

Impact of Sexual Violation in the Digital Space on Women's Psyche

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ABSTRACT

Ever since the rise of social media and internet becoming a basic necessity, a lot of our world has been changed for good in so many ways, or is that really so? It is needless to say that with the advent of social media rise, communication has become accessible. According to Data Reportal, there are 692.0 million internet users as of in 2023 with 467.0 million social media users in January, 2023, equating to 32.8% of the total population. One of the many reasons for the rise in the usage of internet could be that a huge amount of market lies online in this day and age with companies finding ways and means to “convert their captive audience into clients”. According to a research conducted by The Hindu Business, one fourth of social network users will be from India in 2026, with YouTube, Facebook, WhatsApp and Instagram being the top most used social media platforms. Along with this efficacious development, there are a number of negative developments as well that followed with the rise of internet usage and social media users. Women have been facing gender-based prejudice since the past ages and even now, they are constantly reminded that they are feeble, which of course come from baseless assumptions and past treatments. Digital spaces have become particularly intrusive, not just as a way to communicate, but as a way to target and demean others, and sexually harass and violate women and to even groom children. It has become a breeding ground for sexual predators and for people who behave inappropriately towards others by violating their boundaries. Lockdown and quarantine only amplified the situation and even more cases of such violations on the internet were reported. According to a report by United Nations Women, one in ten women in the European Union report having experienced cyber-harassment since the age of 15. This included having received unwanted and/or offensive sexually explicit emails or SMS messages, or offensive and/or inappropriate advances on social networking sites. The risk is highest among young women aged 18-29. The purpose of this research is to find out what goes on in the mind of the victims while receiving online threats and explicit advances from strangers and to validate their feelings, give voice to their anguish and frustration, and to align the patterns of the online sexual violation.

Keywords: *Sexual Violation, Digital Space, Women's Psyche*

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Received: January 23, 2024; Revision Received: February 26, 2024; Accepted: March 02, 2024

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With the influx of technology, it's increasing easy accessibility to the masses in the form of upsurge in social media has definitely brought in a thousand changes in the human civilization. With every new Facebook and Instagram account being created every single day, with every 'like' and 'comment', our world has been abridged in the most unimaginable way possible.

It is safe to say that social media has brought a drastic change in our lives, on how we perceive the world we live in, culturally impacted our societies and created a whole new world which is completely different from the actual world where we live in. Internet access is not just limited to social media sites where interaction and the prospects of meeting new people has become easily attainable, it also comprises of a much broader spectrum bubble which is another dimension on its own.

While we discuss social media and all its glory which has transformed our world, we must also take into consideration how digital space has also become a hub for perpetrators to malpractice and abuse this tool against their own kind. While there have been a lot of studies on online bullying, stalking; there is still lacking research on sexual harassment on digital space and how it impacts the victims, who in majority, are women.

In one of the researches conducted by the Pew Research Center in the United States founded that young women, particularly between the age of 18-24 years, are more likely to experience online harassment such as name calling, cyber stalking and online sexual harassment. The spectrum of these offenses are extremely wide, ranging from name-calling, body-shaming to sending sexual, explicit content and demeaning women. Social media platforms as big as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter fail to provide a safety net to women, due to which many-a-times they feel the need to limit their access to these websites in order to protect their mental well-being and safety, which in turn can also impact their social life and even work life. We live in a century where the access to the digital space has become a necessity to everyone. From catering personal life aspects to workplace tasks, digital space plays an essential part in our day to day lives, and hence it is almost non-negotiable to dismiss online platforms.

Digital platforms act as a fish tank, wherein your personal details, almost every aspect of your life can be monitored, exploited and even misused. Data leaks and collection are other issues that are extremely concerning. Data hacks are just as common.

Being a woman on these digital platforms makes them much more vulnerable to misconducts.

A survey conducted by Plan International, 2020 states that 58% of girls have experienced online harassment, and 50% said they experienced more online harassment than street harassment.

Another survey by Amnesty International, 2017 showed that 46% of women who had experienced online abuse or harassment said it was misogynistic or sexist in nature.

Even in India, sexual exploitation against women in the digital space is just as rampant as we can imagine. Ranging from receiving unwanted attention as direct messages, misogynistic tweets and comments on their pictures to coming across links that lead to

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pornographic sites, online sexual predators are very much actively looking for their targets with the advantage of being anonymous over the internet.

During the lockdown in May, 2020, when the country, along with the entire world, was fighting the covid-19 upsurge, a case blew up the entire Indian media and forced everyone who active on the digital space, especially women, to evaluate what they're sharing over the internet.

The "Bois Locker Room" controversy involved a number of boys from a reputed school from South Delhi, share images of teenage girls on their Instagram group chat which was extremely offensive and straight-up sexual harassment, along with words like "gangrape". This case caused an online outcry. Some of the girls whose pictures were being shared in the group came out to seek support and justice from the public and a thorough investigation was carried out by the Delhi Police. This case was just a needle in the haystack, in digital space, cybercrimes such as blackmail, threats, bullying, stalking, defamation, image morphing, revenge porn, etcetera are immensely pervasive.

