

Rational Withdrawal: Victim Responses to Online Hate Speech and the Limits of Institutional Protection in Norway

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Abstract

This study examines how people exposed to online hate speech (OHS) – whether directly targeted or as witnesses – experience harm and engage, or disengage, with support. Using a mixed-methods survey of 111 respondents in Norway (February–April 2024), we map the contexts, emotional consequences, coping strategies, and support-seeking behaviour of OHS-exposed respondents ($n = 75$), comprising 41 directly victimised respondents and 34 witnesses. Of the 75 exposed, 94.7% identified social media as the primary site. The dominant emotion was anger (57.3%); the dominant coping strategy was avoidance (53.3%). No respondent took legal action. Thirty-six percent sought no help. The study introduces the concept of constrained resilience – resilience not as an individual trait but as an adaptive capacity bounded by platform structures, legal inaccessibility, and institutional fragmentation. It argues that withdrawal can be understood as a rational adaptive response to perceived structural constraints rather than as passivity. The inclusion of witnesses – whose coping patterns closely mirror those of directly victimised respondents – provides evidence consistent with secondary chilling effects beyond direct victimisation. The consequences extend beyond individual wellbeing and may point toward a civic deficit as racialized, gendered, and religious voices disengage from public discourse. The study contributes empirically, theoretically, and policy-practically to scholarship on OHS in the Norwegian context, extending Nordic survey evidence on minority exposure to the question of coping and institutional engagement.

1. Introduction

Digital communication technologies have enabled new forms of exclusion and online hate speech (OHS). Focusing on Norway, this paper examines how individuals exposed to OHS – whether as direct targets or as witnesses – experience harm, navigate coping, and engage, or disengage, with support structures. OHS undermines individual rights, democratic norms, and free expression (Dralega, Igland & Seddighi, 2023; Citron, 2014; Wachs, Gamez-Guadix & Wright, 2022), and forms part of a broader globalisation of hate enabled by digital networks that cross borders and jurisdictions (Perry & Olsson, 2009). At the individual level, OHS is associated with trauma, anxiety, and long-term emotional harm (Waldron, 2012; Amnesty International, 2018). At the societal level, its cumulative consequences reinforce social inequalities and may drive marginalized voices out of public discourse, with potential democratic consequences (Citron, 2014; Penney, 2020; Nadim & Fladmoe, 2021b).

Despite legal protections under Section 185 (Chap. 20) of the Norwegian Penal Code and platform reporting tools, OHS-exposed respondents face major barriers: high legal thresholds, weak institutional response, low resource awareness, and normalization of abuse (Dralega, Igland & Seddighi, 2023). Nationally, hateful speech accounted for close to four in ten (37%, 429 of 1,172) hate-crime cases registered by Norwegian police in 2024, the largest single category, with skin colour/ethnicity the most commonly recorded motive at 58% of all registered hate motives (Politidirektoratet & Oslo politidistrikt, 2025, pp. 4, 19–20, 22); provisional 2025 figures show a modest 4.2% decline in total registrations but confirm the same ranking of offence types and motives (Politidirektoratet & Oslo politidistrikt, 2026). When systems are perceived as inadequate, people withdraw – a pattern theorized as the spiral of silence (Noelle-Neumann, 1974) and the chilling effect (Penney, 2020). This paper argues that understanding withdrawal as a rational adaptive response to perceived structural constraints – rather than as passivity – is both theoretically more accurate and more productive for policy.

A distinctive feature of this study is its inclusion of both direct victims (n = 41) and witnesses (n = 34) as an OHS-exposed subgroup (n = 75). This design enables examination of whether witnessing OHS produces withdrawal patterns similar to those of direct victims – thereby connecting individual responses to broader civic consequences.

This study makes three contributions. First, empirically: it provides mixed-methods survey evidence on OHS-exposed respondents in Norway, documenting patterns across a diverse sample including both direct victims and witnesses, with a qualitative corpus drawn from 72–73 open-ended responses. Second, theoretically: it introduces constrained resilience – resilience dynamically shaped by structural conditions rather than residing within individuals – and distinguishes it from related concepts including rational withdrawal, silencing, the chilling effect, and civic withdrawal. Third, policy-practically: it identifies the resource awareness gap as the most directly evidenced intervention point, and subjects AI-based interventions to grounded critical scrutiny.

Four research questions guide the analysis:

RQ1: How is OHS experienced and situated within the everyday digital contexts of directly victimised respondents and witnesses?

RQ2: What emotional and psychological consequences do OHS-exposed respondents attribute to their experiences?

RQ3: How do OHS-exposed respondents navigate, resist, or cope?

RQ4: How do OHS-exposed respondents perceive, access, and engage with existing support mechanisms, and what gaps do they identify?

2. Literature Review

Research on OHS experiences has grown substantially, though gaps remain – particularly regarding structural conditions that shape coping and secondary chilling effects on witnesses. Within Nordic countries specifically, existing research establishes patterns of exposure and institutional distrust but rarely examines how minority-background victims themselves cope with, or engage institutions in response to, that exposure.

The emotional and psychological consequences of OHS are well documented. Wachs, Gamez-Guadix and Wright (2022) link OHS victimization to depressive symptoms, with resilience as a moderating variable. Amnesty International (2018) found that 41% of women who experienced online abuse reported PTSD-like symptoms across eight countries. In Norway, Nadim and Fladmoe (2021b) document how online harassment disproportionately silences women journalists and ethnic minorities.

