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Digital Democracy, Digital Dangers: Tracing Cybercrime Victimization in Finnish Online Political Discourse

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Abstract. This study investigates the relationship between online political engagement, political preferences, and cyberhate victimization in a Nordic country. We utilize longitudinal, population-level data from over 3,750 Finnish respondents surveyed between 2017 and 2021. The data affords a nuanced understanding of cyberbullying victimization trends over time and how such victimization reflects the respondents' online behavior. The findings reveal a notable association between experiencing cyberhate and the respondents' political activity, highlighting the polarizing nature of the online political environment in Finland. The data indicates also that left-wing supporters are disproportionately targeted by online hate. The study raises concerns about the urgent need for effective measures to mitigate the impact of cyberhate, toward more respectful online discourse among individuals with differing political beliefs.

Keywords: Political Activity, Social Media, Cyberhate Victimization

1 Introduction

Social media has emerged as a potent catalyst for ideological formation and political struggles, effectively drawing together individuals with shared beliefs, facilitating the broad dissemination of ideas, and granting direct access to a spectrum of opposing viewpoints.¹ Ever-evolving social media platforms provide open spaces for political participation, social connectivity, and exchange of opinions. However, these dynamic and democratic spaces can also have the potential for negative consequences for individuals. Different media platforms can facilitate increased conflicts, dissemination of misinformation, and cyberbullying.

Prior research, conducted particularly in the United States and certain European countries, have explored the contours of online victimization as it intersects with political ideologies and activities.^{2,3} These studies are often framed within the polarized setting of a two-party system where ideological divisions are clearly identified. This raises intriguing questions about the nature of such interactions in a multiparty representative democracy, suggesting a different, multilayered, landscape of online political engagement and its attendant challenges.

In this paper, we examine how online political participation and political preferences associate with cyberhate victimization in Finland. We examine three different forms of

cyberhate, which offer us a multi-dimensional overview of the exposure to the phenomenon. These include victimization to hate speech, false accusation, and sexual harassment. We are particularly interested in what kind of consequences political activity can have in digital environments. In addition, explore how different political ideologies connect the observed associations guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: What is the relationship between participation in online political activities and the likelihood of becoming a victim of cybercrime?

RQ2: Does individuals' political preference influence the association between their online engagement and experiences of victimization?

The links between political activity and online hate victimization in Finland represent a significant research gap that this study aims to fill by using a proven theoretical framework, nationally representative data, and novel findings. By combining the theoretical frameworks of routine activity theory and affective polarization the study examines the ability of supporters from various groups to express their views safely in the online environment.

2 Theoretical background

2.1 Routine activity theory and political participation

Routine activity theory (RAT) has played a significant role in criminological research in the past, originally developed in the 1970s.⁴ This approach has been well established and extensively used to study various forms of aggressor behavior both online and offline. As such, it has been widely used for victimization research.⁵ According to RAT, routines carried out in daily life place individuals at risk for victimization by exposing them to risky people, places, and situations. RAT puts forth that the convergence of a motivated offender, a suitable target and a lack of capable guardians will lead to victimization experiences.⁶

Four components are central in RAT for the victimization process, namely: value, inertia, visibility, and accessibility. In terms of value, the offender makes a calculation in terms of the value of targeting someone in a destructive manner. Second, the offender makes an estimate of how much resistance to the threat a potential target can carry out in self-defense. Third, a target must be visible and therefore identifiable to some degree by the aggressor. Finally, offenders are concerned with how easily escaping from a victimization event might be, given the environment in which it takes place.

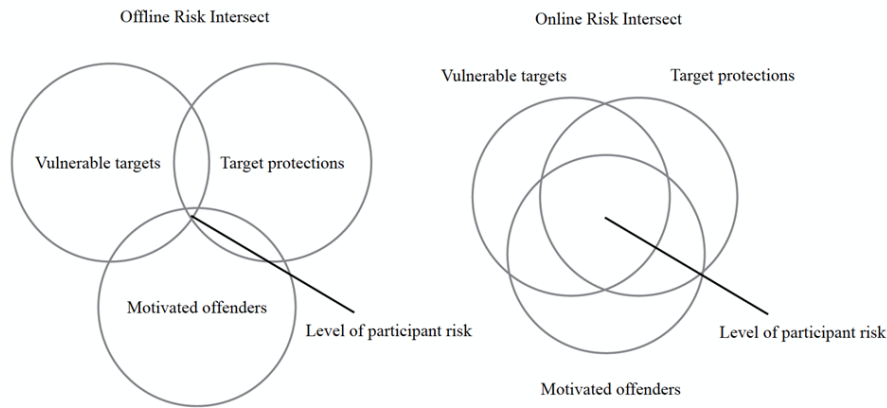


Fig. 1. Offline and online routine activity risks.

