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Title	'Crossing the Line': child protection and welfare managers' and social workers' experiences of social media, online and digital abuse and harassment in Ireland
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Publication date	2026-04-29
Original Citation	Bradley, A, Burns, K, Súilleabháin, FÓ & Halvey, O 2026, ''Crossing the Line': child protection and welfare managers' and social workers' experiences of social media, online and digital abuse and harassment in Ireland', Child Abuse Review, vol. 35, no. 3, 70127. https://doi.org/10.1002/car.70127
Type of publication	Article (peer-reviewed)
Link to publisher's version	https://www.scopus.com/pages/publications/105037256728 - 10.1002/car.70127
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'Crossing the Line': Child Protection and Welfare Managers' and Social Workers' Experiences of Social Media, Online and Digital Abuse and Harassment in Ireland

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Received: 10 December 2025 | **Revised:** 6 April 2026 | **Accepted:** 17 April 2026

Keywords: abuse and harassment of workers | child protection and welfare | cyberbullying | Ireland | social media | social work

ABSTRACT

Users of child protection social work and/or their families are fully entitled to express their dissatisfaction with the professional or service through both formal and informal channels. Fair criticism and dissatisfaction can sometimes, however, escalate and cross the line into violence, harassment and abuse (VHA). Social media online and digital platforms have made it possible for professionals to be subjected to VHA around the clock, in front of a wider audience, all the while making it very difficult to escape or disconnect from. But what constitutes 'crossing the line'?

The findings presented in this paper are from the qualitative phase (Phase 2) of a mixed-methods exploratory study of social media and online abuse and harassment of social workers and probation officers in the Republic of Ireland. Nineteen semistructured interviews were conducted with experienced child protection and welfare managers and social workers. The study found that most participants believed child protection and welfare workers were at increased risk of VHA and expected some level of abuse or harassment due to the serious nature of their work. Participants demonstrated an empathic understanding towards the motivations behind the VHA behaviour by the person instigating it. The paper presents a new 'crossing the line escalation scale' based on the experiences of social workers and managers in child protection to assist with the assessment of social media, digital and online abuse. The contribution of this study is to provide first-hand accounts and analysis from child protection workers and managers on where this line might be.

1 | Introduction

Violence, harassment and aggression (VHA) is often accepted and normalised as part of the 'nature of the profession' (Lee et al. 2021, 1100) of social work. This is particularly the case in child protection and welfare. Child protection workers 'often handle clients who might not want their involvement' (Parveen et al. 2023, 5964). The increased exposure to VHA could partly explain why these professionals rationalise this treatment as an occupational norm (Parveen et al. 2023). Due to the ubiquity of smartphones and social media platforms, workplace violence, abuse and harassment are no longer confined to the physical, in-person workplace or during scheduled working hours (Burns et al. 2024; Halvey et al. 2024).

Digital technologies have blurred professional boundaries so that professionals, including child protection workers, can be subjected to abuse and harassment day or night. Before the internet and social media, a letter of complaint was seen only by your manager. Online and social media communications are visible to a global audience, potentially harming a professional's reputation. For example, if someone makes an allegation on

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Key Practitioner Messages

- Social media and online abuse and harassment can happen even if you are not on social media.
- The point at which the line is crossed from freedom of expression into abuse and harassment is not fixed. However, it usually involves commentary and intrusion into personal and family life, and/or includes threats to safety.
- Participants demonstrated empathy towards the instigator, even when they did not like the behaviours and what was posted.

social media that a practitioner has a sexual interest in children, as well as reputational harm, the communication can also lead to employer, regulatory body, and/or police interventions. It is an ongoing debate in countries at present as to the extent of the duty of care and responsibilities of social media companies to remove vexatious, harmful and abusive comments from their platforms (Howard 2024).

Social media platforms, heretofore, have been subject to light-touch regulations. There is a growing chasm between the United States and the European Union on the degree to which social media platforms should be regulated. The United States takes a minimalist approach to regulating freedom of speech based on the First Amendment to the United States Constitution. The European Union (EU), on the other hand, through the Digital Services Act 2022, is developing a more robust regulatory framework to place restrictions on large internet and social media companies. The EU, in adopting this approach, is seeking to address the online safety of citizens and to address hate speech. Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights states that 'freedom of expression carries with it duties and responsibilities' (Car and Immenkamp 2025, 1). In particular, Article 10 permits the restriction of speech,

> in the interests of national security, territorial integrity or public safety, for the prevention of disorder or crime, for the protection of health or morals, for the protection of the reputation or rights of others ...
>
> (Council of Europe 2021, 12).

At the Munich Security Conference in 2025, JD Vance, the American vice president, said that the EU was curtailing free speech, and he likened content moderation to 'authoritarian censorship' (Car and Immenkamp 2025, 10). In contrast, Ireland's Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media, Patrick O'Donovan, has commented that 'the era of self-regulation' by social media companies is over (McNally and Murray 2025, 1).

Social media and online platforms can be effective tools for social change and public debate (Çela 2015). They can be fun spaces, and many community, sporting and civil society organisations use them effectively for communication and lobbying. Service users and community members can use them positively for social support, advice and to reduce isolation. However, like most community members, service users also experience bullying, harassment and stalking on these platforms. Like many professionals, social workers and child protection workers are sometimes the subject of social media and online posts that involve fair criticism of their practice, employers and/or government and agency policies. However, what can be done if freedom of speech exercised through social media and online platforms is inaccurate, false or involves a serious, unfounded accusation of professional misconduct? What must it be like for a child protection worker/manager to work hard towards keeping a child safe, only to learn about a fake Facebook account with upsetting content purporting to be you that an anonymous person then invites your friends to view?