This exposure gap is patterned by minority status more broadly. Fladmoe, Nadim, and Birkvad (2019) found that 23% of LGBT respondents in Norway had experienced hate speech in the past year, compared with 10% of the general population, and that respondents holding more than one minority characteristic faced disproportionately higher exposure than those with a single minority marker. Nadim and Fladmoe (2021a), analysing survey data from 9,117 upper-secondary students in Oslo, found that while ethnic- and religious-minority students were not more exposed to bullying overall, they were substantially more exposed to hate speech targeting skin colour, ethnicity, or religion specifically, and that this gap widened in schools with a higher

proportion of immigrant-background students – evidence that exposure is shaped by school context as well as individual identity. At the level of platform content, Kasahara et al. (2022) applied big-data and machine-learning methods to over one million Norwegian social-media comments about Muslims and found that hateful or discriminatory comments, while a small share of total commentary, increased markedly between 2010–2015 and 2016–2021, concentrated among a small number of repeat posters.

Elsewhere in the Nordic region, institutional distrust is closely linked to withdrawal. Björkenfeldt (2023), analysing open-ended survey responses from around 3,000 Swedish journalists, found that 51% rated the legal system's ability to protect them against online harassment as fairly or very poor, and traced this distrust to a reciprocal relationship between professional normalisation of harassment and weak institutional follow-through: many respondents described formal reporting as futile and instead reduced their public visibility. Scaramuzzino (2023) found a comparable pattern among Swedish civil society organisations, where representatives coped with hate speech and threats by becoming less visible, depoliticising contentious positions, and disrupting representative functions – a pattern framed as a threat to civil society's democratic function rather than an individual failure of resilience. In Finland, Näsi, Räsänen, Hawdon, Holkeri, and Oksanen (2015) found that witnessing hateful online material reduced both generalised and particularised social trust among young Facebook users, with the effect stronger for trust in people close to the respondent – evidence that OHS exposure erodes relational trust even among witnesses who are not directly targeted.

Taken together, this body of work confirms elevated exposure and institutional distrust as robust Nordic patterns, but leaves open the coping and institutional-engagement question the present study investigates directly.

The civic and democratic consequences extend beyond direct targets. Citron (2014) argues online harassment constitutes a civil rights violation because it systematically drives protected groups out of public discourse. Penney (2020) documents the chilling effect: witnessing harassment of others suppresses future speech among bystanders. Sobieraj (2020) develops the concept of credibility deficit – the way sustained harassment attacks the right to be heard, producing epistemic as well as personal exclusion. Including witnesses ($n = 34$) enables empirical examination of whether these secondary chilling effects are visible in coping and support-seeking data.

Coping responses to OHS span avoidance, institutional action, informal support, and counter-speech (Wachs et al., 2022; Clark-Parsons, 2021). Formal reporting is rarely used because fear of retaliation and low confidence in outcomes deter it (Penney, 2020). Many learn through experience that platform reporting is futile (Citron, 2014). Platform governance is value-laden rather than neutral, often inadequately addressing intersectional harm (Gillespie, 2018). In Norway, the gap between Section 185 and enforcement realities systematically disadvantages victims of coded, cumulative, or anonymous OHS (Dralega, Igland & Seddighi, 2023).

A critical debate this study engages is the interpretation of withdrawal. Three positions exist: withdrawal as rational self-protection (Scott, 1990; Mahmood, 2005); withdrawal as structural silencing (Jack, 1991; Noelle-Neumann, 1974); and withdrawal as internalised accommodation to oppression (Ortiz, 2021). The concept of constrained resilience argues that no single interpretation is sufficient – the appropriate interpretation depends on the structural conditions in which withdrawal occurs.

3. Theoretical Framework

Three interlocking frameworks guide this analysis. Everyday Racism and Intersectionality explain why OHS targeting is structurally patterned. The Spiral of Silence and Silencing Theory explain how OHS-exposed respondents withdraw from discourse. Ecological Resilience Theory provides the ground for the synthesising contribution: constrained resilience. Together they generate a coherent account of OHS harm and response grounded in data the study actually collects.

3.1 Everyday Racism and Intersectionality

Essed's (1991) concept of everyday racism explains how OHS functions as normalized, cumulative harm embedded in routine digital participation. Targeting occurs not because victims have done something controversial but because they are visible. This is directly evidenced in the qualitative data: respondents consistently describe OHS triggered by posting about their identity, culture, or ordinary opinions – not by political provocation. Crenshaw's (1991) intersectionality framework explains why harm is compounded rather than additive: those targeted simultaneously on race, religion, and gender face forms of OHS that neither single-axis legal frameworks nor standard support systems are designed to address. This paper uses intersectionality primarily as an interpretive framework for qualitative accounts; the sample size prevents systematic statistical testing of intersectional combinations.

3.2 The Spiral of Silence and Silencing Theory

Noelle-Neumann's (1974) Spiral of Silence theorizes how perceived hostility in the public environment progressively suppresses minority expression. Applied to OHS, the spiral operates both directly (targets withdraw after being targeted) and indirectly (witnesses modify behavior after observing others targeted) – the chilling effect (Penney, 2020). This study's inclusion of witnesses enables direct examination of the indirect spiral: if witnesses show coping and support patterns similar to those of direct victims despite not being personally targeted, that is evidence consistent with the spiral operating beyond direct victimisation. Silencing Theory (Jack, 1991; Middleton et al., 2014) extends this by framing silence as a structural outcome: online silencing occurs when victims are dismissed or retraumatized by reporting processes, signaling institutional tolerance of abuse.