The online setting presents a highly dynamic environment in which to apply the RAT framework, as accessibility, visibility and inertia are all potentially significantly affected by how interaction takes place. On social media, for example, interaction is highly accessible, as is the route to exit an aggressive interaction, for example. Online, visibility can be managed, and interacting partners are more easily found compared to offline communities sharing antagonistic points of view, for example. Furthermore, in terms of inertia, potential victims are less able to avoid or defend against initial threats through content creation or text-based hate, for example. As such, RAT has successfully been applied to various Internet-based phenomena including hate speech and harmful content,⁷ victimization experiences,⁸ cybercrime and cyberbullying,⁸ and cyberstalking.

Figure 1 above illustrates the dynamics of online vs. offline routine activity risk. As vulnerable targets become more available, potential number of motivated offenders grows and ability to defend against unwanted content online diminishes, the convergence area grows and so does the risk of user participation online. This sets the stage for key components that make online victimization more likely through participation in that environment.

Currently, social media plays a pivotal role in enabling unprecedented levels of engagement in discussions and the initiation of new social movements.¹⁰ It allows individuals to openly share their political views and objectives by engaging in the public domain via social media platforms.¹¹ Compared to offline environments, online platforms enable messages to reach large audiences quickly. Opinions shared online can easily be disseminated beyond the original social circle, reaching individuals with opposing views who may respond with hate speech. Here, once a negative or hostile response is initiated, it can quickly escalate as more people join in. The absence of non-verbal cues present in face-to-face interaction can lead to depersonalization, where people view those with opposing views not as individuals but as faceless members of an outgroup, making it easier to justify directing hate speech towards them.⁷

Also, the algorithms used by social media platforms significantly influence the information users are exposed to, with the platforms' algorithmic filtering further enhancing this effect. For example, individuals are inclined to engage with information that aligns with their existing beliefs and to form networks with others who share their views.¹² This results in social interactions that occur within echo chambers, limiting exposure to diverse viewpoints and exacerbating the polarization among different social groups.¹³ Furthermore, these homogeneous groups become fertile grounds for spreading cyberhate, and studies have shown that active engagement in political discourse can lead individuals towards participating in online 'echo chambers'.¹⁴

2.2 Affective polarization and cybercrime victimization in multiparty system

Affective polarization is an important concept for grasping the emotional and social rifts within modern political landscapes.¹⁵ In contrast to ideological polarization, which is grounded in differing policy preferences and political ideologies, affective polarization is concerned with the emotional and affective reactions that people have towards those from rival political factions. It emphasizes the emergence of negative emotions, such as distrust, aversion, or animosity, which can be directed at individuals simply because of their political party membership, rather than their actual opinions or deeds.¹⁶ This dynamic has been increasingly identified and explored across various democratic nations.

Social media discussions highlight topics that arouse strong emotions across the political spectrum, such as immigration and the environment.¹⁷ Citizens form online networks with politically similar people, and these networks increasingly differentiate themselves from opposing clusters providing fertile base for partisan sorting. Online politics also seem to reinforce opinion barriers, creating an effect that reduces constructive social debate¹⁸. As social media platforms have made political controversies increasingly visible, many people now choose to refrain from political discussions in offline contexts due to the presence of non-like-minded others.¹⁹

In Finland, for example, it has been demonstrated that differences between supporters of different parties are growing on social media.²⁰ The debate has been particularly intense between the Finns (FP), the Greens (GL) and the Left Alliance (LA). The FP is known as a far-right populist party that has made significant electoral gains in the 2010s and 2020s by promoting conservative and nationalist values, while at the same time stirring up debate, particularly against humanitarian immigration. At the same time, GL and LA have acted as counterparts to FP by emphasizing equality, tolerance, and minority rights, especially in relation to income, race and ethnicity, and sexual orientation.

3 Method

3.1 Participants

Our study draws from a comprehensive longitudinal survey conducted from 2017 to 2021. Initially, it targeted a random cohort of approximately 10,000 Finns aged 18-74, yielding a response from 3,724 individuals. Subsequently, the survey was administered three more times at 15-month intervals, exclusively to participants who opted to continue in the study. The development of this panel is detailed in a separate research report.²¹

Participation activity decreased over time, with 1,137 respondents in the second survey, 735 in the third, and 543 in the fourth. Altogether, this research utilizes all 6,131 observations collected from these participants.