The data on cyber sexual crimes against women and its rise is easily available, however the impact that it leaves on a woman and her psyche is not readily available, especially on Indian women. There is plenty of research and data on physical sexual harassment and abuse, how it impacts the victim, how to report it and seek help, however there are not enough guidelines on how to prevent online sexual harassment and how to report it. Very often online offences of any kind are overlooked upon by the authorities or even by the concerned social media sites. Or in many cases. Women are unaware of whom to reach out to or they just block the perpetrator until a new one comes along and the cycle continues unless the woman decides to restrict their account privacy, limits it to their closed ones, which can affect their work over the digital platforms, or in other case, delete or deactivate their account altogether in order to heal from the harassment that might've affected them.

One of the most recent cases of online sexual harassment against women comes from the Delhi Commission for Women's chairperson, Swati Maliwal, who lodged a police complaint alleging that she has receiving rape threats on Instagram on speaking against a powerful movie director who has, allegedly, been outed as a molester during the #MeToo movement by multiple women. Even just existing in a world that is superficial in most of the aspects has become unsafe for women, they cannot just openly find a way where their opinions or even just their existence can go without someone's demeaning statements.

In a 2015 Ted Talk, Monica Lewinsky spoke on how social media's "rush to judgement, enabled by technology, led to mobs of virtual stone-throwers, I was branded as a tramp, tart, tramp, slut, whore, bimbo and of course, 'that woman'. I was seen by many, but actually known by few". Former US President, Bill Clinton admitted to having an affair with Lewinsky while she worked at the White House as an intern in 1995 to 1996 and hers was one the earliest stories to have published over the internet because of which she went through critical scrutiny and online bullying. In 2014, she took a public stand against cyberbullying, and referred to herself as "patient zero" of online harassment.

Another jarring case comes from Hyderabad, India where a 23-year-old software engineer was arrested after he made rape threats on Twitter against cricketer Virat Kohli's 9-month-old daughter. Something very similar happened in 2020, regarding MS Dhoni's 5-year-old daughter and such cases further consolidate the harmful effect that is being caused in the

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digital space towards women and even underage girls, by the hands of predators who use their computer or phone screens as shields in order to spew hate and display their sickening sexual and deeply ingrained misogyny.

Sexual violation in the digital space is not yet well defined. Physical violation can be easily sensed if someone's personal space is being crossed, breached or transgressed. However, during an online interaction any sort of space trespassing cannot be sensed or judged because of the obvious reason, it is happening over a computer or a laptop screen and not within the physical proximity. To even judge the intentions of the person sitting on the other side the screen is nearly impossible.

There could be numerous forms of online interactions that specifically target women and this has been heavily witnessed during the lockdown when working from home had become the new normal. Online classes were being conducted and teachers were stuck with their laptops, managing their students and a lot of news started to come in regarding how teachers were being sexually harassed as predators could easily hack and lurk on zoom meetings.

In Tamil Nadu, special measures were introduced by the Chief Minister, MK Stalin, such as random auditing to monitor teachers' behaviour, recording of the virtual class meetings and a grievance hotline number in order to prevent such misconducts against female teachers or students.

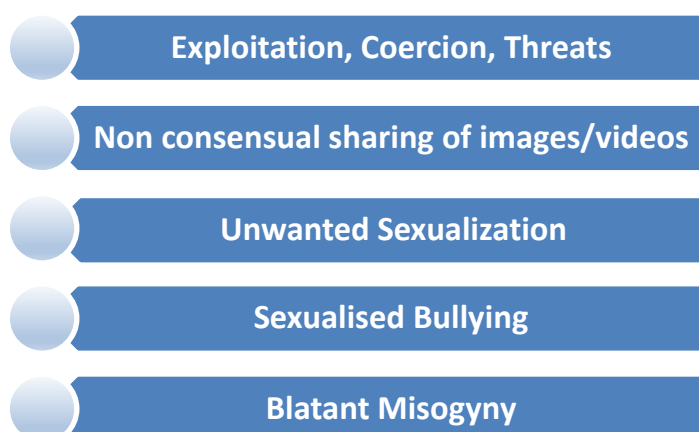
The issue of online sexual violation has been common long before the pandemic made them a necessity. Any interaction of such sort is highly pervasive and can inflict a lot of negative impact.

According to The Print, the stories voiced by students about their experiences of an online session were horrifying. A teacher from Padma Seshadri Bala Bhavan School, Chennai's would allegedly turn up for online classes in a towel, send lewd messages to the girl students and share pornographic links. Online spaces can be more belligerent, because unlike out in an open space, they allow predators to single out their prey for targeted harassment. Another such incident was noted in Aryabhata College of Delhi University where seven students were suspended for misbehaving with fellow female classmates over social media applications. The accused students sent unsolicited messages even after a complaint was filed against them.

There are a number of cases where teachers went through such violations at the hands of their students. From sharing their screens depicting pornographic videos to verbally abusing and using sexist remarks towards their teachers through their microphones, virtual classes posed a great threat of females in general, be it educators or students. Workplace online harassment has been an active topic and it has been proven time and again that women are more susceptible to sexual violation over the digital space however, less emphasis is laid on the emotional psyche of the women who has ever gone or are still going through this.

