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Research Article

EXPERIENCES OF DEALING WITH ONLINE SEXUAL HARASSMENT AMONG YOUNG ADULTS: AN INTERPRETATIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

Research in Vietnam has rarely studied online sexual harassment (OSH) from the perspective of young adults who experience it. This study used interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to analyze in-depth interview data from eight young adults aged 19–25 living in HCMC to understand how they made sense of these incidents, responded to threats and tried to regain sense of safety. Five group experiential themes were identified: violations of safety boundaries; threat intensifies as personal agency narrows; the imprint of threat on psychological and bodily responses; efforts to regain and maintain agency; and lingering unease despite coping efforts. How serious OSH felt to participants was linked to how much control they believed they had over their private information and what they feared might happen. Some still worried about further threats; others felt safer when they thought they could manage the situation. These findings point to the importance of education about consent, digital boundaries, privacy protection, and responses to threatened dissemination, alongside nonjudgmental support to help those affected regain safety and control.

Keywords: interpretative phenomenological analysis; Ho Chi Minh City; online sexual harassment; young adults

1. Introduction

Online environments are important contexts for sexualized self-presentation and sexting among young people (van Oosten & Vandenbosch, 2017). However, sexualized interactions in these environments may constitute OSH when they are unwanted or nonconsensual, for example, when sexualized content is used to demean, pressure, or undermine a person's control over intimate content (Dao et al., 2026). People who experience OSH may struggle to seek help because of shame, anticipated family reactions,

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or the belief that meaningful support is unavailable, including from law enforcement agencies (Mitchell et al., 2025).

International qualitative studies of unwanted online sexual behaviors have drawn on interviews, focus groups, and open-ended responses, using thematic, content, narrative, and analyses informed by grounded theory (Sheikh & Rogers, 2024). Studies using IPA have examined how people make sense of online grooming, cyberflashing, and the nonconsensual dissemination of intimate content (Chiu & Quayle, 2022; Jeacock et al., 2025; Wahyuni & Saputra, 2022). These studies also describe fear, self-blame, loss of control, disrupted relationships, and changes in help-seeking and digital practices (Worsley & Carter, 2022).

In Vietnam, existing studies have addressed online harassment as part of broader research on sexual harassment or its recognition (Le, 2022; Le, 2019). Anderson et al. (2024) interviewed secondary school teachers, university lecturers, and staff of youth organizations. They described online settings as sites of harassment and nonconsensual sharing of sensitive content, but also as sources of information and support. That study offers a professional perspective, but provides less insight into how young adults in Vietnam who have experienced OSH make sense of and cope with it.

The present study used IPA to analyze in-depth interview data from a purposive sample of young adults in HCMC who had experienced OSH. It aimed to understand how participants made sense of what had happened and the process through which they sought to reestablish a sense of safety and control following these events.

2. Research methods and participants

2.1. Ethical Approval

The study was approved by the Advisory Council on Ethics in Social Sciences and Humanities Research at HCMC University of Education (Decision No. ECSH-2026-021). Before the interviews, participants were informed of the study aims, topics, possible psychological distress, and data use. They provided written consent for participation, interview recording, and research use, and could skip questions, pause, or withdraw at any time. If a participant showed distress, the researcher adjusted or suspended the interview and offered counseling and psychotherapy information as needed. Only the researcher accessed the recordings, and details identifying participants or others were removed during transcription and analysis.

2.2. Participants

Respondents, who are adults with ages ranging from 19 to 25 years old and living in HCMC at the time of the report, were assembled via purposive sampling from OSH survey participants. Eligible participants have experienced at least one of the four forms of OSH assessed in the survey: online sexualized verbal harassment, unwanted online sexual attention, online sexual coercion, or nonconsensual dissemination of intimate content (Dao et al., 2026). The participants that encountered more than one form of OSH were prioritized

to explore different manifestations of OSH. Eight respondents agreed to participate. This sample size allowed for detailed idiographic analysis of each case before examining convergence and divergence across cases (Smith et al., 2021). Table 1 presents their characteristics.