The survey included questions about the participants' basic demographics, such as gender, education, and age. The data represent both sexes well as 51 per cent of the participants were male and 49 per cent female. The final sample is also relatively representative in terms of education, as 51 per cent of the sample has secondary level education and 34 per cent holds master's or bachelor's degree. Respondents age ranged from 18 to 74 years, average age being 51 years, which makes the age distribution of the data slightly skewed towards the older age groups (the population average is 46 years).

3.2 Measures

We formed the dependent variable by considering different angles of cyberhate. We used three items of self-reported online victimization by examining whether participants have victimized by 1) hate speech, 2) sexual harassment, or 3) false accusation. According to the composite variable created, there were 901 victims in the data (indicating a victimization probability of 15%).

The independent variable was online political participation, measured through activities on social media such as sharing, creating, and discussing political content. Respondents assessed the frequency of engagement in these activities on a scale from never (1) to daily (4). We combined these responses into a 10-point index to measure the extent of participation, where 1 indicates no participation and 10 indicates daily participation in all activities. Descriptive analysis revealed that about 35 per cent of participants participated in some form of political activity online during the study period. However, active participation was limited, with only 15 per cent scoring 4 or higher on the index, indicating that most respondents participated infrequently and in limited forms.

Political party preference was utilized as a moderating variable, measured by reported voting intentions for the 2019 parliamentary elections. This was measured only during the second survey wave, restricting its utilization in longitudinal analyses to participants of this wave who provided their preference (n=1,125). To have enough observations for the analysis, we focused on the six largest political parties in Finland, with 250-712 observations per party. The distribution was the following: the Centre Party

7.1%, the Finns Party 9.1%, the Coalition Party 15.9%, the Social Democrats 15.8%, the Greens 20.2%, and the Left Alliance 10.6%.

3.3 Analytic strategy

We conducted multilevel linear probability models to predict the probability of victimization at the respondent level. In all models, we account for the clustering of responses at the respondent level, and the models include random intercepts. The analysis was performed using the Stata 18 software, using *meglm* and *xtreg* commands. The main results were plotted by using the *coefplot* command.

First, we examined the overall manifestation of victimization in terms of political participation and voting preferences. After this, we implemented an interaction model to find simple effects of online political participation across different political parties.

4 Results

First, we analyzed the general associations in the longitudinal data design. The findings are given in Figure 2. The findings indicate a marked increase in the incidence of cybercrime correlating with the level and diversity of political participation on social media. Specifically, an increase by one unit in the participation activity associates with a six-percentage point increase in the probability of victimization, as substantiated by a statistically significant coefficient ($B=0.06$, $p<0.001$).

The data also revealed notable disparities in victimization rates according to the political preferences of the respondents. Individuals expressing a preference for the Left had a notably higher propensity for becoming targets of cybercrime in comparison to supporters of alternative political factions. The result showed that left-wing supporters were up to 30 per cent more likely to become a victim. This is also illustrated in Figure 2.

Finally, we conducted an interaction analysis to find the simple effects of online political participation among different party preferences. Findings are shown in Figure 3. This analysis indicated that online participation significantly elevates the risk of victimization for individuals aligned with left-wing and green political parties. Conversely, this trend does not manifest with equivalent clarity among affiliates of other political entities. Among supporters of the Coalition and the Finns cybercrime experiences are unlikely to increase as participation becomes more active or diverse.

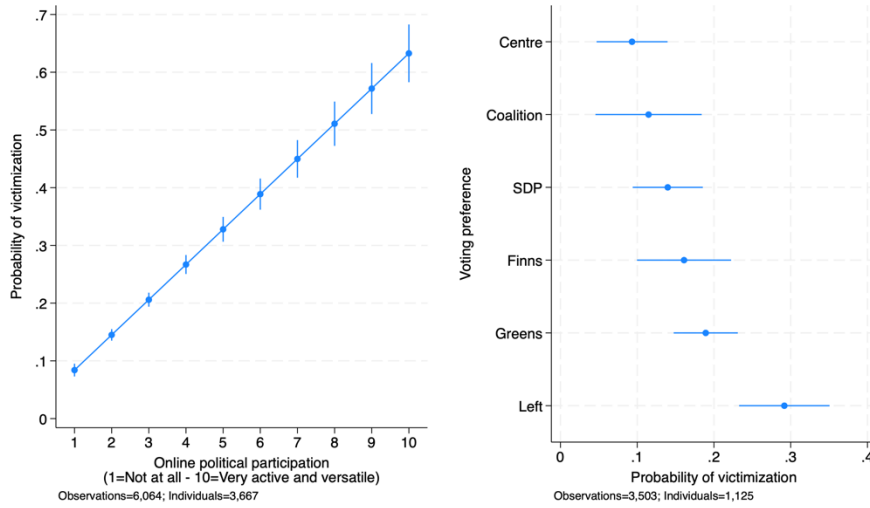


Fig. 2. Predicted probabilities of experiencing cyberhate based on online political participation and party preference. Estimated from the generalized linear mixed effects models.