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Types of Sexual Violation Women face over the digital space



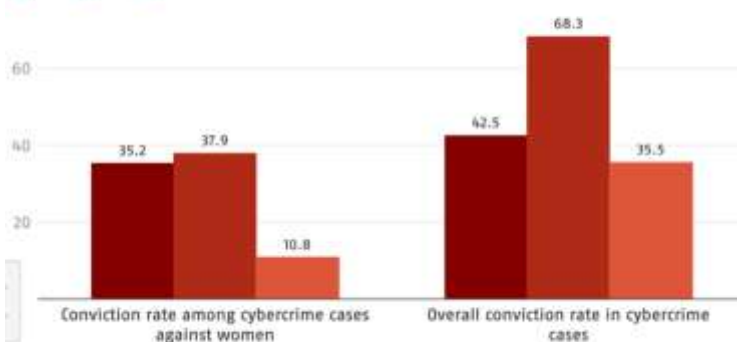
Legal Service India E-Journal notes that “the data from the 2021 National Commission for Women show that during April and May of the rigorous lockdown, the frequency of cybercrimes against women increased drastically and continue to rise”.

As per, National Crime Records Bureau, the top five states accounted for 61% share of online sexual harassment against women. Karnataka had the highest share with 2,243 cases in 2021, followed by Maharashtra with 1,697, and Uttar Pradesh with 958 cases.

Conviction rate for cybercrime cases against women jumped 3-times since 2019

Conviction rate: Rate of case disposal by the courts

■ 2021 ■ 2020 ■ 2019



Source: National Crime Records Bureau

All of the data and records further prove that the idea of an all-inclusive, safe and participatory set-up of digital space has been compromised due to the rise of sexual violation over the internet that targets women and children on the larger scale. Online misogyny is a global rights tragedy. With easy and cheap accessibility to internet, women have become more prone to such risks, the violations have been shifted towards the digital space and this deviant behaviour is posing a great threat towards women, which in turn, is disrupting their online presence.

Social media sites have come up with safety measures to ensure safe environment and equal opportunities for everyone, however such violations are very much still rampant. It is possible for social media users to just freely report someone to the concerned authorities of

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the sites, or to just block them or filter content. It is on-hand possible to personalize your privacy settings and report any account. Despite of creating safety measures, predators still lurk over the digital paradigms to target someone and reporting systems need to be more efficacious.

These activities are bound to affect the victims' psyche which can cause multiple reactions or even cause them to have silencing effect. Being a woman who's actively participating over the digital space can expose her to different forms of abuse.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Introduction

There are numerous studies and prior researches that elucidate how online sexual harassment has increased exponentially over the years and rise in the technological dependence in workplaces have fueled sexual violations over the internet against women. This research paper will try to put forth emphasis on its impact on women psyche- what picture does it paint, how it shapes their perception regarding online dating platforms and they plan on coping with such incidents.

Barak et al. (2005)

The work of this article focuses on the ongoing unbridled sexual harassment over the internet and how computer-mediated communication has taken over which points to the reinforced behaviour due to the online culture. It focuses on how internet can be a boon and ban at the same time as some people can exploit its purpose. It further goes on to compare "offline sexual harassment" with "sexual harassment in cyberspace". From discussing undisguised forms of sexual harassment that are way too intrusive and harmful to passive harassment against the women, it discusses how men, homosexuals and children are also the victims of sexual violation over the digital space, although the rate of women being targeted is the highest.

It further discusses that sexual violation over the internet can be different from the physical gender harassment as the motive of online perpetrators is to pressurize the victim, make them emotionally vulnerable, and not just seek sexual attention as it is not viable over the internet.

Buchanan, Niall et al. (2021)

The research states that sexual violation over the internet became more prominent right after women joined workforce, which in turn has resulted in victims consuming more alcohol and going through depression and anxiety as dealing with such violation during office hours can be really emotionally exhausting. It further discusses how sexual harassment takes place both online and offline in the form of sexual jokes or sexual comments.

It also reveals how there is a draught of valid and reliable scales which can measure online sexual harassment.

The methodology used a transparent five-step process that includes systematic literature review, scale development items- which has over 10,000 anonymous online posts from The Everyday Sexism website, scale development and pilot which tested the question wording, response rate and the reliability of scale; scale development and refinement that run an analysis using a principal axis factoring extraction that further filtered the end results, and final scale testing that used snowballing method to garner more responses in Facebook groups. It focused on the unwanted experiences faced by the participants while using the digital platforms during the past 12 months and it comprised of 13 items.

Lewis, Ruth et al. (2016)

This research paper discourses about the online sexual harassment that takes place in the UK. It is very common for equal rights activists to receive pervasive online abuse. A cross-party campaign was launched in the year 2016 titled "Reclaim the Internet" which exemplified the massive abuse faced by women on the internet- which has become a "separate dystopian civilization". It further goes on to discuss the conceptualization of dismissing the online abuse and not recognizing it as problematic as physical violations. The main focus of this paper is by and large towards the feminist activists and the threats they receive online due to their stance on equality and equal representation of women. A typical paradigm of abuse towards female activists composes of almost every type of threat and derogatory violation, levels of sexism, misogyny and predisposed conception regarding gender roles. It mentions the rise of feminist movements along with the upswing of the digital world, and then goes on to provide a significant study on how this has led to blatantly targeting females online.