There is a paucity of empirical data and guidance documents addressing online VHA towards social workers (Burns et al. 2024). A key finding of our comprehensive literature search during this study was that there were no qualitative studies in the English language with social workers, probation officers or child protection workers and managers on this topic (Burns et al. 2024). The contribution of our study is to address this gap for the social work profession, with a particular focus on child protection and welfare. Phase 1 of our study involved an exploratory national survey of social workers, social work students and probation officers (Burns et al. 2024; Halvey et al. 2024) aimed at understanding the nature, frequency and incidence of VHA towards social workers in Ireland. Interestingly, social workers in Ireland had lower prevalence rates for work-related social media and online digital abuse (one in six) (Burns et al. 2024), compared to one in five-secondary-level teachers (RedC and Association of Secondary Teachers in Ireland [ASTI] 2024). Based on the findings from Phase 1, Phase 2 provides an in-depth qualitative examination of the experiences of child protection and welfare workers employed by Tusla, the national public sector Child and Family Agency in Ireland. This cohort reported the highest prevalence rates of social media and online abuse in Phase 1 of our study.

The research questions for the qualitative phase of this study were as follows: (1) How do social workers and managers in the Child and Family Agency define online, social media and digital abuse and harassment? (2) What types of abuse and harassment did they experience? and (3) How did they define the line between fair comment on their practice or service and abuse and harassment?

2 | Literature Review

Freedom of expression is enshrined in Article 40.6.1 of the Irish Constitution, which proclaims that the 'state guarantees ... the right of the citizens to express freely their convictions and opinions' (Government of Ireland 1937). This includes criticisms of government policies and the public services delivered under those policies, such as child protection and welfare social work. However, this liberty can be limited if it is deemed to 'undermine public order or morality or the authority of the State' (Government of Ireland 1937). Formal complaint channels are in place for a service user to report their concerns and grievances relating to a social worker's

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conduct. Complaints can be lodged with a direct complaint to the service provider/employer, a fitness to practise complaint can be submitted through CORU (Health and Social Care Professionals Council 2025), or to the Ombudsman for Children's Office (2025).

Social media and online platforms offer service users and/or their families an informal space for expressing their dissatisfaction. Although some of the complaints shared online can be defined as fair criticism, others may use those platforms to cross the line into abuse and harassment. In the literature, abusive targeting and harassment of an individual online is described in a variety of ways, including 'digital bullying' (Al-Turif and Al-Sanad 2023), 'cyberbullying' (Samsudin et al. 2023; Javed et al. 2023; Kagan et al. 2017); and 'cyber-harassment' (Ahmed 2024; Nielsen et al. 2023; Oksanen et al. 2022). Cyberbullying refers to the 'tormenting, humiliating and/or threatening someone using online or mobile communication technologies' (Chandler and Munday 2016, 1). According to Ahmed (2024, 15), cyberharassment refers to a 'broad spectrum of behaviours, including cyber stalking, online bullying, trolling, and the dissemination of harmful content'. Hereafter, the term 'social media, online and digital abuse and harassment' is used in this paper in place of 'cyberbullying' as, we argue, it provides a more comprehensive description of these behaviours. Social media, online and digital abuse and harassment (SMODAH) can be defined as

> A set of behaviours and practices, whether singular or multiple events, by individuals or groups using digital technologies and devices, social media platforms, and/or the internet to send or post direct implicit messages that are abusive, threatening, or stalking or harassing behaviours of a person. The intention is to cause upset, distress, harm, shame, reputational harm or to exert pressure to get a desired outcome. It is not confined to a physical workplace; it is generally publicly visible, it can impact more than the intended participant, and posts are sometimes without attribution (Burns et al. 2024, 3).

A national exploratory survey conducted in the Republic of Ireland amongst social workers, social work students, and probation officers ($n = 379$) found that 21.9% of participants ($n = 83$) had experienced social media, online or digital abuse, with 15.3% ($n = 58$) of participants experiencing this form of abuse in a work-related capacity (Burns et al. 2024; Halvey et al. 2024). Facebook, Twitter (now X) and email were the most common vectors for the abuse, and the abuse was experienced by practitioners in all age groups. Abuse and harassment were mostly instigated by adult service users (current or former) or family members of service users (current or former). UNISON (2022), the public service union in the United Kingdom, conducted a nationwide study on the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on social work. They reported that out of 3000 social workers who participated in their survey, 3% had experienced abuse online over the period of a month (January–February 2022). In Norway, a study on workplace mistreatment and insomnia focusing on child welfare workers reported that 5.4% had experienced at least one incidence of cyberbullying in the previous 6 months (Nielsen et al. 2023). Social workers and child protection workers are not exceptional in this regard: Medicine (Royan et al. 2023), academia (Veletsianos et al. 2018; Barlow and Awan 2016), journalism (Davis Kempton and Connolly-Ahern 2022), politicians (Moore 2021), climate scientists (Vidal Valero 2023), gamers (McLean and Griffiths 2019) and sports (Burch et al. 2023) have all reported similar issues. Many of these studies indicated a gendered component to cyberbullying, with women experiencing higher rates than men. This finding is of particular interest in a profession like social work and other care professions that contain a significantly higher proportion of women than men.

