work.

Subordinate theme 1.1: Being able to ignore the hate. Participants had different views on whether online social support had any impact on their experiences of online harassment or not (see Subordinate theme 2.1). But a prevalent notion was that the support made it easier to ignore the hateful comments or messages that they received. When they were able to ignore the harassment, it also became easier to continue with their public work. Mattias thought that he potentially was less affected by online harassment thanks to online social support. This was because the support helped him shift focus and he was able to disregard the harassment:

> *"Yes, I could probably imagine that I have become less influenced by the online harassment and that it has felt less difficult and even that I have been less affected through the support because then I can focus on that instead"*

Lena shared her experience of online social support and brought up #iamhere as an example. Thus, she belonged to one of the few participants who, on their own accord, mentioned that they were aware of that #iamhere had supported them. Lena explained that she and her editorial staff had been exposed to brutal cases of online harassment in the past. When they had received hordes of hate because of a certain reportage, #iamhere had decided to step in. Lena expressed that the support from #iamhere had a great impact on their continued work and that it had led to that more people dared to express their opinions. The online social support also had a domino effect and resulted in that they received social support outside of SNS. This, in turn, made them able to overlook online harassment and continue with their work:

> *"When hordes of hate were written in our [editorial office] social media they [#iamhere] bombarded us with love. As a result, ordinary locals also dared to openly show their support. Nowadays, our readers take us in defence when hatred begins to flow. This makes us able to resist and do our job."*

Subordinate theme 1.2: Sense of community. Four of the participants declared, in various ways, that online social support contributed to a sense of belonging. The support helped them get a perspective and realise that not everyone was against them and that there were people out there who had their back. It made them feel as if their work was important and valued. Others meant that the support reminded them of that there was a world outside of SNS. The harassment they encountered online did not correspond to reality. The support helped the participants understand that they represented ideas that were quite widespread and that haters were not the norm. Or as Erik stated: "we are many,

and they are few". The sense of community was described as essential for their continued work and something that enhanced their well-being.

Erik did not feel like the experience of online harassment had significantly been affected because of online social support. Nevertheless, he felt that online harassment was easier to manage thanks to it. The support compensated for the harassment and made it less apparent. He felt like people would always need social support, regardless if they were exposed to harassment online or offline. According to Erik, it was also because of online social support that he was able to get up in the morning, cope with online harassment and continue with his public work:

> *"No, I do not think that it [online social support] has affected the experience of hate itself, but it definitely makes it easier to deal with. It is like… yeah, but it is like anything, it is not fun to drink a drop of ammonia, but if you dilute it in like a thousand litres of water, then you will not even feel the taste of it… and it is a bit like that. But like this… all happy calls and all constructive criticism and all cheers, obviously weighs up. It is also somewhere the thing that makes it like… that is what makes me get up in the morning and do this. /…/ I do not think that it is any difference like… online or offline. I think that regardless [if] people are exposed to [inaudible] behaviour, whether it is bullying in school or harassment at work, um they will be able to handle it better if they feel that they have many more who do not expose but who rather back them up and like stand on their side."*

Mattias also belonged to the group of participants who talked about the fact that online social support made them feel less alone. He felt as if he would not have been able to continue writing if it were not for the support. Mattias stated that online social support validated him as a writer and gave him meaning to continue:

> *"Um, no you probably feel a sense of security in that I can… um not everyone is like against me. People are with me and I actually fill a function for many people, so the support has been important, I think, just to keep going and keep writing, absolutely."*

Primary theme 2: Positive but not essential

All participants perceived online social support as something positive. However, the level of significance ascribed to the support varied. Most participants wanted to emphasise that they were very pleased and grateful for the support that they had received. They also stated that they were aware of the fact that the climate online would worsen if people stopped posting uplifting or encouraging comments. Consequently, they felt that online social support was truly important. At the same time, some participants were convinced that they could not rely on others to manage online harassment, that it was something they had to do on their own. They also felt that online social support itself could not solve the complex problem of online harassment against public figures.