The methodology comprised of survey and in-depth interviews of women involved in journalism, activism and academics, followed by snowball sampling. It further clarifies that it not only included social media activists but also black women, religious minorities and small activists. The analysis was done thematically. Most of the samples received comprised of white women being in the majority with 182 out of 226 responds in total. The most commonly used social media platforms by activists were Twitter and Facebook, wherein 88% of activists reported being abused on just Twitter, whereas 60% of them reported of facing sexual violation on Facebook. The research manuscript goes on to explain how the online sexual violation does not have a single pattern.

The limitations of this paper include that the research revolved around activists that are majorly white women, and does not represent other ethnicities in a considerable amount.

Mishna, Faye et al. (2021)

This qualitative research paper focused on perspectives of young people between the age group of 12-19 years; on sexting, whether consensual or non-consensual. The key consensus of the research concurs that the girls who participated in the study had received unsolicited sexts, including "dick pics". The manuscript also discusses how there is a complexity associated with saying "no". It also focuses on how Covid-19 changed the experience of sexting, and how psychologists can help children, teenagers and parents navigate through this new era of digital communication. It further goes on to differentiate between consensual and non-consensual sexting and teenagers' experiences on digital platforms and how they see it as their freedom of sexual expression. Along with "cyber flashing" and non-consensual advances, girls who are in their teen years also go through "commitment manipulation" in order to get them to send their nude pictures via social media sites. With the advent of Covid-19 and then the lockdown, which led to more activity on the digital platforms, substantial surge has been noted in such unpleasant experiences by women on the internet.

As the study needed to focus on the experiences of the youth regarding sexting, 12 focused groups discussions were carried out with 62 participants (47 girls, 15 boys) in order to extract different perspectives.

The group discussions also touched on the topic of "complexity associated with saying no" where it is difficult for the girls to just "block, report and forget", rather they feel stuck and

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confused when such unwelcomed attention is coming from a friend and they don't want to ruin their friendship, due to which they just put up with it.

It further goes on to mention the lack of adult support since a lot of victims of online sexual harassment choose to not inform their parents about it, as it may lead to excessive monitoring of their activities on social media, and may also compel them or may lead to "victim blaming" as well.

The limitation of this research manuscript is that it was excessively affected by the lockdown because of which the focused group discussions could not be carried out properly, and it does not dwell deep into the emotional psyche of the victims of online sexual harassment, the primary focus and theme of the group discussions were on the sole meaning of consensual and non-consensual sexting.

Focus group discussions can also hamper and influence participants' true beliefs and perceptions, which may lead to causing discrepancy in the data collection.

Megarry, Jessica et al. (2014)

The article conceptualizes the experiences of women faced primarily on Twitter through a hashtag "#mencallingmethings". It focuses on the rampant verbal abuse and scrutiny towards women from men. The article also pivots towards the contributions of western feminist researches over the last 30 years where the focal point is types of threats to women online. As feminist linguist Dale Spender quotes – "if, because of threat- women refuse to participate [online], they will be cutting themselves off from the information medium", the article notes how the topic of online harassment towards women is catching momentum over the past few years due to media and academia, and at this day and age, equal participation over the digital space has become more prominent as internet has become a vital part of our lives.

The #metoo movement was initially mentioned by sexual assault survivor and activist, Tarana Burke in 2006, whereas the #mencallmethings was created on 7 November, 2011 by a few female bloggers on Twitter for the motive of outing and discussing their online sexual harassment stories and experiences. Soon Twitter was flooded with tweets by women narrating their harrowing experiences on the digital space.

Megarry further goes on to explain how female users have increased in number but that has not resulted in digital spaces being a safe space for them, and how the experiences of women and men on the internet are drastically poles apart. Even though every single woman who participated in this Twitter campaign had her own story, the pattern of the violation was quite stationary and it further goes on to indicate that the online harassment is stereotypically targeting women on the basis of their identity as a woman. The article further concludes that the unbridled digital sexual harassment impedes women's participation and continues to be a unsafe space for them which causes them to modify their own behaviours in response.

Henry, Nicola et al. (2016)

The article wades on to explain how Technology-facilitated sexual violence coerces a victim to perform sexual acts without their will. The manuscript also discusses how there are plenty of research done on such violence against children and adolescents, but rarely on adults. It puts emphasis on the technological involvement in the new forms of gender violence that predominantly takes place on the digital space. It dives into the phenomenon of internet

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communication, a new form of transmission that has taken over our lives and comes out as a deterrent many a times in multiple forms-one of which could be online victimization, revenge pornography, bullying, etc. This study is one of the few ones that discusses how Technologically-facilitated violence can actually lead to both online and face-to-face sexual based harms.

It goes on to present a data backed by World Health Organization which states that approximately 35% of women worldwide have experienced sexual violence by someone known or a complete stranger. Women aged between 16-24 years are considered more susceptible to gender based sexual violence. It goes on to explain how surge in the usage of technological devices has led to facilitate sexual violence over the digital spaces. Online sexual violation is also termed as “electronic aggression” and “electronic harassment”, along with a terminology given by Thompson and Morrison (2013), “technology-based coercive behaviour”.