The types of abuse and harassment that social workers have experienced via social media, online and digital platforms include, but are not limited to, false allegations being made about the practitioner, fake social media/online accounts being created to impersonate them and the sharing of photographs of social workers' children online (Burns et al. 2024). The potential gravity and impact of these behaviours was demonstrated in a recent high-profile conviction of a woman in Ireland, who had utilised online platforms to harass, abuse and cause reputational harm to a wide range of professionals (police, solicitors, politicians, community workers and child protection workers). Part of her harassment campaign involved contacting professionals' employers, An Garda Síochaná (police) and national broadcasters to make false allegations about these individuals, including a serious allegation of rape (Irish Examiner 2023a, 2023b), none of which had any basis in fact. The woman was sentenced to 6 years in prison with the last two suspended (Irish Examiner 2023a; O'Sullivan 2023).

In response to the 'increasing and serious concern' (Baker 2023) to staff within the Child and Family Agency being targeted via social media platforms, Tusla announced the development of a new Violence, Harassment and Aggression strategy in 2023. Part of this strategy was the creation and adoption of a policy on managing work-related violence and aggression (Tusla, Child and Family Agency 2023). Modelled on the Health Service Executive's (HSE) *Strategy for Violence Harassment and Aggression; Linking Service & Safety* (McKenna 2008), Tusla recognised and accepted that the provision of 'social care can result in situational conflict', but noted that this should not make 'any form of aggression and/or violence being inherent, inevitable, or acceptable' (Tusla, Child and Family Agency 2023, 2). The policy aims to equip staff with the agency's supporting procedures in how to prevent, manage and respond to VHA. The policy highlights that a considerable amount of unacceptable, abusive behaviour takes place via social media and other online and digital platforms.

Nippert-Eng's (1996) boundary theory provides a useful framework for this study. This theory examines how workers construct and maintain boundaries between work and home, professional and personal and self and role, and what happens when these boundaries are breached. Nippert-Eng theorises a continuum from 'segmentors', who keep a strict boundary between work and home, to 'integrators', who allow them to blur. Social media and online spaces challenge this framework by 'forcing' boundary permeability on workers regardless of their preferences, removing the agency that Nippert-Eng's original

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formulation assumed workers controlled. Fair expression of views about a professional or service does not breach the professional boundary, but posting a photo of the worker's personal car or home on Facebook dissolves the boundary between work and home, and the professional and personal self. Social workers who deliberately stay off social media to protect the work-home boundary (segmentors) cannot control the actions of others who post about them.

3 | Methods and Research Design

The second phase of the social media and social work study in Ireland reported in this paper comprised 19 semistructured interviews undertaken between May 2023 and February 2024. The inclusion criteria for the phase reported in this paper were that participants were (a) employed as a social worker (any grade) or as a manager (any profession) by the Child and Family Agency, (b) age 18+ and (c) they self-defined as experiencing online, social media, digital abuse or harassment directly related to their work in child protection and welfare. Two expressions of interest to participate in the second phase were declined as they did not meet the inclusion criteria. We were interested in participants' experience(s) of this issue across their working life in child protection and welfare; therefore, no date parameters were set as part of the inclusion criteria. The incidents reported in this paper occurred between 2011 and 2023, which means that some of the incidents occurred when participants were working for the HSE, before the establishment of the Child and Family Agency in 2014. This study received research ethics approval from both our university's Social Research Ethics Committee and from Tusla's own Research Ethics Committee.

Interview participants were recruited in three ways: through the Phase 1 national survey, internal Child and Family Agency communications to all staff and snowball sampling (Gray 2018). Twelve of the interview participants were female (63%), and seven were male (37%). Eighteen of the participants were social workers by profession. All were working in statutory child protection and welfare for either the HSE or Tusla at the time of the abuse or harassment. Seventeen of the participants were experienced practitioners and managers with a minimum of 8+ years of experience in child protection and welfare. The exact posts and grades of participants are not presented to protect anonymity, but they range across all aspects of the service (front-line child protection and welfare teams, alternative care, senior managers, etc.). Table 1 outlines the age ranges of the participants:

TABLE 1 | Age ranges.

18–24	0
25–34	2
35–44	5
45–54	8
55–64	3
65+	1
Total	**19**

At the time of interviews, 15 participants held management-grade positions (see Table 2). It was challenging to recruit practitioners in front-line practice grades:

Participants had 2 weeks after the interviews to withdraw from the study; no one withdrew. Interviews lasted between 30 and 90 min. Seventeen of the interviews took place over Microsoft Teams, and two interviews took place face-to-face. Given the paucity of literature on this topic, the interview guide was primarily developed from the Phase 1 national survey data. The data were analysed using thematic reflective coding (Braun and Clarke 2022) using NVivo 20.

Some of the participants' demographic information is either not reported or obfuscated in this paper. The rationale for this decision is that some of the participants' experiences were high-profile. An intensive deidentification process to anonymise the transcripts was undertaken by the researchers. Some data that might normally be included (e.g., the name of a Facebook group) was removed to further maximise anonymity. Pseudonyms are used for all participants. For 17 of 19 study participants, the SMODAH had concluded by the interview date.