3.3 Ecological Resilience and Constrained Resilience

Resilience scholarship has moved from individual trait models toward ecological models locating resilience in the interaction between individuals and their environments. Norris et al. (2008) conceptualize community resilience as adaptive capacity shaped by available resources rather than individual strength. Ungar (2011) argues resilience is determined more by social-ecological resources than by personal attributes. Bonanno (2004) demonstrates that resilience is not a fixed binary but a spectrum of adaptive responses varying with context and constraint. Livingstone and Helsper (2007) show that online resilience is fostered or inhibited by the sociotechnical environment. Kohn (2023) applies this to OHS, framing digital resilience as dynamic across confrontation, reporting, and withdrawal strategies.

This paper introduces constrained resilience to synthesize these insights: adaptive coping responses to OHS bounded by structural conditions – platform inaccessibility, legal unenforceability, institutional fragmentation, resource invisibility – such that withdrawal constitutes the most viable response available within those

constraints, even when it carries civic costs. Constrained resilience is not the absence of resilience but what resilience looks like when the conditions for exercising it are systematically narrowed. Following Scott (1990) and Mahmood (2005), it recognizes rational agency within constraint, while Ortiz's (2021) caution prevents romanticizing the conditions that produce it.

Table 1 defines the key concepts used in this paper and their analytical functions.

Table 1
Key concepts and their analytical functions

Concept	What it explains	Relationship to constrained resilience
OHS exposure	The initiating experience – direct targeting or witnessing	Structural context in which constrained resilience operates
Harm	Emotional and psychological consequences of OHS exposure	Primary outcome constrained resilience responds to
Coping	Immediate response strategies to OHS	The repertoire from which constrained resilience draws
Rational withdrawal	Why disengagement can be a reasoned choice under specific conditions	One expression of constrained resilience when assertive options are closed
Constrained resilience	Why the available coping repertoire is bounded by structural conditions	Synthesising concept: explains why withdrawal dominates even when assertive resilience exists
Silencing / chilling effect	Broader consequences for expression among targets and witnesses	Civic-level consequence of constrained resilience at scale
Civic withdrawal	Withdrawal from public participation specifically	Most consequential form of constrained resilience – where it produces democratic harm
Institutional distrust	Why formal mechanisms are not used	Structural condition that constrains the available coping repertoire

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Design and Mixed-Methods Integration

This study employs an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018), following broader guidance on integrating quantitative and qualitative strands within a single social research design (Clark et al., 2021): quantitative descriptive analysis was conducted first to map patterns of OHS exposure, emotional response, coping, and support-seeking; qualitative thematic analysis was then used to explain and deepen those patterns. Integration occurs at the interpretation stage: quantitative patterns are explained through qualitative accounts placed immediately after the quantitative findings they extend.

4.2 Definition of Online Hate Speech

This study uses the legal definition of OHS as established under Section 185 (Chap. 20) of the Norwegian Penal Code (Lovdata, 2005), as applied and discussed in Dralega, Igland and Seddighi (2023): a publicly uttered expression that threatens, mocks, or expresses contempt for any person or group on the grounds of skin colour, national or ethnic origin, religion or life stance, sexual orientation, disability, or gender identity. This definition was presented to respondents in the survey instrument as the referent for questions about OHS experience and witnessing. We acknowledge that self-identification introduces some interpretive variability – what one respondent considers hate speech, another may classify as harassment or offensive speech – and note this as a limitation in Section 4.7.

4.3 Data Collection

An online structured questionnaire was distributed via nettskjema.no (University of Oslo) in Norwegian and English between February and April 2024. Questions covered: demographics; OHS exposure; platform context; emotional responses; perpetrator familiarity; coping strategies; support sources; and resource awareness. Open-ended questions invited elaboration on incident contexts and descriptions of hate speech encountered. Items were pre-tested with five colleagues. To mitigate re-traumatization risk (West, 2012), all open-ended questions were optional and respondents were provided with mental health and digital safety resources at survey end.

4.4 Sampling, Recruitment, and Sample Characteristics

Purposive and snowball sampling recruited active social media users who had experienced or witnessed OHS, targeting diverse demographic groups through civil society organisations, university networks, and social media platforms. Inclusion criteria: adult respondents (18 years or older) based in Norway, active social media users. The survey was distributed in both Norwegian (40 respondents) and English (71 respondents); the two language versions used equivalent items and responses were combined analytically, with Norwegian-language quotations translated by the authors.

A total of 111 participants completed the survey. Of these, 75 (67.6%) had personally experienced or witnessed OHS and form the exposed subgroup. Within this group, 41 were directly victimised (19 who personally experienced OHS only, plus 22 who both experienced and witnessed), and 34 were witnesses only. Thirty-five reported no exposure. One response was missing on the exposure question. Table 2 presents full sample characteristics.

Table 2
Sample characteristics (N = 111)

Characteristic	Category	n	%
Gender	Female (exposed: 41)	60	54.1%
	Male (exposed: 34)	51	45.9%
Age group	25–34	47	42.3%
	35–44	37	33.3%
	45–54	20	18.0%
	Other	7	6.3%
Education	University degree	94	84.7%
	Vocational/secondary/other	17	15.3%
Work situation	Employed	75	67.6%
	Student	27	24.3%
	Unemployed	9	8.1%
Region of origin	Asia	52	46.8%
	Africa	28	25.2%
	Norway	25	22.5%
	Europe/South America	6	5.4%
Migration background	First-generation migrants	56	50.5%
	Second- or third-generation	11	9.9%
	Not stated/Norwegian-born	44	39.6%
Religion	Christianity	42	37.8%
	Hinduism	30	27.0%
	Islam	23	20.7%
	Non-religious/other	16	14.5%
OHS exposure	Directly victimised only	19	17.1%
	Both experienced and witnessed	22	19.8%
	Witnesses only	34	30.6%
	TOTAL directly victimised (n = 41)	41	36.9%
	TOTAL exposed (n = 75)	75	67.6%
	Neither (not exposed)	35	31.5%
	Missing	1	0.9%

Note: All RQ2–RQ4 analyses use $n = 75$ exposed subgroup as denominator. Directly victimised ($n = 41$) and witnesses ($n = 34$) are distinguished where specified.