The article further goes on to distinguish between different behaviours into separate dimensions, which include – “harassing or violent acts that are sexual in nature, speech acts, acts that cause fear or apprehension, image-based violations or physical/contact offences”. It goes on to discuss how the internet related sexual violence has become rampant in schools and college settings, and it captures a wide range of harassment behaviours, and how it also includes unbridled hate speech towards females, especially from marginalized sections of the society.

The article further states that women are suffering the most even though there isn't any way to measure how such sexual content is perceived by them or what it entails.

There is still dearth of research focusing on cyberstalking and online abuse and it goes on to quote previous researches in the field, discussing more studies which found that stalking on digital platform is more common than anticipated, for example monitoring someone through their social media profile, impersonating someone else's online identity or posting revenge porn without consent. Image-based sexual exploitation is mentioned where sexual coercion is highlighted. Pervasive spreading and sending of sexual content over the digital space has created a new threshold of cybercrimes and unsafe digital experiences for specifically women. The focus of this article is more towards the online behaviours characterized by “sexual and/or relational pursuit”.

Technology-facilitated unwanted sexual experiences pressurizes the victim to perform any sort of sexual activity without their own will and it is defined as “sextortion”. This can range from bribery, blackmailing to threats. Although, the current researches on the topic are “not comparable” since the findings of these studies vary widely. Most of the studies focus more on either the rise of technology or on cybercrimes. The article further points out how the lack of repercussions and legislative responses makes it difficult for the victims to act on it in a far-reaching manner, which in turn is leading to digital spaces to act as a carrier of gender and sexuality based violence which has far-reaching impacts and has become a whole new battle for women that they have to conquer in order to be treated equally and to access digital spaces in a fair manner as it has become a basic necessity for each and everyone.

Simon Ståhl & Inga Dennhag (2020)

This research aims to focus on sexual harassment online and offline, along with their associations with depression and anxiety, with emphasis on adolescents irrespective of their gender. It also discusses how good-peer relationships impacts mental health status. This study is one of the very few ones that compares online sexual harassment with offline sexual harassment, with its discussion on how it can lead to mental illnesses, specifically if it involves adolescents. The research of this paper is backed by a 2019 Swedish study that found that “online sexual harassment was associated with a higher level of depressive symptoms in girls”.

Among other factors, peer support has been considered really affective when dealing with such a situation, whereas lack of it can lead to worsening of the symptoms.

The data collection included four schools from different localities, along with written informed consent forms, and it included a survey. The sample size was 617, that included 367 girls and 227 boys, aged 12-20 years. The self-assessment scale also included Revised Children's Anxiety and Depression Scale and Black Youth Inventories. The data collection found that 48.50% of girls and 28.19% boys reported harassment victimization, even though the offline harassment was reported more common. It also concluded that online harassment significantly led to increased anxiety issues in girls. Questions about sexual harassment experiences were transcribed from previously used questionnaires. Participants were asked to describe their experiences in order to garner more accurate data on the exploitation that may be physical, verbal or non-verbal.

Questionnaire also measured the scope and impact of peer relationships, the dynamics of teenage friendships and how sustainable and safe one feels in such relationships, especially while going through any sort of mental constraint.

Rego, R (2018)

This article reviews how the forms of misogyny have changed from homes and workplaces to social media sites, specifically, Twitter, which has become the most used carrier for hatred and bullying against female journalists. It further goes on to elucidate how women have always been the victim of multi-layered patriarchy and abuse, and now they are also enduring sexual violation on social media.

Even though now social media sites have become domains of harassment and bullying for women, yet this phenomenon is not sufficiently explored. The focal point of this article is on gender trolling targeted towards females as a form of ruthless sexual violence.

The methodology adopted was in qualitative form, which included famous Indian journalists – Barkha Dutt, Sagarika Ghose and Rana Ayyub. It puts emphasis on the nature and form of gender based sexual violation on the micro-blogging sites, and argues that social media sites play an integral role in enlarging the compass of misogyny and gender-based subjugation. Such deviants who use social media platforms to target journalists also do it if they are in disagreement with “dominant ideologies and ruling party dispensations”.

When it comes to targeting female journalists, deviants have also targeted those who speak for the marginalized sections of the society, such as Dalits, tribals, minorities and women. Due to the option of being anonymous, deviants use this to threaten and troll others on a daily basis and soon it all takes the form of relentless bullying and harassment.

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The paper has focused on Twitter since it connects people with news outlets and journalists. Trolls have been described as having “sadistic tendencies” as they derive pleasure from bullying their targets by shaming and exploiting them and they indulge in “disruptive, narcissistic behaviour”.

ÖZSUNGUR, F. (2021)

This research paper discusses the social work management and strategic factors and measures in order to combat effects of violence against women through digital elements. The paper used systematic review method and it was found that “the behavioural patterns of digital violence against women were disruptive behaviour, bullying, harassment, stalking, intimidating, controlling”.

It was found through this study that at almost every digital platform, computer games, smartphone applications, e-articles, social media, cyber warfare, women are exposed to digital violence.

It further goes on to elucidate how gender violence is one of the most biggest problems that we have in today's world.

“The process of transformation from matriarchal form to patriarchal form in society has recently revealed the most violent and oppressive situation against women. Many issues such as sexuality, physical elements, weakness, glass ceiling syndrome have become tools of violence against women (Garcia-Moreno et al., 2000)”.