Subordinate theme 2.1: The experience of hate is still the same. A common notion among participants was that there were many advantages to online social support. Despite several benefits, some participant still underlined that the support could never

detract the seriousness of online harassment and that the experience of the hate was no different, regardless of how many positive or encouraging comments they had received online. On the issue of online social support and whether it potentially could influence the experience of online harassment, Yvonne replied:

> *"Um but… I think… at the same time, it is no less scary to receive this hate, just because there are many people who support you on Facebook, I cannot say that. It is rather so that you are being reminded that love is stronger than the hatred of all of them who… who like support."*

Johan was on a similar track. He stated that he received much support and backup daily and that it was thanks to, for instance, positive letters from followers and supportive comments online that "the everyday life could continue". Johan belonged to the group of participants who were exposed to more online harassment in certain periods, depending on which topics he temporarily chose to engage in. He declared that he especially appreciated online social support during the times when the online harassment against him was the most intense. Even though the support, to some extent, helped during the most difficult times, Johan still admitted struggling as he knew that those who supported him could never truly comprehend what he had been exposed to. Johan thought of online social support as something positive but the fact that his supporters could not relate to his experiences meant that his understanding of online harassment and its impact on him, was very much the same:

> *"and it is some support that it becomes fun to do what you are doing, even though you might get shit from time to time um but then I believe, when you sit there, you know, when it starts to blow around you or um when it is hard, it is still difficult, despite positive comments, to take it in. Because these people know… it gets very lonely because it is very few who exactly knows what it feels like to stand in the middle of it."*

Subordinate theme 2.2: Managing on one's own. All participants had generally well-thought-out strategies for managing online harassment. It included blocking hateful SNS users, reporting them to the police as well as separating oneself from the harassment. This was done either by consciously not reading harassing comments or by using technological solutions which could filter hateful content. It also became apparent that several of the participants had a distinct mindset which helped them deal with online harassment. Karin compared herself to a "Teflon pan" during the interview and said that she had simply decided not to be affected by the insults. Johan was on a similar track. He found that it was quite common among colleagues who worked in the same industry as himself, to make online harassment a big part of their life story. Furthermore, he felt like people tended to blow it out of proportion and make it look worse than it was. Johan objected to this and strived not to make online harassment part of his identity. Mattias and Peter, on the other hand, told themselves that the harassment against them was not personal. Those who harassed them did so because of what they thought Mattias and Peter represented, according to them. Several of the participants also described a sense of normalisation. They claimed that they had become "hardened" and that they no longer were significantly affected by online harassment. The harassment had turned into a "matter of habit" and was described to be "part of the job". In conclusion, none of the participants in my study solely relied on online social support for managing online

harassment. In connection with the previous quote, Johan summarised why he felt like he had to manage online harassment on his own:

> "So there… it is also… it becomes one of those things that you deal… you learn how to handle it yourself. You learn that this is like a thing that 'I have to solve this on my own machine for no one else understand'."

Johan described that it was difficult to fully appreciate online social support as those who supported him had not been exposed themselves and therefore, they could not relate to his experiences. He felt that he could not rely on others to manage online harassment and that he had to learn to deal with it himself. Not all participants were as explicit in their reasonings, but it was inferred that, while they thought online social support was valuable, it was not enough to successfully manage online harassment. Many participants started by saying that they had positive experiences from online social support. However, shortly thereafter they continued to talk about their personal strategies for managing online harassment. Although the description of online social support was favourable, it was quite concise. When they talked about their thoughts regarding online harassment and what they had done to handle it, participants had much more to add.

Maria represented a common line of thought among participants. She stated that it was "fun" to receive encouragement and said that her followers often had taken her in defence whenever she had been exposed to online harassment. Thereafter followed a longer description of how she previously had acted herself:

> "Sometimes I write 'Now you sharpen your tone!' and take like adult responsibility, you understand? And [I] make the other person into a disobedient child instead of going in and answering with the same coin. At other times, I am a bit jeering just because it like… disarm them so to speak. 'So, you actually mean that…?' I write, and that depends on how they like behave. 'So, your starting point is that…?' And then I make it appear like they are just as silly as they are um and then I can just end with 'Okay, then it is done' and then I write nothing more. Um, so I try to act good but at the same time not let people walk over me if you know what I mean?"