Table 1. *Characteristics of Study Participants*

Participant	Gender	Age	Forms of online sexual harassment			
			Online sexualized verbal harassment	Unwanted online sexual attention	Online sexual coercion	Nonconsensual dissemination of intimate content
P1	Female	25	✓	✓	✓	✓
P2	Female	23	✓	✓	✓	–
P3	Female	21	✓	✓	✓	–
P4	Male	23	–	✓	✓	–
P5	Female	22	✓	✓	–	–
P6	Male	21	✓	✓	✓	✓
P7	Female	19	✓	✓	✓	–
P8	Female	21	✓	✓	–	–

2.3. Data Collection and Analysis

2.3.1. Data Collection

Data were collected through individual semistructured in-depth interviews conducted via Zoom or Google Meet. Each interview lasted approximately 75–120 minutes. Following IPA's emphasis on participants' accounts (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014), the interviews invited them to describe the circumstances of their OSH experiences and how events unfolded, what those experiences meant to them and any effects they attributed to them, how they dealt with the situation, and whether they considered it resolved. The guide was used flexibly: the order of questions and follow-up prompts followed each participant's account and left room for issues they considered important.

2.3.2. Data Analysis

The analysis followed the six-step IPA process described by Smith et al. (2021):

- Reading and rereading: The eight interviews were transcribed verbatim (138 A4 pages), and each transcript was reread alongside its recording to attend to content, tone, and emotional context.
- Exploratory noting: The researcher made descriptive, linguistic, and initial conceptual notes, attending to participants' sense-making and the researcher's interpretation of their accounts (the double hermeneutic).
- Developing experiential statements: Preserving each participant's general context, the researcher condensed their notes into statements at a higher level of abstraction.
- Developing personal experiential themes: Related statements were clustered within each case, resulting in 43 personal experiential themes..

- Moving to the next case: The first four steps were completed separately for each case. Earlier themes were temporarily set aside when a new transcript was examined.
- Looking for patterns across cases: Personal experiential themes were compared in a cross-case matrix to examine convergence and divergence and to identify distinctive cases. The proposed group themes were checked against the transcripts and original extracts, yielding five group experiential themes and 14 subthemes.

Researcher reflexivity: The first author, a psychology doctoral student with prior OSH research experience and no prior relationship with participants, conducted all interviews and the primary analysis. Familiarity with the four OSH dimensions assessed in the preceding survey could have sensitized the researcher to certain forms of harassment and responses; these dimensions were therefore treated as background knowledge rather than an a priori coding framework. Reflexivity was maintained by examining each case on its own terms before cross-case comparison and repeatedly checking interpretations against participants' original accounts. The second author provided methodological supervision and reviewed the emerging themes and analytic process for consistency with IPA principles.

3. Results and discussion

The analysis identified five group experiential themes and 14 subthemes (Table 2).

Table 2. *Group Experiential Themes, Subthemes, and Contributing Cases*

Group experiential themes	Subthemes	Contributing cases
Violations of safety boundaries	The self and online presence sexualized without consent	All eight cases
	Intrusion from online spaces into offline life	P1, P2, P5, P6, P8
	Personal data and private content appropriated as tools of control	P1, P2, P3, P4, P6, P7
Threat intensifies as personal agency narrows	Realizing that images and data have moved beyond one's control	P1, P2, P3, P4, P6, P7
	Imagining exposure and judgment	All eight cases
	Attributing responsibility to oneself in retrospect	P1, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7
The imprint of threat on psychological and bodily responses	Diminishing responses to interactions that could be blocked or ignored	P1, P2, P4, P5, P6, P8
	Psychological and bodily distress as the threat became immediate	All eight cases
	Reactivated responses to cues reminding participants of the threat	P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7

Efforts to regain and maintain agency	Personal coping efforts and confidence in one's ability to cope	P1, P2, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8
	Seeking out trusted others to help manage the situation	P1, P2, P3, P4, P6, P7, P8
	Formal protection mechanisms as a conditional resource	P1, P2, P3, P4, P6, P7, P8
Lingering unease despite coping efforts	The incident remains unresolved while data remain beyond one's control	P1, P2, P4, P7
	Experiences of OSH shape ways of living and the development of self-protective rules	P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7

The five themes are presented for clarity, not as successive stages. Threat appraisals, psychological and bodily responses, and coping often overlapped, and retrospective accounts did not always establish their temporal order.

3.1. Violations of safety boundaries

Participants described OSH as violating their right to set boundaries around their bodies, online presence, and private data. P5 participated in social media groups for reproductive women's health, where she commented on posts for educational purposes. Following these interactions, however, she received unsolicited sexual message from anonymous accounts. She described such members as *"lurking bugs,"* a metaphor reflecting their intrusive presence in a space without any sexual intent. A similar violation appeared in P8's experience when a video of her wearing a Youth Union uniform at a school activity received the comment, *"Those legs around my neck...* In both case, ordinary online participation or self-presentation was given an unwanted sexual meaning, regardless of the participants' intentions.