As the methodology adopted is qualitative in nature, it lacks in terms of revealing the cause-effect relationships of concrete events. It further goes on to mention that the strategic management style needs to be verified accordingly as it may differ culturally and socio-demographically.

The reason behind committing a digital violence can have multiple reasons, from having violent tendencies, hate speech ideology to experiencing childhood violence and political and racist ideas.

It has been founded (Walker, 1989) that, the sadness and anxiety of the target audience and feeling of superiority after the attack cause psychological satisfaction of the attacker.

The research paper further examines that after going through a digital attack, a victim can have three reactions – Constructive/positive behaviour, Neutral/passive behaviour and Counter-attack.

On the other hand, the violator can have multiple behaviour types such as, disruptive behaviour, bullying, harassment, stalking, intimidating, controlling, etc.

Nova, Fayika Farhat, et al. (2019)

This study encompasses research on consolidating the issue of sexual harassment over the social media sites and its interrelation with stereotypes, aggression, interpersonal relationships, and mental health. It further goes on to explore the phenomenon of these harassments and how less-equipped the authorities are to deal with these especially in under developed countries such as Bangladesh, even the literature available on online harassments is very much deficient. The study was conducted through a technique that used anonymous

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social media (ASM), in which anonymous online survey was conducted with 291 participants and semi-structured interviews with 27 participants. The results of this study provides an insight into wide prevalence of sexual harassment on anonymous social networks in Bangladesh. It goes on to explain the discriminatory communal community of Bangladesh and how contrasting it is with the wide pervasiveness of online sexual harassments, and on top of that victims are not getting proper security after going through constant scrutiny. The participants for the semi-structure interviews were selected through snowballing technique, and were conducted in Bengali. The survey results indicated that out of 291 respondents, 72 received messages that were “uncomfortable”, of them 56.5% were women and 43.5% were men. A lot of participants also mentioned that they tried to guess the sender by their typing techniques – pattern of language, use of punctuation and emoticons, and tone of the message. Hence this study was able to provide a thorough insight into the nature of anonymous social media harassments and put the victims' suffering in the light by presenting study on how out of all the reports filed against online harassment in Bangladesh, 70% of them were by women and this further proved that there is a lack of accountability in the country.

Choi, K. Lee, S., Lee, J. (2017)

This research is primarily focused on online sexual harassment among juveniles in South Korea. It discussed how researches and literature are extensively there for juvenile delinquency, however not much is there when it comes to online sexual harassments among juveniles. In this research, elements from both social learning and self-control theories are used to assess the causes for online sexual harassment using mobile phones. The data analysis conducted used binominal logistic regression analysis in order to determine the causes of juvenile sexual harassment in cyberspace.

Mitchell, K., & Štulhofer, A. (2021).

This research emphasises on how online sexual harassment is a gendered experience. This research is set in Croatia, and mentions that compared to their male peers, female adolescents are more likely to experience online sexual harassment and this has been a major source of anxiety and distress for them. This study sought to explore the role of ‘resilience’ in explaining the association between online sexual harassment and negative mood, such as depression and anxiety symptoms. The sample consisted of 477 female Croatian adolescents and an investigation was done to examine changes in mood, and the role of resilience. The data collection was carried out for 26 months and was considered “the period of observation”. It was found that “online sexual harassment and negative moods were associated cross-sectionally, but not longitudinally”. This suggests that the symptoms of negative moods such as depression or anxiety caused due to online sexual harassment, may be short-lived. Another finding indicated that females with higher resilience were not affected with negative moods due to receiving disturbing or uncomfortable messages online. “Resilience, defined as the ability to ‘overcome the negative effects of risk exposure’ is a significant predictor of mental health in adolescents. Resilience is strongly implicated in positive adjustment following early traumatic sexual experiences and has been suggested as a protective factor that moderates the link between risk exposure and negative outcomes, including sexual risk taking. However, the role of resilience in the association between exposure to sexual harassment and internalizing problems has not been addressed. Whether resilience may reduce the likelihood of further exposure is currently also unknown”.

Karlekar, S., & Bansal, M. (2018).

This research's focal point relies on the advent of the famous #MeToo movement that went viral on the social media sites a few years ago in which women were breaking the silence on their sufferings and joined this wave of speaking out about their sexual harassment stories. They stood in solidarity and in order to push forward this movement, this research presents the task of automatically categorizing and analysing various forms of sexual harassments.

Data analysis was done through a number of models such as CNN-RNN architectures to classify the three forms of sexual harassments (passing comments, staring, trying to touch). This research aims at reporting sexual harassments online through their multi-label classification models, and how convenient it should become for the victims to file a complaint with the comfort of being at home and using their digital accessibility.

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to lay the methodological approach undertaken to discover the impact of online sexual violation on women psyche, and this will be attained through one-on-one personal interviews. This chapter will focus on all the approaches adopted in order to conduct and provide the reasoning for our research. It will discuss the sample selected and will set out the method used for data collection along with the process of data analysis. It will discuss ethical considerations and also limitations associated with this study.

Aim of research

The purpose of this study is to –

- Analyse how sexual harassment has seeped into the digital spaces.
- How does online sexual violation effects women and their psyche?
- Get an insight into the anguish of the victims, and not just their suffering.
- How does the presence of such violators over the internet limit women's online capabilities?