4.5 Qualitative Analysis

Qualitative analysis followed a constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2014). Of the 75 OHS-exposed respondents, 72 completed the open-ended question on context of OHS encounters, and 73 completed the question inviting description of the hate speech experienced or witnessed — yielding a rich qualitative corpus of 145 substantive responses. Norwegian-language responses (from 40 of the 111 total respondents) were translated by the authors; all quotations in the paper are identified by language of response and translated where necessary.

Both authors independently conducted initial line-by-line coding of open-ended responses, attending to actions, processes, and respondent reasoning. Focused coding was then applied to identify the most analytically significant initial codes and group them into categories. Memo-writing throughout tracked emerging connections between categories and theoretical concepts. Disagreements between coders were resolved through discussion and consensus; the final coding scheme was agreed before categories were consolidated. The qualitative findings are used in an explanatory role: accounting for why the quantitative patterns take the form they do.

4.6 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval

was obtained from SIKT prior to data collection. Participation was voluntary; responses were anonymized; informed consent was obtained from all participants.

4.7 Limitations

Five limitations require explicit acknowledgement. First, self-selection bias: purposive and snowball sampling likely overrepresent individuals who are highly sensitized to OHS. Second, absence of a comparison group: causal claims about the effects of OHS cannot be made. Third, self-reported emotional states and coping are subject to social desirability effects. Fourth, OHS self-identification introduces definitional variability across respondents. Fifth, the survey did not include a direct question on reasoning for non-use of formal channels; the interpretive propositions about institutional trust in Section 6.3 are therefore inferred from behavioural patterns and qualitative accounts rather than directly demonstrated. These limitations mean findings support interpretive and associative claims, not causal ones.

5. Findings and Analysis

This section presents an integrated mixed-methods analysis structured around the four research questions. Quantitative patterns are presented first; qualitative accounts explain and extend them. A consistent analytical distinction is maintained between descriptive findings, associative claims, and theoretical interpretations. All RQ2–RQ4 percentages use $n = 75$ as denominator. Norwegian-language quotations are translated by the authors and marked (No); English quotations are marked (En).

5.1 RQ1: Nature and Context of OHS Exposure (N = 111)

Of the 111 respondents, 75 (67.6%) had been exposed to OHS: 19 (17.1%) had personally experienced it only, 34 (30.6%) had witnessed others experiencing it only, and 22 (19.8%) had both experienced and witnessed OHS. Thirty-five (31.5%) had no exposure. Social media platforms were the primary site for 71 of the 75 exposed respondents (94.7%), followed by news media comment sections, private messaging apps, and online forums.

The 34 witnesses are analytically central. Penney (2020) documents that witnessing harassment suppresses future speech among bystanders. Whether this pattern appears in our data — whether witnesses show similar coping and non-help-seeking patterns to directly victimised respondents — is examined across RQ2–RQ4.

Qualitative accounts confirm Essed's (1991) account of everyday racism: OHS was encountered through identity visibility and ordinary participation, not provocation. A Sami respondent described how targeting is triggered by cultural presence alone:

"It is most often news stories with Sami content. The Sami National Day, activism against environmental encroachments, Sami culture portrayed on TV, such as Stjernekamp, reindeer herding, and the Sami Parliament election."

Directly victimised respondent (No)

A journalist respondent described how professional visibility functions as a trigger:

"Hateful comments appear after I have written articles, been visible in the media, or when the news covers topics that trigger those who post the comments."

Directly victimised respondent (No)

A witness described secondary harm reaching her child through gaming and school environments:

"My son is very often targeted because he is not white. His father and I are from Asia. His classmates at school and in online games say to him: "Back to work!" and hit him as if he were a slave."

Witness respondent (No)

The phrase "in none of the cases did the person who made the post want to provoke, just give information" (witness respondent, En) captures a recurring pattern: OHS was encountered in acts of ordinary participation — sharing information, expressing identity, commenting on news — not in deliberate controversy. This is consistent with Silencing Theory's account of OHS as disciplinary targeting of presence itself (Jack, 1991; Middleton et al., 2014).

5.2 RQ2: Emotional and Psychological Impact (exposed n = 75)

Table 3
Emotional responses to OHS (multiple responses permitted; n = 75 exposed respondents)

Emotional Response	n (of 75)	%
Anger / rage	43	57.3%
Fear	28	37.3%
Shame	27	36.0%
Violated	26	34.7%
Humiliation	15	20.0%
Proud of who I am	13	17.3%
Other	10	13.3%
Revengeful	8	10.7%
Unworthy	7	9.3%
Indifferent	6	8.0%
Guilt	4	5.3%

Note: Percentages calculated on n = 75. Multiple responses permitted.