These boundary violations could also extend into participants' offline lives. P8 described how the person harassing her seemed to know her activities, despite her not knowing the person's identity. This imbalance of control over personal information makes her afraid of being recognized or approached at school, even though the harassment had occurred online. For P6, the intrusion went further. After repeatedly propositioning him online, the harasser *"came directly to my workplace, "touched my body,"* and continued the harassment *online and in person for quite a long time."* His experience showed that blocking online contact could not necessarily end the harassment when the perpetrator was also able to reach him in person.

Boundaries narrowed further when personal data or private content became instruments of coercion. For P6 and P7, intimate images or videos from previous relationships were used to demand more sexual images or the resumption of romance. P2 and P4 described data recovered from a sold phone or compromised account being used to demand sexual requests, and said data would be leaked if those demands were not met. P3's

account showed that genuine material was not even necessary: *"He took my photo and used AI [artificial intelligence] to put me in obscene images […] then threatened to post those images online,"* in an attempt to pressure her into sending *"sexy"* photos. Whether the material had been shared in an intimate relationship, obtained without permission, or fabricated using AI, the harasser controlled whether it would be retained or disseminated. That control turned intimate or fabricated material into coercive leverage.

3.2. Threat intensifies as personal agency narrows

Participants appraised OSH as more serious when they realized that control over their private data had shifted to the harasser. For P4, this loss of control narrowed his sense of agency, which he captured through the metaphor of a "life sentence" and expressed more than concern about the continued existence of the image: *"Even if I later report it and get the original link deleted, it will still be floating around on countless other devices."* It conveyed his sense that deleting the original link could not restore his ability to decide who possessed the content or how it would be used. This loss of control became more dire as participants imagined being exposed and judged by their peers. Even before any intimate material had been leaked, P4 feared that his career would be *"ruined"* and that others would regard him as *"not masculine enough."* After learning that an intimate image had been sent to one friend, P6 imagined it reaching *"all my friends, teachers, and family"* and affecting his reputation and work. His imagined audience expanded from one recipient to his entire social world. The depth of the threat therefore lay in both the transfer of control to the harasser and participants' inability to contain the social judgment that dissemination of their sexual images might bring.

Some participants also reflected on their earlier choices and treated them as reasons for the harassment. P7 asked, *"Why wasn't I more clear-headed at the time? How did I let this lead to consequences like these?"* When consent was revisited during the interview, she recognized that she had objected to being photographed or filmed and felt *"better"* after shifting blame to the harasser. P6 similarly moved from calling himself *"so stupid"* for allowing someone to gain leverage through intimate images to recognizing that *"they were the one in the wrong, not me."* By contrast, P2 and P8 did not attribute responsibility to themselves, therefore, self-blame is not an inevitable response to threat. It arose when reflection on earlier choices became self-judgment, whereas shifting their mindset to account sexual harassment back to solely being the harasser's choice, could alter how participants understood the experience and bring them some relief.

3.3. The imprint of threat on psychological and bodily responses

Participants' physical and psychological responses shifted with how much harm they believed the harasser could cause, although these shifts did not follow a fixed sequence. When an online interaction could still be blocked, distress often subsided quickly. P5 described moving from *"outrage"* during the first incidents to feeling *"tired of it"* by the fourth or fifth messages: *"I simply blocked them."* This did not indicate acceptance but

rather, she no longer invested as much emotional energy in an interaction she could easily end. P3's response stood at the other extreme. After being coerced with AI-manipulated sexual images, she recalled: *"I just sat there, as if I were completely powerless... I didn't know what to do at all. I sat there for a while and then started crying... My mind was blank."* The threat could no longer be dismissed because the fabricated images could be recognized as her. Across cases, the intensity of participants' responses was tied less to a common set of symptoms than to the moment when the harasser appeared capable of causing consequences they could not readily contain.

Ambiguous cues could reactivate these responses even after the incident had subsided. Before opening an anonymous message, P2 found that *"thoughts about that previous threat to share [my images] came rushing back."* Her fear eased once she opened it and realized that the sender was someone else. The response therefore preceded confirmation of danger and arose from the possibility that the earlier threat had returned. P3 described a similar reaction to receiving an intimate image, but calmed down after recognizing that it was unrelated to the AI-manipulated material. Reminders carried greater weight when participants continued to regard the original threat as unresolved.