Primary theme 3: Double sidedness

Subordinate theme 3.1: Feeling like the odd one. When asked how it felt to receive online social support, all participants agreed that it felt good. Emma, for instance, described it as "really wonderful". While Yvonne agreed with this sentiment, she also conveyed a sense of ambiguity which stood out. On one hand, Yvonne was extremely grateful for the support that she had received. Much like Erik and Mattias previously stated, she emphasised that she appreciated feeling like she was not alone. However, it became evident that she simultaneously was somewhat uncomfortable with being labelled as a "victim". Even though Yvonne identified herself as a victim of online harassment, she did not want to solely be known as one. She claimed that she would rather be recognised as a fighter who strived to make the world a better place. Although Yvonne was moved by all the support that she had received she, all the same, felt as if the attention strengthen her role as an outcast which, in turn, took a toll on her self-confidence:

"It feels… it feels incredibly good in one sense, to be honest. It is fantastic to receive this support um and it means a lot to feel like you are not alone. Then you can become… there is a double sidedness in this, which I have noticed on myself, that on one hand, I am very happy and really moved by everyone who gets in touch but at the same time it can sometimes reinforce the feeling that you are odd in a sense, here are plenty of people who support me, but they are not exposed like me. I become like the 'vulnerable', I become the 'victim' um in this all the time. And it is a two-sided feeling, that is, to be felt sorry for, if I should say so, is both cosy but it can also in some way erode one's self-confidence or what to call it."

Yvonne was alone in expressing this sort of "double sidedness" when asked about online social support. But her answer indicated that there were other aspects to the support which was important to note as well.

Discussion

The study investigated how public figures, exposed to some form of online harassment, experienced online social support made in their defence. To my knowledge, this has not previously been explored. Several studies have found that public figures, to a great extent, are exposed to online harassment (e.g. Akhtar & Morrison, 2019; The Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention, 2019) and that their exposure can lead to self-censorship or thoughts of leaving their jobs (e.g. Adams, 2018; Gelin & Pettersson, 2018). Fewer studies have investigated what can be done to improve the situation for public figures. It has been found that online social support has many benefits (e.g. Indian & Grieve, 2014; Oh et al., 2014) and that it can lessen the negative effects of online victimisation (Cole et al., 2017; Nick et al., 2018). But none of those studies has examined public figure's experiences. The findings in my study are therefore of great importance.

All participants in the study experienced online social support as something overwhelmingly positive. Participants expressed that the support was important for them personally but also for the public conversation in general. Although all agreed that online social support was meaningful, participants talked about it in different ways and they had different perceptions of whether the support affected their experience of online harassment or not. Some expressed that the support was a prerequisite for their continued work. Others thought that, while online social support was valuable, it was not a condition for them to keep going. They felt that the experience of the harassment was not affected by the fact that they received encouraging comments online and they also felt that they had to manage online harassment on their own. In other words, the level of significance ascribed to online social support varied. This could potentially be because the participants had been exposed to different degrees of online harassment. Previous studies have suggested that the most efficient coping strategy for online harassment largely depends on how severe harassment the person has been subjected to (Machackova, Cerna, Sevcikova, Dedkova, Daneback, 2013). Participants' attitude towards online harassment could also have played a part in why they talked about online social support in different ways. Those who had decided to manage online harassment on their own might not have ascribed online social support the same importance as those who did not have the same mindset. This would be similar findings to Cote (2017). She showed that female gamers, exposed to online harassment, was determined to fend for themselves and therefore

dismissed the help from male players. Much like the participants in my study, Cote found that they rather brought up their own strategies for managing the harassment.

Lastly, a sense of double sidedness was identified in the current study. One participant made clear that she was moved by the online social support but still felt a little uncomfortable by it. The attention reinforced a feeling of being odd which made her uneasy. Participants had different thoughts and feeling regarding online social support, but all still agreed that it was valuable. To use the terminology of Suler (2004), certain forms of benign disinhibition seemed to be useful to lessen the negative effects of toxic disinhibition. That means that online social support is important and initiatives like #iamhere are needed. Online social support might not work as a single solution to solve the problem of online harassment against public figures but together with other solutions, like showcasing community rules (Matias, 2019), using collective blockbots (Geiger, 2016) or programs that identify harassing content (Golbeck, 2018; Van Royen et al., 2017), progress will be made. I hope that this study will help to raise awareness of the vulnerability of public figures online and at the same time demonstrate possible interventions to improve their situation. Online harassment is a major problem in itself, but when public figures are targeted and threatened to silence because of their thoughts and beliefs, it is not solely a crime against the individual's right to freedom of expression, but it also has the risk of jeopardizing the very essence of democracy itself.