Anger was the most frequently reported emotion (43, 57.3%). We note this descriptive finding before interpreting it: the data establish that anger is common; they do not by themselves establish what anger means. Fear (28, 37.3%), shame (27, 36.0%), and feeling violated (26, 34.7%) may indicate loss of perceived digital safety; however, feeling shame does not necessarily demonstrate internalized stigma, and we use "may indicate" rather than "signals" throughout. Amnesty International (2018) documents long-term behavioral modification associated with such responses. Wachs et al. (2022) link OHS victimization directly to depressive symptoms.

Thirteen respondents (17.3%) also reported feeling proud of who they are — resisting pathologizing victim experience. The qualitative data contain accounts of intersectional targeting where multiple identity dimensions are attacked simultaneously:

"Terrorist, F-Arab, barbaric, camel person, slave. And threats of taking lives and rape."

Directly victimised respondent (En)

"Racist harassment such as "go back to where you came from," comparisons to animals, being described as uncivilized, and harassment based on sexual orientation combined with racism."

Directly victimised respondent (No)

These accounts provide direct qualitative evidence of the intersectional compounding Crenshaw (1991) theorizes: respondents are targeted simultaneously across multiple identity dimensions in ways that single-axis

legal or support frameworks are not designed to address. The Spiral of Silence (Noelle-Neumann, 1974) suggests that the fear and shame co-existing with anger in Table 3 produce behavioral modification documented in RQ3.

5.3 RQ3: Coping Strategies (exposed n = 75)

Table 4
Coping strategies (multiple responses permitted; n = 75 exposed respondents)

Coping Strategy	n (of 75)	%
Ignore or avoid engaging	40	53.3%
Report to platform administrators	28	37.3%
Block or mute the individual(s)	27	36.0%
Discuss with friends, family, or colleagues	21	28.0%
Leave or avoid the platform	14	18.7%
Counter-narrative (facts, kindness)	11	14.7%
Stop engaging in public debate altogether	11	14.7%
Share or repost to raise awareness	9	12.0%
Confront the individual(s) responsible	8	10.7%
Contact a support group or helpline	3	4.0%
Take legal action or contact law enforcement	0	0.0%

Note: Percentages calculated on n = 75. Multiple responses permitted.

Table 5
Key coping strategies by gender (n = 75; descriptive only)

Coping Strategy	Female (n = 41)	%	Male (n = 34)	%
Avoid/ignore	18	44%	22	65%
Report to platform	15	37%	13	38%
Block/mute	11	27%	16	47%
Counter-narrative	4	10%	7	21%
Stop public debate	6	15%	5	15%
Note on Table 5: the n = 41/n = 34 column headers above refer to gender counts within the exposed subgroup (75 respondents: 41 female, 34 male), not to the directly-victimised/witness split (also 41/34) used elsewhere in this paper. The two groupings share the same totals by coincidence but are not the same respondents, as Table 5B below clarifies.				

Table 5
B. Exposure type by gender (n = 75)

Gender	Directly victimised (n = 41)	Witnesses (n = 34)
Female	22	19
Male	19	15

Cross-tabulating exposure type by gender shows the two $n = 41/n = 34$ splits are independent: of the 41 directly victimised respondents, 22 are female and 19 are male; of the 34 witnesses, 19 are female and 15 are male. Gender and exposure type are therefore not aligned in this sample.

The coping data point toward a continuum rather than a single category of "withdrawal." Blocking and muting (27, 36.0%) constitutes active boundary-setting – targeted and assertive. Ignoring and avoiding engagement (40, 53.3%) involves broader disengagement while maintaining platform presence. Leaving a platform (14, 18.7%) or stopping public debate altogether (11, 14.7%) represent progressive civic withdrawal – the latter being the form most directly associated with democratic harm (Citron, 2014; Penney, 2020). Constrained resilience applies differentially: boundary-setting is most consistent with adaptive self-regulation; civic withdrawal is most consistent with structural exclusion.

Table 5 presents descriptive coping differences by gender. Male respondents avoided at a higher rate (65% vs 44%); counter-narrative use was more common among men (21% vs 10%). Qualitative accounts suggest, tentatively, that male respondents were more often targeted for political or ethnic expression while female respondents were more often targeted for identity visibility – these are qualitative observations and should not be generalized given sample size.

The zero rate of legal action (0, 0.0%) is the study's most striking figure. It is consistent with respondents perceiving formal legal pathways as inaccessible or ineffective, given the documented gap between Section 185's evidentiary threshold and the coded, cumulative forms of OHS described in the qualitative data (Dralega, Igland & Seddighi, 2023; Kierulf, 2021). The qualitative data contain one account that is directly consistent with learned futility in reporting:

"I have learned not to respond, but in vain... I report the person immediately."

Directly victimised respondent (No)

The phrase "in vain" combined with habitual reporting behaviour suggests that formal behaviour (reporting) persists as a reflex while expectation of outcome has collapsed – a pattern consistent with, though not demonstrating, the kind of institutional learning Penney (2020) documents in the chilling effect literature. The cross-sectional design cannot establish temporal sequence; longitudinal data would be needed to demonstrate a learning process rather than an initial assessment of futility.