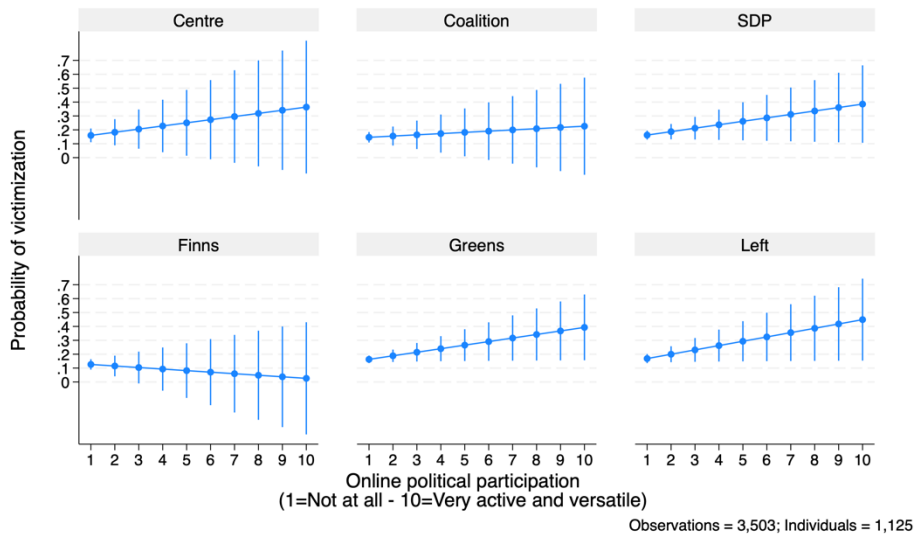


Fig. 3. Predicted probabilities of experiencing cyberhate based on heightened online political participation, differentiated by party preference. Estimated from the fixed-effect models.

5 Discussion

The study investigated the link between online political engagement, political preferences, and cyberhate victimization in a Nordic country, distinguishing itself from other research that often concentrates on two-party systems such as in the case of the United States. The study explored a multi-ideological political scene with various political conflicts, especially underlining the rise of political divisions in the digital environment. The findings provide novel insights into the complexities of digital participation and democracy.

Our empirical analysis focused on the relationship between participation in online political activities and cybercrime victimization. We also asked whether political preference influenced the association between online engagements and experiences of victimization.

In general, the study lent strong support for the assumptions of routine activity theory (RAT). The analysis showed that political participation generally increases experiences of hate. However, this varies significantly among different political groups, which is in line with affective polarization approaches. Supporters of the Left Alliance appeared to have the highest risk of victimization among all parties, which may be due to left-leaning individuals being more visible on social media and potentially more vulnerable due to the relative smallness of their party. In the Finnish political landscape, large parties, particularly those leaning more to the right, tend to dominate.

As individuals' political activity increases, victimization rises especially among the Green and the Left Alliance supporters. In contrast, supporters of the Finns Party and the National Coalition Party tend to experience relatively less harassment, even if their activity levels increase. These observations thus highlight that in Finnish social media, it seems easier to be "on the right" than "on the left".

The research raises several intriguing follow-up questions. For instance, to what extent has the polarization between the left and the right begun to manifest in voting behavior? In recent political elections, the right-wing parties have notably prevailed. If active left-leaning individuals face more harassment and hate speech on social media, how does this reflect on traditional forms of social participation? Conversely, if the activity of right-wing parties attracts less hate speech, does this facilitate political visibility in other channels of participation? Answers to these questions remain open for future investigations.

This study naturally has its limitations. The primary limitations stem from its original research design and data collection methodology. The data were gathered through general survey questionnaires. Therefore, a detailed analysis at the message level that might reveal variations in communication styles among supporters of different political parties, was not possible. Moreover, the data originated from a single, small European nation, underscoring the need for broader data collection across multiple countries to enable cross-national comparisons. The analysis conducted in this study was constrained by a limited number of instances suitable for individual-level longitudinal observation across various intervals. Consequently, it was not feasible to evaluate how shifts in political allegiance and style of discourse could affect personal experiences.

Despite these complexities, our study demonstrates that the interplay between political preferences and online activities offers an important subject that illuminates prevailing digital inequalities within today's society.

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Disclosure of Interests. The authors have declared no competing interests.

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