Limitations and strengths

The group of participants in the study were quite homogeneous. All had "traditional" public occupations that often leaned towards a journalistic direction and most had occupations where they expressed more or less political opinions. One important aspect, however beyond the purpose of the current study, would have been to include participants with more recent forms of public professions, those who were public but not necessarily had writing as their main way of working. Future studies could include influencers, YouTubers, reality profiles and such as these individuals also have proved to be vulnerable to online harassment (e.g. Bäckman; 2019; Lundgren, 2020).

The group of participants were homogeneous regarding ethnicity as well. I actively sought to recruit participants with different backgrounds but unfortunately received no response. People with other ethnicities might have different experiences and raise important perspectives which now was not included in the study. Finally, it is essential to ask oneself if the group of participants truly represented the public figure's experiences in general. It could be so that a certain type of people agreed to participate in my study. As mentioned before, it is common for public figures to self-censor and consider leaving their jobs due to online harassment. None of the participants in my study clearly expressed such tendencies. That might be another explanation as to why online social support was not judged as a prerequisite for continued work for all participants.

Further limitations concern the procedure of the study. Participants were offered to conduct interviews face-to-face, via Skype or telephone, or answer questions in writing. Preferably, all interviews would have been conducted the same, but this was unfortunately not possible. The disadvantage of conducting telephone interviews or having participants answer in writing is that it is difficult to ensure that participants are paying attention and are not focused on other things while they answer the questions. At the same time studies also suggest that the difference between telephone interviews and interviews face-to-face

might not be as distinct as one is easily led to believe (Vogl, 2013). Allowing the participants themselves to choose how they wanted to conduct the interviews was done for several reasons. As the public figures were positioned in different parts of Sweden it was not possible to do face-to-face interviews with all of them. By giving them more options I also hoped to increase the likelihood that they wanted to participate as they then could choose which type of interview best suited their schedule and they felt most comfortable doing.

My interviews were relatively short. The shortest was 19 minutes and the longest 42. Smith and Osborn (2009) claim that semi-structured interviews, that most commonly are used within IPA, usually last for an hour or more. This could potentially mean that it was difficult for me to come close to the participants and have time to get a complete picture of their experiences. However, if interviews were significantly longer, fewer participants might have agreed to participate. Many public figures are busy with full-time jobs and several of them would most likely not have time to volunteer if the interviews would have been more extensive.

Future research directions and conclusion

An important area of research to study is online harassment and gender. Researchers have different views on whether men or women are exposed to more online harassment (e.g. Akhtar & Morrison, 2019; Buntain, 2018; Löfgren Nilsson & Örnebring, 2016; Pacilli & Mannarini, 2019) but it is apparent that they are exposed to different forms of harassment. Men receive more homophobic slurs or insults on their accomplishments (Brody & Vangelisti, 2017) while women are more frequently exposed to harassment that is sexual in nature, like threats of rape (Brody & Vangelisti, 2017; Löfgren Nilsson & Örnebring, 2016; Staude-Müller, Hansen & Voss, 2012). Misogynistic discourses are especially evident for female public figures who work within male-dominated fields (Adams, 2018; Marwick & Caplan, 2018). Women have been attacked by members from the far-right movements (Gelin & Pettersson, 2018), men's right activists (Marwick & Caplan, 2018) and so-called incels (involuntary celibates) in the past (Fernquist, Pelzer, Cohen, Kaati & Akrami, 2020). It is also relevant to further investigate gender in relation to different forms of online social support. Previous studies have found that online social support from a friend helped to regulate negative responses from stress among women. The same association was not found when the support came from strangers. Among men, no significant difference was found. They reacted, in the same way, regardless of who they received support from (Teoh, Chong, Yip, Lee, & Wong, 2015). In the current study, participants mostly received social support from followers who they did not know personally. It would have been interesting to study how the fact that online social support came from strangers, affected the very experience of the support. Future studies should investigate how gender potentially could influence public figure's experiences of both online harassment and online social support as it is a very current issue today.

Studies also indicate that online social support could be a less effective "buffer" against stressful life events than in-person social support (Cole et al., 2017; Indian & Grieve, 2014; Kaakinen, Keipi, Räsänen & Oksanen, 2018; Ybarra et al., 2015). In a development of the study, it would have been relevant to inquire after the participant's experiences of in-person social support (e.g. support from families at home or support

from colleagues at their workplace) as well. As it potentially would entail further interesting findings.