3.4. Efforts to regain and maintain agency

This theme echoes how participants sought to regain and maintain agency by acting on aspects that remained within their control. For P1, this meant carefully controlling what she disclosed to the harasser: *"I only sent a question mark. I neither confirmed nor denied anything about that image. […] I did not confirm that the information was mine."* Although her reaction could be interpreted as avoidance, she perceived it as a strategy to keep the perpetrator from spreading said image with confirmation that it is genuine, thus obtaining additional power over her. Other participants took screenshots as evidence, blocked online contact, researched relevant laws, or filed legal complaints. These actions could not recover data already obtained by the harasser, but they expanded helpful options for participants and helped them regain confidence in their ability to respond.

Agency could also be strengthened when participants found someone they considered safe enough to involve. P4's girlfriend *"did not blame me at all,"* and *"that absence of judgment"* helped him move away from self-blame. In contrast, P8's boyfriend did not make her feel fully supported and safe throughout the experience. She saw her best friend as her most helpful source of support, but kept the incident from her parents because she feared that their worry, blame, or restrictions on her social media use might add to the pressure she already felt. P8 believed that without people to talk to, the incident would have stayed on her mind longer and might have made her more suspicious of later contacts. As for P5, she told no one because she had not found someone she believed would understand. Support restored agency when it reduced the emotional burden and allowed participants to navigate the situation without judgment.

Legal complaints only offers consolation under certain conditions. By learning relevant laws and filing reports, P2 and P4 were able to pressure their harassers. P6 similarly photographed himself outside a law enforcement office as a warning. However, when he reported the incident, he said the police officer was *"quite dismissive"* and *"a little judgmental toward me."* Other participants were unable to pursue legal action because they could not identify the harasser or lacked sufficient evidence. Legal protection was therefore a conditional resource, shaped by the available evidence, whether the harasser could be identified, and how officials responded.

3.5. Lingering unease despite coping efforts

For some participants, even after they had dealt with the incident, the harassment was still making them upset. P1 described the experience as *"something that still haunts me"* because it had *"not been completely resolved."* Despite that, she continued working as a model, regardless of greater online visibility. P7 also chose to remain in her current relationship while fearing the harasser might act again: *"They'll wait until I'm at my happiest, then send that video to my friends and family."* Neither participant had given up on experiencing life, but it did not mean that the threat was gone.

For others, the anxiety became part of everyday activities. P2*"constantly checking messages in the message requests and spam folders"*to detect contact from the harasser. She also regarded the incident as *"a lesson,"* decided not to sell her phones again or to protect personal data more diligently. Some participants changed how they shared personal content and interacted online, ranging from no longer sending intimate images, even to a sexual partner, to posting less frequently and using a clone account. For P3, these precautions extended beyond online activity into her work and offlime interactions. She stopped accepting business inquiries through messages and *"stayed away from anything involving men,"* particularly those who reminded her of the harasser. In trying to protect themselves from further harm, participants sometimes accepted restrictions on their intimacy, self-expression, and opportunities for work.

P8 was a contrasting case: her unease subsided, and she returned to her usual routine within 2 – 3 days. An anonymous person who knew her school and activities had contacted her repeatedly, initially leaving her afraid and watchful at school. She believed that the person had no sensitive material or other means of putting further pressure on her; she could refuse the requests or block contact, which eventually ceased. She did not blame herself: *"I knew I hadn't done anything wrong, so there was nothing to be afraid of. […] They had nothing they could use against me. […] They couldn't harm me."* She also felt that earlier experiences of harassment had made her more resilient, but said that more forceful behavior or greater pressure would have made her much more afraid and less confident. Her initial fear subsided as she came to regard the threat as containable. P8's case thus illustrates the limits of the group theme of lingering unease, a divergence that matters in IPA's comparison of individual cases (Smith et al., 2021).

3.6. Discussion of the Findings

The findings parallel earlier research on sexual solicitation, coercion, threats, and the nonconsensual dissemination of intimate images. The present study found that boundary violations involved the sexualization of participants' online presence, harassment extending into offline settings, and the use of private data as coercive leverage (Filice et al., 2025; Henry et al., 2023). The case involving artificial sexual image provides another depth to these findings. Unlike cases involving genuine material, the harasser did not need an actual sexual image of the participant to cause panic. The fabricated image was enough to upset her because other people would think that it was the real her, raising fears of judgment if it were leaked.

The experience became more severe when participants realized that they could no longer control what would happen to their private content, who might see it, or when it might reappear (Nygård et al., 2025). Physical and psychological responses intensified when the threat seemed immediate and difficult to end. Shame addedd to the emotional burden of harassment for some participants, who reflected their decisions with harsh self-judgment (Mandau, 2021). The humiliation dissipated when participants realized that the perp was actually responsible for what had happened. P7 described feeling better after recognizing that she had not consented to being filmed, and P6 similarly came to identify the harasser as the person in the wrong.