5.4 RQ4: Support Sources and Resource Awareness (exposed $n = 75$)

Table 6
Sources of support (multiple responses permitted; n = 75 exposed respondents)

Source of Support	n (of 75)	%
No help sought or received	27	36.0%
Friends or family members	23	30.7%
Other people online (counter-speech)	13	17.3%
Others (unspecified)	10	13.3%
Social media platforms (reporting tools)	11	14.7%
Support groups or online communities	9	12.0%
Non-profit organisations	3	4.0%
Self-help websites	3	4.0%
Law enforcement or legal advisors	2	2.7%
Workplace or educational institution	2	2.7%
Mental health professionals	1	1.3%

Table 7
Resource awareness by help-seeking behavior (n = 75)

Resource Awareness	No help sought (n)	%	Help sought (n)	%	Total
Aware of at least one resource	8	17.0%	39	83.0%	47
Not aware of any resource	19	67.9%	9	32.1%	28

The single largest category is no help sought or received (27, 36.0%). Friends and family were the most commonly cited actual support source (23, 30.7%), followed by peer counter-speech online (13, 17.3%). Formal institutional support was marginal: law enforcement or legal advisors (2, 2.7%); mental health professionals (1, 1.3%).

Table 7 identifies the most policy-relevant finding in the study. Among respondents unaware of any resources, 67.9% sought no help – nearly four times the rate among those aware of at least one resource (17.0%). This association points to a substantial resource-access or outreach gap. The data cannot rule out confounding factors – severity of experience, digital literacy, prior institutional experiences, age, or education – and the association should not be interpreted causally. It is nonetheless the strongest empirical pattern in the study linking a potentially modifiable condition (resource awareness) to a significant outcome (help-seeking), and it directly grounds the recommendation for a unified referral gateway in Section 7.1.

Platform reporting was cited by 11 respondents (14.7%) as a support source. The qualitative data suggest low confidence in these mechanisms, consistent with Tyler's (2006) procedural justice framework: trust in institutions derives primarily from perceived procedural fairness – consistent, transparent, and respectful processes. Platform reporting, as described by respondents, appears to produce none of these conditions. The

survey did not include a direct question on reasoning for non-use of formal channels, and interpretive propositions about the sources of institutional trust deficit are developed in Section 6.3 as interpretive propositions rather than demonstrated findings.

6. Discussion

6.1 Constrained Resilience: Operationalising the Concept

The constrained resilience framework introduced in Section 3.3 is grounded across all four research questions. In RQ2, anger (57.3%) and pride (17.3%) coexist with fear and shame – suggesting respondents are critically aware of injustice while maintaining self-worth.

This co-occurrence is not incidental: of the 13 respondents who reported feeling proud of who they are, 8 (62%) also reported some form of withdrawal – avoiding engagement, leaving a platform, or stopping public debate altogether – indicating that pride and withdrawal are not opposed responses but frequently coexist within the same respondent. The clearest single case is the respondent already quoted in Section 6.2 describing ethnic targeting as “cancer, weeds, we will erase you and your traces”: this respondent reported fear, anger, and feeling violated alongside pride, and reported both avoiding the hate speech and no longer engaging in public debate at all – the most complete form of civic withdrawal in the coping repertoire (Table 4). His full account:

Whenever I post political opinions about my country of origin where there is ongoing violence against the ethnic group I am from” [...] “Cancer, weeds, we will erase you and your traces and so on are used in reference to my ethnicity. This is part of a broader campaign led by the state.

Directly victimised respondent (En)

This case illustrates constrained resilience precisely because withdrawal and self-worth are not sequential stages – resignation following exhausted pride – but a simultaneous adaptation: the respondent’s sense of identity remains intact while the structural conditions he describes (state-linked, sustained, ethnicity-based targeting) foreclose assertive options, leaving withdrawal as the most viable remaining response. Read this way, the 17.3% pride figure is not evidence against the severity of harm respondents describe, nor against the rationality of their withdrawal – it is evidence that withdrawal here reflects situational constraint rather than a loss of self-regard.

In RQ3, the coping repertoire is extensive – blocking, reporting, counter-narrative, peer discussion – but the most used strategy is avoidance (53.3%) and the most conspicuous absence is legal action (0.0%). In RQ4, the fourfold difference in help-seeking between resource-aware and unaware respondents is consistent with informational as well as institutional constraint. This structural patterning is consistent with Nadim and Fladmoe’s (2021a) finding that OHS exposure among Oslo students varied with school-level immigrant composition rather than students’ individual characteristics alone, reinforcing that constraint operates at the level of context and structure, not solely the individual.

Constrained resilience is most clearly visible at the civic withdrawal end of the coping continuum: the 11 respondents (14.7%) who stopped engaging in public debate entirely. Unlike blocking a specific perpetrator, this form of withdrawal removes voice from public discourse rather than from a specific threat – the form most

consistent with structural exclusion rather than adaptive self-regulation. The constrained resilience framework does not label this as resilience failure but identifies it as the outcome of a coping repertoire progressively narrowed by conditions outside respondents' individual control.

This rate is broadly comparable to a national baseline: among the general Norwegian population who reported experiencing online hets in the past six months, 16% said they had stopped participating in online debate altogether and a further 33% said they had become more cautious (Medietilsynet, 2024, pp. 10–11). That a sample selected for identity-based OHS exposure shows a civic withdrawal rate comparable to a general-hets population baseline is notable given the qualitatively different severity of exposure — coded, cumulative, and identity-targeted rather than opinion-based — and suggests either that withdrawal is a common response to online hostility regardless of type, or that the present sample under-represents the most severely affected non-respondents.

The witness subgroup (n = 34) provides a particularly important test: if witnesses show coping patterns similar to those of directly victimised respondents despite not being personally targeted, that is consistent with the Spiral of Silence operating beyond direct victimisation. The coping and support data across both subgroups are consistent with this interpretation, though the study cannot demonstrate the causal mechanism.