4 | Results

Following our analysis of the survey data in Phase 1 (Burns et al. 2024; Halvey et al. 2024), we were interested in thicker and more nuanced descriptions of practitioners' and managers' experiences. In particular, we were interested in how participants found out about social media posts, how they defined the differences between expressing dissatisfaction and criticism of a professional or service and abuse and harassment, what happened and whether online abuse and harassment translated into face-to-face interactions, and what participants understood about why it was them that were targeted.

4.1 | How Did Participants Find Out About Social Media Posts?

None of the participants were actively involved in checking for posts about themselves before the abusive or harassing posts started, and none were 'tagged' in messages. Nine of the participants were told of the posts by colleagues or other practitioners, two by service users or family members of service users, five by

TABLE 2 | Practice grades at interview.

Social worker	2
Senior social work practitioner	2
Social work team leader	6
Principal social worker	4
Other manager	5
Total	**19**

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friends/family/community members, two by foster carers and one through a fitness-to-practice complaint to CORU (health and social care regulator). Sixteen of the study participants had social media accounts when the abuse or harassment started, and three had no social media presence at the time. One practitioner received abusive messages through direct messages on Facebook Messenger, but she was not aware of this until a long time into the abuse:

> ... she'd made another threat to a family support worker during access that she was going to kill me and she didn't mind what time she had to do for it. Like really malicious. Just really, I suppose the only reason we knew about that was because somebody who'd seen it rang into the social work office because it named myself and another worker and she was like this video [is] up on Facebook
>
> (Rachel).

> I wasn't aware of it, but then colleagues began to say, you know, this lady is now on Facebook and is making allegations against yourself and others
>
> (Peter).

> ... relatives of say grandparents or aunts and uncles of the children would have been highlighting it, like saying all that stuff has gone up on social media
>
> (Simon).

> Didn't thankfully didn't get too far because my good friends at the time would alert me quite quickly to it
>
> (Shirley).

4.2 | Why Me?

Participants did not feel that the abuse or harassment was related, in any obvious way, to their personal status or characteristics such as gender, race and/or membership of a minority community. Participants mostly described that the problematic behaviours and posts largely stemmed from their role as decision-makers at certain points in their work with a child or family:

> I think it was probably the length of time she knew me and the decision to actually take that youngest child into care, because he was the only one of her children who had always been at home with her
>
> (Rachel).

> I was involved in the kids coming into care. She assaulted one of her children. I went to court. And so, the judge saw fit for the children to come into care. So that is the background of it. That was my encounter with her
>
> (Jack).

4.3 | What Happened?

The experience of SMODAH amongst participants was wide-ranging, from a single Facebook Live event to experiences which took 7 years to resolve/stop. Facebook was the main platform used for abuse and harassment reported by 18 of the 19 participants. One participant reported that TikTok was the platform used. The use of multiple platforms was reported by eight of the participants, such as Facebook and YouTube, Facebook and a podcast and Facebook and a website. The parents of children in care or children being supported by the child protection department were most likely to engage in abuse or harassment (eight mothers and three fathers). Three were from children in alternative care, two were from former service users/care leavers, two were from protest groups and the identity of one person was never confirmed. These were the primary designations by participants of the person who started or led the social media/online posts; however, in quite a few cases, especially when the situation involved an anti-child protection Facebook group, there would be posts from a parent, but also multiple individuals posting or commenting on the original post. For a small number of participants, whereas the first posts were from an individual, the situation escalated to face-to-face protests at the child protection office by multiple people and groups. Although there were some threats of protests at practitioners' homes and/or threats of actual violence against participants, none materialised in real life. There were no deep fakes reported by participants.

4.4 | When and Why Did the Abuse/Harassment Stop?

For 17 out of 19 of the study participants, the abuse/harassment had stopped before the interview date. Table 3 outlines the length of the abuse or harassment for the sample:

There was a large diversity of experiences in this sample. For two participants, this was a once-off event that was upsetting, but it did not persist. For one participant, the SMODAH spanned a 2-year period but involved only two short periods of online posts. For four participants, the abuse/harassment only stopped with the criminal conviction of the instigator on charges related to complaints by the study participants:

TABLE 3 | Length of abuse/harassment.

Less than a week	3
Less than a month	2
1–6 months	2
1–2 years	4
3–5 years	4
5+ years	2
Ongoing (5 months at time of interview)	2
Total	**19**

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> ... she was found guilty by the jury. I was kind of surprised because I wasn't sure what way it would go because sometimes I think the narrative of Tusla kind of takes over on some of that, that stuff
>
> (Rachel).

> She had to say on camera that she retracted it, but again that day she, even though she was in prison and the judge had to adjourn a couple of times because she wouldn't, they couldn't get her into the room, from her prison
>
> (John).

One stopped when a report for a court case concluded, but the person was not imprisoned:

> I think I referred to it as, you know, an occupational hazard but, you know, obviously it was the judge [who] was horrified by it and her [the instigator's] solicitor was as well to be fair. Em, but yeah, that was the last interaction then I had. It moved to a new social worker then
>
> (Jane).