Qualitative approach

A qualitative approach was chosen for the research methodology for this study. The process of research involves empirically carrying out one-on-one interviews in order to collect data. This method would allow us to get a better understanding of the matter, on how women go through sexual harassment in the streets and the very same, yet a different form of sexual violation over the internet. Narrative analysis is used to get a deeper insight into the analysis. It is a form of qualitative research in which the researcher focuses on how participants construct story and narrative from their own personal experiences.

Qualitative methodology was considered most suitable for this topic since it enables greater capacity to garner more meaning and insight into the subjects' experiences. It will help us to understand their state of mind in a much efficient way, how it affects them mentally and emotionally, how safe or unsafe they feel while being on a social media site, all of these factors are necessary to be understood at a much deeper level which would be possible only through qualitative methodology.

Interview

One-on-one interviews were carried out for this research. They were semi-structured which allowed the participants to be more flexible with their responses as the form that we took

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were free flowing. Through this method, we were able to elicit more in-depth information from the participants. Semi-structured interviews enable participants to give responses on their own terms, go to great lengths of their experiences in their own way, with being completely honest as it gives them full charge of their explanation regarding the topic. This will also enable to provide data with authenticity, relying on the subjectivity of the participants and their responses.

Even though one-on-one interviewing will elicit rich and valuable data, it will also be an extremely time-consuming process in which we'll end with loads of data. The quality and even quantity of the data generated might vary as it completely relies on experiences, perceptions and even emotional quotient. On addition, since qualitative researches have lesser number of participants as compared to quantitative, it may get difficult to provide "more far reaching and reliable data results."

Sampling and selection

The sampling method used in this research was Purposive Sampling, which is also known as "judgement sampling" in which the researcher uses his/her own expertise to select the samples that suits best to their research topic.

This method also helps the researcher to gain better in-depth knowledge on the topic while collecting the data. Purposive sampling is essentially strategic since it forms a correlation between the sampling and the topic that needs to be researched.

The inclusion criteria had specifically females between the age group of 19-27 years of age, who have been using social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Linked In, etc since a long time (teenage years or early adulthood). The participants were selected through a survey which had a number of questions related to online sexual violations, and for those who responded that they've been through such online harassment were contacted in order to conduct the interviews. The age group selected helped to construct a specific pattern of experiences that each participant faced since social media sites have become a bandwagon for predators to harass and objectify women, which can have a detrimental affect on the psyche of women.

Dependent Variable	Females (19-27 years) who use social media sites actively, have gone through online sexual violation.
Independent Variable	Impact of sexual violation on women psyche

Participants were contacted through their responses on the survey conducted. For those who responded that they've been through online sexual violations, were personally contacted. In total, 20 participants were included in one-on-one interviews. Most of the participants were students (14 out of 20), the other 6 were working.

Research Design

Since the present study is qualitative in nature, it can be said that the research design can be flexible and iterative in nature since it the nature of the findings gets keep on evolving. It was heavily relied on the case study format, since it involved in-depth interviews with females who are regularly active on the internet, due to their own personal choice or for work related needs and opportunities. One-on-one interviews really helped to dig deep into the psyche and thought processes of women who face gender-based discrimination even on the internet where they share the space with million other people. The interviews also relied

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on the narrative research since we were collecting the stories, experiences and narratives of these women in order to get a better perspective on their sufferings on the internet. As a researcher, it was important for me to collect these narratives of women and put emphasis on their psyche, on what their mind goes through when they face such violation that targets their character, and self-worth in general. It was necessary to focus on their anger since very often we put weight on their emotional side of the nature and not validate their anguish and abomination against the perpetrators.

In order to form the base of the questions and to get an insight on the most prevalent forms of sexual violation on the internet, a survey questionnaire was prepared first through which the most basic forms of sexual violation were recognized and then the interview schedule was created.

Data Collection

Data collection took place in the months of February, March, April and May. All the interviews were fully transcribed verbatim through which themes were extracted for further research. All of the selected participants were contacted after the survey was carried out which was done to understand how rampant it is and the exact areas of sexual violations over the internet. The shortlisted participants were contacted through WhatsApp. Most of the interviews were conducted in a secluded campus area of Amity University, Noida; where the participants felt more at ease and found it easier to express themselves as they all preferred to be in a quiet environment, where it was easier for them to navigate their experiences and feelings.

It was really necessary to build empathy and rapport with the participants as the topic required them to fully immerse in their emotional threshold, discuss their mental and emotional suffering caused by online objectification and violation. A pre-interview aid was formed in order to present a basic layout to the participants which included basic instructions that were to be followed and kept in mind while conduction of the interview.

A proper interview questionnaire was prepared by the researcher in order to provide a structure and maintain the flow of the interview.

Most of the questions were around the pervasive sexual harassment on the digital space and how it affects women and hampers their online presence, along with their take on how women can protect themselves from such violators who have the advantage of sitting behind their screens and remain anonymous. The questions revolve around how increased usage in the social media sites since the past 10 years has given rise to this dystopian world where it has become easier to connect, share and present oneself, along with multiple downsides that includes giving perverts a platform, away from the physical world, in which they can target and violate women in a much accessible manner.