In conclusion, this study makes new valuable contributions to the relatively unexplored research area of online social support. Findings also have implication for practice as it has become evident that online social support is meaningful for public figures. Partly for the individual's experience, but also for the survival of the public conversation in whole. The study suggests that individuals who come together and organise themselves can make a difference. Online social support is an important contribution when it comes to creating a more inclusive and open-minded climate where public figures are no longer forced to self-censor or considers leaving their jobs.

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UNIVERSITY OF GOTHENBURG

Hej (namn på person)!

Mitt namn är Moa Lanngren och jag är masterstudent vid Göteborgs universitets psykologiska institution. Jag genomför just nu mitt examensarbete och jag har valt att studera offentliga personers erfarenheter av hat och hot på nätet samt upplevelsen av socialt stöd online. Mer specifikt är jag intresserad av att höra om dina upplevelser av näthat och vilken påverkan exempelvis uppbackande/stöttande meddelanden i kommentarsfält har haft i ditt fortsatta arbete som offentlig person. Jag undrar om du hade kunnat tänka dig att ställa upp på en intervju och berätta om dina upplevelser? Det finns ett stort kunskapsglapp kring möjliga interventioner för att stötta opinionsbildares utsatthet på nätet och din medverkan i studien är därför mycket uppskattad. Intervjun tar uppskattningsvis 30 minuter att göra och kan genomföras genom personligt möte, via Skype eller telefon beroende på dina möjligheter. Om det passar bättre för dig att svara på frågorna skriftligen kan de också mejlas ut till dig.

Allt insamlat material kommer behandlas konfidentiellt och enbart vara tillgängligt för mig och min handledare Margareta Bohlin. Margareta är forskare och studerar olika former av organisering på sociala medier. Eventuella personliga uppgifter som framkommer under intervjuns gång kommer anonymiseras innan publicering och självfallet behandlas konfidentiellt. Medverkan i studien är frivillig och du kan när som helst under studiens gång avbryta din medverkan utan att behöva ange någon särskild anledning.

Om du har några frågor eller funderingar gällande studien är du välkommen att höra av dig till mig eller min handledare.

Tack på förhand!

Med vänliga hälsningar,
Moa Lanngren

Student	**Handledare**
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Appendix 2

Tankar och upplevelser av sociala medier
Hur upplever du det att vara offentlig person/opinionsbildare på sociala medier?

> → Har läget förändrats under den tid du varit aktiv? I så fall hur?

> → I vilket syfte använder du sociala medier i ditt arbetsliv?

Erfarenheter av näthat
Är det någon särskild typ av inlägg på sociala medier som får motta mer hat/hot än andra? (Kan du ge exempel)?

> → Hur tar näthatet sig uttryck? (Hur ofta får du motta hat/hot?)

> → Har du någon uppfattning om vad det är för personer som lämnar hatiska/hotfulla kommentarer till dig?

> → Varför tror du att de hör av sig till dig?

> → Skulle du säga att de lyckas med sitt syfte?

Vill du berätta om hur du påverkats av hat/hotfulla kommentarer?

> → När du pratar med kollegor som är i samma bransch, upplever du att de har liknande erfarenheter som du? (Om inte, varför tror du att ni har olika upplevelser?)

> → Kan du ge exempel på hur du hanterat näthat? Har strategierna varit effektiva?

Socialt stöd online
Vidare är vi intresserade av att höra om dina upplevelser av hur socialt stöd online (t.ex. "uppbackande"/stöttande kommentarer i sociala medier) kan påverka upplevelsen av hat/hot på nätet. Kan du berätta vad du har för erfarenhet av den här typen av stöd?

> → Hur har det sociala stödet gått till? (Ex. Hur ofta får du motta stöd/vad skrivs/vilka skriver?)

> → Hur känns det att motta socialt stöd online?

På vilket sätt har socialt stöd online påverkat dig och det arbete du utför?

Allmänt
En mer generell fråga, har du förslag på åtgärder för att lösa problematiken med hat/hot på nätet riktat mot offentliga personer?

Finns det någonting mer du skulle vilja tillägga om näthat och/eller socialt stöd innan vi avslutar?