One stopped when the person was detained under mental health legislation:

> We would have got an order like - Tusla were very supportive. We had to use, to get a lot of the videos downloaded actually, to present them as evidence in court. What I think happened, now this is nearly ten years ago, she ended up being sectioned and put it into the [name of service], and I think one of her family members actually deleted the account or went in and deleted it all and basically put a post saying please stop encouraging this behaviour as she's really, really unwell
>
> (Simon).

In two cases, interventions by An Garda Síochaná (police) brought the abuse/harassment to an end:

> I rang the guards and the guards did a visit to him immediately because he is a challenging person and they visited him ... and threatened him - they advised him not to come anywhere near the village and so he didn't do that again then
>
> (Roisin).

> ... how I reckon it stopped is because the second time he was arrested the [police] inspector who was doing the investigation came down and interviewed him while he was still in custody and told him that if he didn't stop that he would face more charges
>
> (Ellie).

For the remaining participants, the abuse/harassment stopped when the manager went out on sick leave, when they changed the settings on their social media accounts to hide their identity, when the case moved to another practitioner or when a manager approached the person to ask them to desist from posting about the practitioner.

4.5 | 'Crossing the Line': Defining Abuse and Harassment

The research team were interested in how participants would define the 'line' for comments and behaviours that crossed into abuse and harassment when expressed through social media, online and digital platforms. Participants all acknowledged that complaints and expressing critical views are a feature of this work, but they all had a clear sense of what crossing the line into abuse and harassment meant. The following quotes illustrate boundary crossing between the professional and personal and work and home. It is clear that the worker's agency is diminished as they have no control over the boundary dissolution due to the public nature of the posts:

> ... I think that the process is that, you know, if somebody has a complaint, they bring it to the guards [police] or they bring it to Tusla [employer]. But if they're making unsubstantiated allegations online, that's not, that's not acceptable ...
>
> (Jack).

> Probably when somebody steps outside the normal line of, you know, complaining ... it's continuous and over a period of time, I suppose for me that would be what I would deem to be harassment
>
> (Aoife).

> Well, I mean, dissatisfaction with a service is like, that's commonplace, it's not wilful, that's life like, there's no malice or maliciousness ... but online abuse and harassment like this is trying to get at your character, is going to, you know, and it's about you personally and it's about, you know, threatening whether you feel safe, bringing up things that are upsetting
>
> (Lily).

Participants described multiple ways in which the boundary line between fair criticism of professional practice and conduct can be crossed into SMODAH. Jane explained it as: '... someone using the information or the profiles that they find of you online and invading your privacy. ... It was nearly a campaign of sort of harassment, really, you know, because it was so widespread'. Researching practitioners' private lives and publishing identifying information, also known as doxxing, was seen by participants as particularly invasive and intrusive, and one of the more significant boundary dissolutions. Róisín compared the experience to someone trespassing into her home: 'It's almost like a personal attack. It's very personal. It takes it outside the workplace ... It's almost coming into

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your home, and you think of your children'. For Simon, the line is crossed when identifying information of a practitioner's family member—who are not involved in child protection and welfare practice—becomes subject to the SMODAH:

> If, like it is very personalised, very personalised attacks, like bringing people's family members into it. Like going out and finding out the names of people's children, the names of people's partners. Then putting up stuff about them and saying stuff about them. Identifying where someone's partner works. Identifying where someone's children go to school ... when it starts dragging in people outside, like outside of your direct work, I think it really crosses the line then.

Debby talked about her children's photographs being published as a clear demarcation:

> ... they had my photograph up and they were going around going, 'this woman will take children', 'keep your child away from this woman', you know. And I kind of thought like that, that's personal then it's me, it's my photograph. And then they put up photographs like when my photographs of my children went up ... They're actually researching me and trying to find out things about me. And that's when I thought that's personal then, that's harassment
>
> (Debby).

For other participants, the issue escalates from nuisance to abusive when instigators use social media and online platforms to make false and unsubstantiated allegations, for example, being called 'paedophiles' in attempts to damage participants' professional reputation or character. Jane said:

> ... anyone can take that picture and distribute it because you've put it up there on a public forum. To be honest, I kind of accepted that, I understood that, but I was also like 'at what point does it venture into harassment'? Because you know, there's false allegations, there's defamation.

Debby discussed how she was described as a paedophile online because of doing her work as a child protection practitioner/manager:

> ... if you're named, and your photographed, and your telephone conversations are recorded, and they're all put up online and with the tagline that you're, you know, a paedophile or you're selling children or, you know, all of that. Then that's, to me is harassment
>
> (Debby).

Debby's experiences also correlate with those of others, where the harassment escalates further towards veiled, and even explicit, threats. Participants described being told that they were being watched. Rachel, for example, spoke about instigators referring to her car and knowing her whereabouts:

> I'd expect a certain amount of arguing, you know, from people when they meet you. But I think what veers it over is sometimes the statements that people make to you. So something like oh, I see that's the car you're driving and I've seen it around, wherever that sense that people are being kind of watched, or the I know where you live ...
>
> (Rachel).

In the most egregious of cases, two participants, who had long careers in child protection services, had unfounded, vexatious allegations made against them that they had a sexual interest in children:

> That, this lady said she that she was abused, that she was part, that she was a victim of a paedophile ring, that I had peddled her into prostitution from [identifying information removed]
>
> (Peter).