6.2 The Zero Legal Action Finding

No respondent in the exposed subgroup (n = 75) took legal action. This is consistent with respondents perceiving formal legal pathways as inaccessible or ineffective under Section 185 as currently applied. The high evidentiary threshold — requiring proof of qualified offensiveness and intentional recklessness — may systematically disadvantage victims of coded, ironic, or cumulative OHS forms — as Dralega, Igland and Seddighi (2023) and Kierulf (2021) document. Platform anonymity makes intent difficult to establish. The qualitative corpus confirms that the hate speech encountered — "Sami people do not belong in Norway, kill the reindeer" (No); "Terrorist, F-Arab, barbaric, camel person, slave" (En); "Cancer, weeds, we will erase you and your traces" (En, describing ethnic targeting) — is severe and sustained, yet the zero rate of legal action suggests victims do not perceive Section 185 as a viable response to it. Independent monitoring of public Facebook activity corroborates that this is not an isolated account: roughly one in four comments on Sami-related topics were coded as negative, rising to one in three within certain Facebook groups and spiking during periods of heightened public debate such as the Fosen wind-turbine ruling (Analyse & Tall, 2023, on behalf of Amnesty International Norge).

This is consistent with the reasons Norwegian police themselves identify for hate-crime under-reporting nationally: not knowing that what one experienced was a criminal offence, lack of trust in the police, an unwillingness to bear the burden of reporting, or an expectation that the case will be dropped (henlagt) regardless (Politidirektoratet & Oslo politidistrikt, 2025, pp. 12–13). The same report notes that under-reporting (mørketall) is compounded by inconsistent internal coding of hate motive once a case is reported, producing what it terms "double dark figures" (Politidirektoratet & Oslo politidistrikt, 2025, p. 13) — a structural, not individual, source of the gap between experienced and legally actioned OHS.

6.3 Institutional Non-Use: Three Possible Explanations

The non-use of formal institutional channels — zero legal action, marginal use of formal support — requires explanation. This paper offers three interpretive propositions, presented explicitly as such: the data are

consistent with each, but the survey did not include a direct question on reasoning for non-use, so these remain analytical interpretations grounded in behavioural patterns, qualitative accounts, and existing theory rather than directly demonstrated findings.

First, procedural inadequacy. Tyler's (2006) procedural justice framework argues that institutional trust derives from perceived consistency, transparency, and respectful process – not primarily from outcomes. Platform reporting, as described by respondents, appears to violate all three: reports produce no visible response, no consistent outcome, and no acknowledgment. This interpretation is consistent with the behavioural pattern of low platform-support use (14.7%) despite widespread awareness of reporting tools, and with the qualitative account of reporting "in vain." This pattern is not unique to OHS victims: Björkenfeldt (2023) found an almost identical dynamic among Swedish journalists, where distrust in the legal system stemmed from the absence of visible response rather than case outcomes alone, suggesting that procedural neglect – not merely evidentiary difficulty – may be a more general feature of how Nordic legal systems are perceived to handle online harm.

Second, cultural and intersectional inadequacy. The qualitative data document OHS targeting that is simultaneously racial, religious, and gendered – forms of compounded harm for which single-axis support systems and legal frameworks are not designed. Crenshaw (1991) predicts that those targeted intersectionally will find standard support systems inadequate; Essed (1991) explains why everyday racist targeting is difficult to make legible within legal frameworks that require discrete, provable incidents. These theoretical accounts are consistent with the low rates of formal institutional use across minority-background respondents in the sample, though the survey data do not directly test this. This is consistent with Fladmoe, Nadim, and Birkvad's (2019) finding that Norwegians holding more than one minority characteristic face disproportionately higher OHS exposure than those with a single minority marker, suggesting that intersectional harm compounds exposure in ways plausibly linked to institutional inadequacy as well, though the present data speak only to the exposure side of that relationship.

Third, prior negative experience. One qualitative account directly supports this proposition: "I have learned not to respond, but in vain... I report the person immediately" (directly victimised respondent, No) – suggesting that formal behaviour (reporting) has become reflexive while expectation of outcome has collapsed. If prior experience of non-response teaches respondents that formal channels are ineffective, future non-use is rational and predictable. A direct question on reasoning for non-use, or longitudinal data tracking changes in reporting behaviour over time, would be needed to move this from an interpretive proposition to a demonstrated finding.

These three possible explanations suggest different remedies: procedural reform for the first; intersectional training and cultural competency for the second; and documented institutional learning – or explicit acknowledgment that this is a limitation of the current data – for the third. Their analytical value is in pointing toward where intervention might most productively focus, not in claiming the study has identified mechanisms it has not directly measured.

6.4 Critical Reflections on AI: Grounded in the Findings

This study is conducted within the SOCYTI project, which develops AI tools for real-time OHS detection and intervention. The findings generate specific and grounded critical questions about how such tools should function.

First, if respondents distrust opaque reporting systems — as the behavioural data suggest — AI-based detection cannot simply add another opaque layer. Transparency about detection criteria and feedback mechanisms are minimum conditions for a trustworthy system. Second, if minority language is culturally specific, contextual, or ironic, automated detection risks false-positive flagging of in-group speech as hate speech, exacerbating the cultural adequacy deficit. Noble (2018) and Benjamin (2019) document that algorithmic systems encode existing social biases; in multilingual, multicultural settings this risk is acute. Platform moderation failure of exactly this kind has been independently documented in Norway: following 7 October 2023, antisemitic and Islamophobic comments on Facebook and TikTok not only increased but persisted after moderation, with average attack-comment volume per post roughly doubling on Facebook and rising more than tenfold on TikTok (Analyse & Tall, 2024, on behalf of Amnesty International Norge) — evidence that automated or platform-level detection cannot be assumed to catch what it is designed to catch, particularly for coded or context-dependent hate.