To manage these experiences, participants relied on their own efforts and support from trusted people who listened without judgment (Siegel et al., 2025). Seeking legal protection was more complicated. P6 encountered a dismissive response when he reported the incident to the police, and legal mechanisms could not necessarily restore control over private material already held by harassers (Rackley et al., 2021). The prospect of above-board intervention nevertheless gave some participants leverage to make their harassers back down.

Across most cases, participants continued to feel uneasy about what might happen next or changed aspects of their daily lives to protect themselves, even after taking steps to deal with the harassment (McGlynn et al., 2021). As discussed in Section 3.5, P8 presented a contrasting case in which distress subsided relatively quickly. This difference reflects the circumstances of the threat, not a personal trait. For participants whose intimate material remained beyond their control, the possibility of more harassment or unwanted publicity continued to cause unease. P8, by contrast, came to regard the threat as manageable. All in all, these cases suggest that lingering distress was not an inevitable outcome of OSH. Its persistence appeared closely related to the leverage participants believed harassers still held and their own perceived ability to contain the consequences.

The qualitative sample retains some limitations due to two criteria during recruitment. Participants were drawn from survey respondents who had volunteered contact details and agreed to an interview, which may have favored those more willing to disclose or revisit OSH. Those reporting several OSH dimensions were also prioritized, potentially giving varied experiences greater prominence than in the wider survey sample. Even though the

eight participants belong to a shared demographic, the forms of harassment they encountered, their relationships with the harassers, and the time elapsed since the incidents were different. This is a base for comparison, but limit how far the shared patterns can be extended. A single interview using a broad guide may leave some experiences unexplored. The findings should be understood as situated interpretations of these eight participants' experiences, not as representative of all young adults affected by OSH.

4. Conclusion

Across the eight IPA interviews with young adults aged 19–25 in HCMC, the perceived severity of OSH and the distress that followed were closely tied to whether participants believed harassers still held private material and ability to contain the threat. This pattern was not homogenous. Some participants continued to experience unease despite coping efforts, while others felt safer when the threat appeared more manageable. Support from trusted people gave relief when it came without conviction. Legal intervention could discourage further harassment, even though it did not completely erase the perp's ownership of private material. These findings highlight the need for education on consent and digital boundaries, practical guidance on protecting privacy and responding threats to leak intimate content. For counselors, understanding whether a threat remains active is important, but so is how the affected person perceives the situation and their ability to navigate. Unprejudiced support helps victims feel safety and agency. Authorities should protect the privacy of victims in legal reports, clearly explain safeguard options and evidence-preservation measures, especially when fear of blame may already discourage victims from seeking help.

❖ ***Conflict of Interest:*** *Authors have no conflict of interest to declare.*

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TRẢI NGHIỆM ĐỐI MẶT VỚI QUẤY RỐI TÌNH DỤC TRỰC TUYẾN Ở THANH NIÊN: NGHIÊN CỨU HIỆN TƯỢNG HỌC DIỄN GIẢI

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ABSTRACT

Ở Việt Nam, ít nghiên cứu về quấy rối tình dục trực tuyến (QRTDTT) từ góc nhìn thanh niên đã từng trải qua. Nghiên cứu này áp dụng phân tích hiện tượng học diễn giải (IPA) thông qua phỏng vấn sâu tám thanh niên 19–25 tuổi tại Thành phố Hồ Chí Minh (TPHCM) để tìm hiểu cách họ diễn giải sự việc, ứng phó với đe dọa và tìm lại cảm giác an toàn. Năm chủ đề trải nghiệm nhóm gồm: xâm phạm ranh giới an toàn; đe dọa tăng khi quyền chủ động thu hẹp; dấu ấn của đe dọa trong phản ứng tâm lí và cơ thể; nỗ lực khôi phục và duy trì quyền chủ động; bất an kéo dài sau ứng phó. Cảm nhận mức độ nghiêm trọng gắn với khả năng kiểm soát thông tin riêng tư và hậu quả đi kèm. Một số vẫn lo bị đe dọa tiếp; số khác thấy an toàn hơn khi tin rằng mình có thể ứng phó. Kết quả gợi mở giáo dục về đồng thuận, ranh giới số, bảo vệ quyền riêng tư, ứng phó với đe dọa phát tán nội dung và hỗ trợ không phán xét để người bị quấy rối lấy lại cảm giác an toàn.

Từ khóa: hiện tượng học diễn giải; Thành phố Hồ Chí Minh; quấy rối tình dục trực tuyến; thanh niên