> So next thing I started getting emails, you know, and saying that I was also involved in rape, abuse, of this person that I had been in the room and burnt her with cigarettes and all along with this, my friend, my friend that I had done all this. I've never even seen this woman in my life, knew nothing about her
>
> (John).

These experiences cast a shadow over their professional careers, interfered with their personal familial relationships, insofar as being required to speak to their partners and children about these false allegations in case family members and/or their friends read these false allegations online. Although in their respective cases, they received some level of organisational support, Peter, John and Debby referred to feeling alone and largely responsibilised for 'clearing' their names themselves. Indeed, the vast majority of participants in this phase of the study recounted that they felt personally responsible for responding to and addressing SMODAH.

We create the 5-point scale in Figure 1, based on the qualitative research data, to visualise escalation and SMODAH 'markers' identified by practitioners and managers. The scale presented in Figure 1, grounded in this study's findings, is a preliminary conceptual model that will require empirical validation in future studies, including testing for reliability, validity, cross-cultural and cross-disciplinary applicability. The scale builds on models and typologies such as Chappell and Di Martino's (2006) International Labour Office research on workplace violence. The scale in Figure 1 extends this research by arguing that service users as perpetrators of workplace violence on professionals (Type 2 in Chappell and Di Martino) is no longer spatially bounded to the workplace and extends into the digital domain. The scale design is influenced by Kelly's (1988) seminal work in which she argued that harassment and violence sit on a continuum of graduated harm.

Research participants' data on what constitutes 'crossing the line' for them when it came to abuse and harassment,

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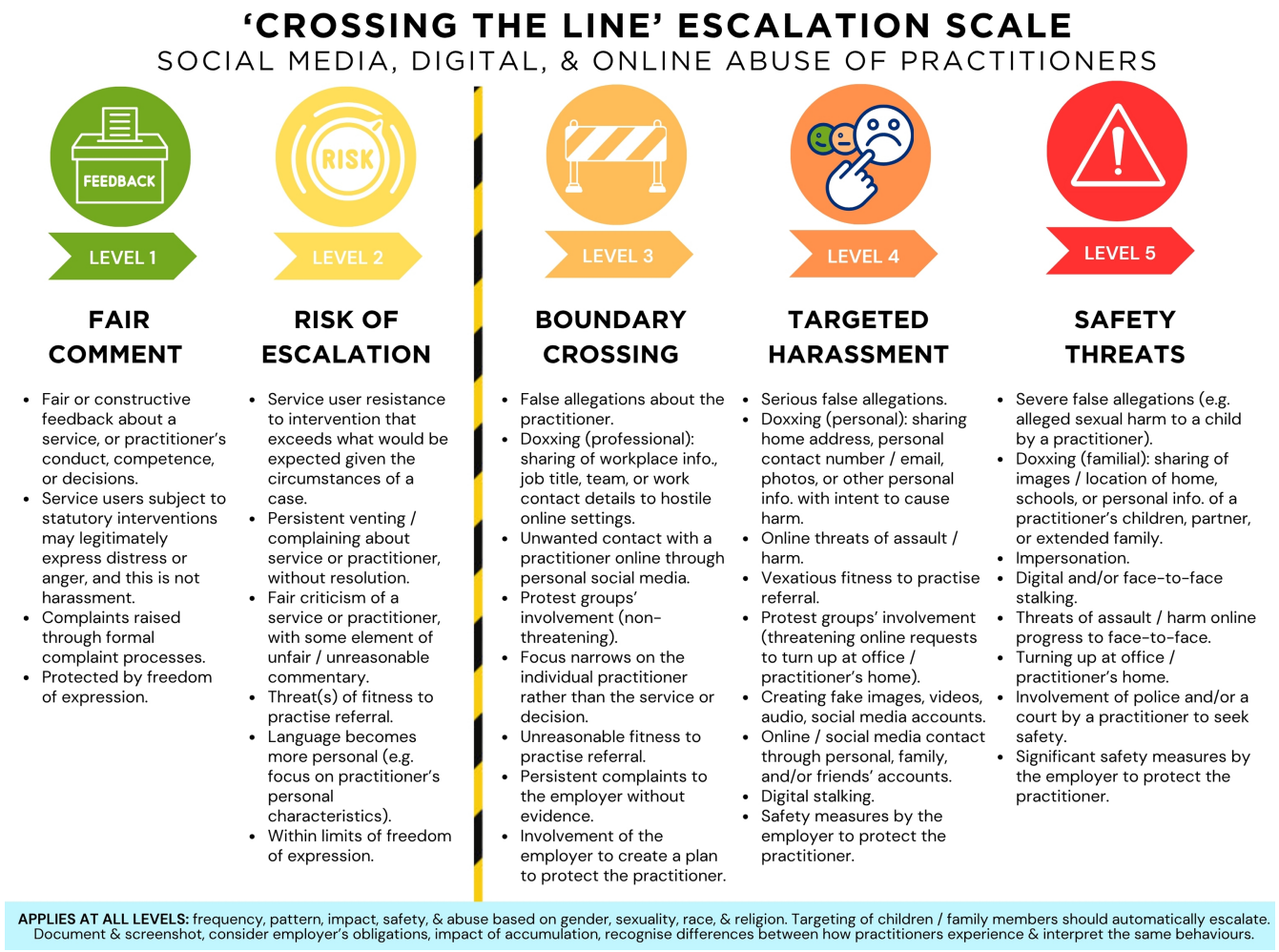