This pattern extends beyond Norway. Appeals Centre Europe (2026), an independent dispute-resolution body established under the EU's Digital Services Act (DSA), reviewed 1,400 cases in which platforms had decided to leave up content reported as hate speech and overturned that decision 70% of the time overall — rising to 83% for TikTok specifically, the platform on which 94.7% of this study's exposed respondents encountered OHS. At the time of writing, Norway's implementation of the DSA — and with it, access to an equivalent independent appeal mechanism — remained pending: the regulation had not yet been incorporated into the EEA Agreement as of June 2026 (Stortinget, 2026). Norwegian respondents therefore had no equivalent recourse when platform decisions were disputed, but the underlying finding — that the same platforms these respondents used systematically fail to enforce their own hate-speech policies — is drawn from the identical services and is consistent with the pattern respondents in this study describe.

Third, if victims already avoid reporting — as the zero legal action and low platform-reporting rates demonstrate — AI intervention must not deepen surveillance that deters participation further (Crawford, 2021; Mittelstadt et al., 2016). Fourth, if resource awareness is the strongest empirical association identified with help-seeking in this study, AI could most directly address the identified gap by functioning as a referral and navigation mechanism — directing OHS-exposed respondents toward relevant support — rather than primarily as a detection mechanism. This use-case is directly grounded in Table 7 and carries lower risks than detection-and-removal.

7. Conclusion

This study offers an empirically grounded account of how OHS-exposed respondents in Norway — both directly victimised ($n = 41$) and witnesses ($n = 34$) — experience harm, navigate coping, and engage with available support. The central argument is that the dominant pattern — avoidance (53.3%), zero legal action (0.0%), 36% seeking no help — is consistent with constrained resilience: adaptive coping bounded by structural conditions that narrow the available response repertoire. Withdrawal can be understood as a rational adaptive response to perceived structural constraints rather than as individual failure.

The study makes three contributions. Empirically, it documents OHS-exposure patterns across a diverse Norwegian sample, includes witnesses as a distinct analytical subgroup to examine secondary chilling effects, and draws on a qualitative corpus of 72–73 open-ended responses to ground quantitative patterns in

respondent experience. Theoretically, it introduces constrained resilience and distinguishes it from related concepts (Table 1). Policy-practically, the resource awareness association (Table 7) points toward a substantial outreach gap as the most directly evidenced intervention target.

At scale, patterns such as those documented here — particularly the 14.7% who stopped engaging in public debate and the secondary withdrawal consistent with the Spiral of Silence among witnesses — may point toward a democratic deficit in Norwegian digital public life. This remains a theoretical implication consistent with the data and the literature (Citron, 2014; Penney, 2020; Crenshaw, 1991; Nadim & Fladmoe, 2021b) rather than a demonstrated outcome; the study does not measure population-level civic participation.

7.1 Recommendations

Directly evidenced by this study: A unified, multilingual victim referral gateway coordinating Norway's fragmented support ecosystem. The resource awareness association (Table 7) — a fourfold difference in help-seeking between aware and unaware respondents — directly supports this as the highest-return intervention within existing infrastructure.

This recommendation is corroborated from the institutional side by a companion study: interviews and workshops with 25 Norwegian public, private, and civil society organisations found that stakeholder efforts against OHS are diverse but fragmented, lacking systematic coordination or clear role delineation across sectors, and identified the same need for lowered legal-recourse thresholds and better-resourced support structures that the present study's victim-side data independently suggest (Dralega & Igland, 2026). Read together, the two studies indicate that fragmentation is not merely a victim-side perception but a documented feature of the response ecosystem itself.

Supported by qualitative evidence from this study and corroborated by the literature: Trauma-informed, intersectionally competent support practice among platform moderators, law enforcement, and legal advisors. The qualitative data document intersectional targeting; the literature confirms these as systemic features of OHS response (Gillespie, 2018; Crenshaw, 1991). The three possible explanations for institutional non-use in Section 6.3 — while interpretive rather than demonstrated — all point toward this as a necessary reform.

Consistent with this study's non-use pattern, requiring legal analysis beyond its scope: Review of Section 185 in light of how OHS actually operates — coded, cumulative, platform-anonymous, and intersectional. This study establishes non-use (0.0% legal action); the inference that Section 185 is the primary cause requires the legal analysis that Dralega, Igland and Seddighi (2023) and Kierulf (2021) provide.

Derived from the SOCYTI project context, informed by the findings: Development of AI-based OHS response tools with community co-design, independent audit, and explicit accountability for misclassification, prioritising referral and navigation functions — directly responsive to the identified outreach gap — over detection-and-removal, which carries higher risks of the harms documented in Noble (2018), Benjamin (2019), and Crawford (2021).

These recommendations arrive at a moment of active policy attention to precisely the minority groups represented in this study's sample: the government's *Handlingsplan mot muslimfiendtlighet 2025–2030* (Kultur- og likestillingsdepartementet, 2024) and *Handlingsplan mot hets og diskriminering av samer 2025–2030*

(Kultur- og likestillingsdepartementet, 2025) both name online hate speech among the concerns to be addressed for Muslim and Sami communities respectively, and the national hate-crime report itself lists these plans among the drivers of its own data-quality agenda (Politidirektoratet & Oslo politidistrikt, 2025, p. 6). This suggests clear uptake potential for the present findings beyond the research literature.

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