FIGURE 1 | Social media, online and digital abuse escalation scale.

map onto Nippert-Eng's (1996) work on progressive layers of boundary dissolution. For Noah, the line was crossed if they were contacted through their personal social media, whereby the service user 'followed' the worker from their professional role into their personal digital space. Digital technologies facilitate greater permeability between workplaces/professional roles and personal, private nonwork spaces by making the worker more 'visible'. Some choose to make themselves visible by posting. Some become visible due to the posts of family and friends (and as we also found in our previous study, through community organisations' social media profiles), whereas others become visible through service users' posts about them (see Peter and John above, neither of whom were on social media). For another participant, the line was crossed when the perpetrator was live-streaming outside of their office, making severe false allegations (e.g., paedophilia) and doxxing of the social worker's and family information (Ellie). Levels three to five of the scale represent the increasing severity of abusive and harassing behaviours that can occur. The scale is underpinned by factors that apply at all levels (e.g., intersectionality, targeting of children and family members, frequency and impact). The scale addresses and problematises normalising discourses amongst social workers and child protection workers/managers who can have higher tolerance levels for abusive behaviours, which are seen 'as part and parcel of the job' (Aoife). A key strength of the scale is its categorisation of behaviours at each escalating level of severity; however, it does not present actions to increase safety.

4.6 | Are Child Protection Social Workers More at Risk?

When participants were asked whether they believed child protection and welfare staff were more at risk of social media/online abuse and harassment, 14 believed that the work places them at increased risk:

> I do, yeah, and I think it's because what we do is quite emotive, challenging. We deal with involuntary clients, you know, and we have to try and build a relationship with some of them over a period of time... So, you can have long-standing relationships with service users who may be, you know, there's a conflict with, you know, and that can be very difficult to deal with at a professional level, but that can spill over onto you know, you know, your private life as well
>
> (Noah).

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> I definitely think so. Yeah. And just look at the nature of our work, you know, we're making, we're automatically not liked from the minute we go out and visit a family. From the minute we lift the phone, people don't want us in their lives
>
> (Jane).

The remaining five participants did not believe child protection and welfare social workers were specifically at a greater risk of social media/online abuse and harassment. Their views were that anyone in front-line services was potentially at equal risk:

> I think if you work for the public sector, there's probably a higher chance of it happening just by virtue of probably the professions that we're in, and the fact that I suppose, like that trying to wait for services sometimes is that impossible wait because you don't know how long you're going to be waiting for something...But I suppose if I was taking another step back, like I could think of other professions where lots of people have posted, like negative things about the professions online, like bankers
>
> (Rachel).

> We aren't anything special compared to other professions 'cause I just think we're in an age now where you know the culture is for people to speak about anything online ... Are we special in comparison to other professionals, maybe not, you know!
>
> (Shirley)

> ... Gardai, probation officers, they are the same as well. But do you know, so I kind of have us all in that same category. Yeah. But we are, you know, anyone who's working with people when they're at their lowest ...
>
> (Debbie).

4.7 | Acknowledgement of the Service Users' Vulnerability

A key finding from this study was that, despite experiencing SMODAH, child protection practitioners and managers rationalised the behaviour of those posting online messages for the most part. They expressed value positions that were empathetic and understanding, even if they did not like the behaviour and the negative impacts it had on them. John, for example, associated the instigator's behaviour in his case with her mental health and wellbeing. He said:

> I feel sorry for her. You know, some people were mad and wanted to kill her. I never thought that. I felt like she's a person who has a mental health issue ... it's not as if she's 100% in her, in her frame of mind ... So, I think she's a victim in her own way
>
> (John).

Similarly, Aoife seemingly did not bear any ill will towards the person who posted the SMODAH message about her and also correlated the behaviour with the person's mental health:

> I don't even know if I would, my anger is actually not with her.. I mean, I suppose I very much see her as a damaged person, a person probably with a personality disorder that, you know, she did this for whatever reason, and I kind of accept that that's the person she is and I actually wouldn't have a, you know, I don't have an anger with her, really.

Mary demonstrated an ethic of care towards vulnerable people with whom social workers practice:

> Yeah, I think it does. And I suppose we're also very aware that the people we work with are very vulnerable. So, why, like we often understand why they do some very destructive things to their own children, and to us, and to themselves. So, we have all this awareness, and we have a duty of care to people.

5 | Discussion

This article reported on a sample of experienced practitioners and managers with many decades of work in this sector. Experiencing online/social media abuse and harassment, at least for this sample, was not a high-frequency experience: Despite their many years in child protection and welfare, participants did not have multiple, different, unrelated cases of abuse and harassment to recount. Each participant had one main experience to share, often with multiple connected parts, and mostly with one instigator. Facebook was the main platform through which the abuse or harassment was communicated. Most of the abusive and harassing behaviours were from service users (mostly adults) or members of service users' families, with a smaller number receiving abusive messages or resharing of posts from protest groups.

The political landscape in Europe provides remedies for citizens who have experienced online and social media abuse and harassment through provisions in the Digital Services Act 2022. In Ireland, new laws provide additional tools and pathways to respond. The Harassment, Harmful Communications and Related Offences Act 2020 (Coco's law) addresses the sending of threatening and grossly offensive communications. The Criminal Justice (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2023 created a standalone offence of stalking, including online stalking for all (you do not have to be in an intimate relationship to be eligible). Defamation remedies are also available.

It was a significant cause of secondary distress for participants in this study when their employer left them to manage the issue, partly or mostly, on their own. This happened when the employer did not exercise their duty of care, for example, when there were threats to workers' safety, when managers failed to acknowledge this was a workplace VHA issue, and/or when

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appropriate supports were not provided (e.g., legal services). Since the participants experienced the abuse and harassment recounted in this study, the child protection service's response has evolved significantly. Tusla now have a *Social Media Staff Use Guidelines* (Tusla, Child and Family Agency 2022), which, for example, provides an algorithm on how to respond to this issue and sources to access support. Tusla also has a *Policy on Managing Work-Related Violence, Harassment and Aggression* (Tusla, Child and Family Agency 2023). Tusla regularly run VHA training for their staff, which addresses how the employer's duty of care extends to the digital sphere. There are dedicated staff in the Tusla, Office of Legal Services (OLS) who have become experts on 'take down requests' with social media companies, and OLS have met with social media companies to help them understand the perspectives of child protection staff when they are subject to online, social media and digital abuse and harassment.

This is not to paint an overly rosy picture: SMODAH and VHA continue to be a difficult and persistent issue for child protection workers and employers to address. However, there are now clearer pathways to respond than earlier in the decade and a political will, at least in some EU countries, to hold social media companies to account for what happens on their platforms. The environment has also changed in that, compared to some research participants' earlier experiences, SMODAH and VHA, which stem from workers' and managers' professional responsibilities, are now accepted as being an employer issue, not a personal issue.

An important finding from both phases of this study (national survey and qualitative phases) is that practitioners and managers do not need to be on social media to experience abuse or harassment related to their work in child protection and welfare. Participants expected some degree of abuse or harassment as a result of doing child protection work, as this work involves serious decisions being made about whether children can continue to live at home and the assessment of child abuse and neglect. However, they expected their employer to accept that online, social media and digital abuse and harassment are an employer issue. When it arises, they want their employer to recognise that they have a role in addressing the issues and to put measures in place to protect the worker's or manager's safety and welfare.

6 | Concluding Comments and Limitations

It is essential that democratic societies comprehensively monitor the operation of child protection services (López et al., Forthcoming), as these services have important, consequential powers to protect children and to intervene in family life. It is a feature of modern life that commentaries are more likely to be shared on social media and other online platforms. We argue that online and social media platforms can play an important role in providing an avenue for individuals who may not wish to participate in formal monitoring services to comment on child protection systems involved with their child and family. However, we also argue that workers have a right to protection: There is a line that is crossed when posts veer from the right to freedom of expression into abuse and harassment. Study participants understood that critical and fair commentary is a necessary feature of this work. However, they also argued that they have a right to dignity in the workplace, to be protected from abuse and harassment, and to work in a safe environment. The contribution of this study is to provide first-hand accounts and analysis from child protection workers and managers on where this line might be.

6.1 | Limitations

We recruited current Child and Family Agency staff who self-defined that they experienced social media/online abuse and harassment directly related to their work in child protection and welfare. This is a sample of 'stayers'; a related sample of staff with similar experiences who left the organisation were not interviewed. A further limitation of this phase of the study was that psychologists, administrators, social care leaders and others who work in child protection and welfare services were not interviewed.

Because participants could volunteer to interview based on an experience of social media, digital and online abuse and harassment from any time in their career, the study is subject to recall bias. Furthermore, social desirability bias is a consideration: Participants' accounts may have been shaped by disciplinary norms associated with resilience, coping, emotional containment, tolerance for challenging behaviours and advocacy for service users. The very tendency of practitioners to minimise, professionally absorb and rationalise exposure was part of what the study sought to examine.

Managers are overrepresented in our interview sample. It is unclear why so few social workers at professionally qualified and senior social worker grades participated in these interviews. One possible reason is that social workers in these grades have increasingly heavy demands on their time with demanding workloads. For 11 of the 19 participants, the incidents started when they were employed as professionally qualified social workers or senior social work practitioners, and the abuse ended when they were in a management grade. Therefore, this qualitative dataset should not be read as typically comprised of the experiences of managers.

All of our interview participants were White, whereas 90% of members of the Irish Association of Social Workers identify as White (Maguire 2020). We made efforts through our networks to recruit a more diverse sample, but to no avail. A final limitation of the study relates to the wide range of years over which the incidents occurred. This means that participants spoke about events that happened while working for two different organisations, and the incidents took place while different agency policies were in place. The data in this article should not be interpreted as reflecting how the Child and Family Agency would respond to this issue now.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank Katie Buckley and Maria Flavin for their work on the transcripts. We would also like to thank Ger Brophy, Chief Social Worker in the Child and Family Agency for his support for this study.

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Funding

This study phase was part-funded by the Tusla, the Child and Family Agency.

Ethics Statement

Ethical approval was granted by the Social Research Ethics Committee at the researchers' University and by the Research Ethics Committee at Tusla.

Consent

All participants were provided with a participant information sheet; they signed an informed consent form and had up to 2weeks after the interview to withdraw from the study. No one withdrew.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data in this study are not available for analysis for other researchers. It contains highly identifying information given the high-profile nature of some of the incidents, which could lead to jigsaw identification.

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