The questions were open ended, although some of the basic questions were close ended, for example, asking for name, age, occupation, contact details.

An example of the open-ended question included in the interview questionnaire was – ‘While going through any of such content that is derogatory towards women or reading a text from someone that has intentionally sent you sexually violating messages (for example asking for nudes or cussing you out in a degrading manner), what goes inside your head?’.

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Such open ended questions allow participants to freely articulate their thoughts into words and let their personal beliefs take charge which would provide really rich responses and would portray a layout of their experiences and belief systems. Open ended questions also let participants to ponder over their thoughts while aligning them with their experiences while responding.

The interview schedule was structured in the following way –

- participant's demographics
- their online presence and activity
- impact of sexual violation over the internet on their psyche and emotional well-being
- protection against such online violators

As this topic can be very emotional and could possibly be triggering as well for some, it is important to stay respectful towards the participants and let their anger, if that's what they feel, to free flow since the objective of this topic was to let women express their extreme anger against their suffering, that has surpassed and travelled from the physical realm to digital world which, as a result, is making their work-life and private life difficult and unsafe.

Data Collection Instruments

Since this topic of research can get as vast as possible, along with changing ranges of its intensity, it was necessary to get a basic idea of at what range of intensity I wanted to work with. To deal with this issue, a survey questionnaire was created before actually diving into the one-on-one interviews.

Interview question schedule was created which catered to the basic demographic details and then to the questions on social media usage, rise in the online harassment, on how intense it gets, focusing on the mindset of the victim and their emotions in a free manner.

DATA ANALYSIS

Data was collected through transcription, it was then interpreted, coded, analysed and verified. Transcribing really helps to establish a better understanding of the data collected since the responses are easily accessible from there on, the researcher can repeatedly read and work on the responses.

Thematic analysis was then conducted by extracting themes out of the codes that were taken out of the responses. A form of deductive approach was followed, in which the researcher has already preconceived themes in mind regarding the data because of prior knowledge or theories. For instance, because of the nature of the topic, themes such as discomfort, agony, repulsion, vulnerability, etc. were bound to be expected since the variables chew over women being violated over the internet, being subject of constant scrutiny because of their gender and facing sexual violence. Data interpretation involved carefully analysing the data and checking through it if there are any similarities and recurring themes, or differences.

Another step was to verify the data, to check and recheck if the data received is valid, and this was done by going through the transcripts again and again, along with the codes.

In the following table, codes are mentioned which were extracted out of the interview transcripts, which later on are made into themes. This will ease the process of get to the

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essence and outcomes of the research findings and highlight the eminent points of the results and what actually we are trying to put emphasis on.

Coding and Thematic Analysis

Interview Extracts	Codes
<p>At least 17 out of 20 participants have mentioned that social media sites have made them compare themselves or their lives from other people, be it in terms of appearance, achievements.</p> <p>Participant 2 – “if I’m feeling low, seeing other people doing well brings down my morale and this has led me to deactivate my Instagram account multiple times”.</p> <p>Participant 5 – “I’m a chubby girl, so when I see pictures of beautiful, toned, skinny models, it really impacts and fucks with my head a lot and that has made me feel insufficient in so many ways”.</p> <p>Participant 9 – “Social media is the main source of unhappiness and it feels like a deep, dark void where I tend to hide myself whenever I am feeling like I have nothing to do and it does more harm than any good, I feel so incomplete in so many ways, of course I have really good online friends with whom I feel so connected and validated, but I’d love to meet them and talk to them in person at any given day, rather than see them through this window of distance that makes me feel so alone and helpless”.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Constant comparison • Low morale due to comparing oneself to others • Feeling underconfident • Insecurities • Feeling lost • Feeling of inadequacy • Feeling of being left out and all alone • Source of judgement, insecurities and unhappiness
<p>Social media has become a main source of connectivity which has also lead to increase in number of online sexual harassments and violations. The data analysis proves that majority of women who have been actively using social media since the last 10 years, have been victims of online sexual abuse.</p> <p>Participant 6 – “since most of the perpetrators does not have a face attached to their profile, it comes from a place of entitlement, which makes them want to belittle women and objectify them and let their hatred come out”.</p> <p>Participant 1 – “My display picture on Instagram is not even properly visible, its black and white with my face resting in my palm, and one day out of the blue I receive a dm from a guy saying that my picture is so freaky, it really made me feel weird about it. And this stranger would then repeatedly text me almost every month. I felt so agitated and annoyed by his unhinged behaviour”.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feeling of agitation • Gender based violence • Feeling of entitlement • Belittle women • Annoyance • Feeling being bothered again and again • Grooming on the internet • Inappropriate behaviour • Inappropriate messages • No appropriate measures to safeguard women against such violation on the internet • Being confrontational • Not having complete faith in the authorities as they take a lot of time to take action against online predators • Reporting and blocking the

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<p>Participant 11 – “Unwanted texts would even come from people I know off of the internet, two of my seniors would constantly bug me to go on a date with them, even though I had declined their advances multiple times before, this made me question their audacity! Like seriously how dare they think that this behaviour is justified! I know for a fact that both of them did not have the courage to see my eye to eye in the campus and that is why they used social media as a shield to bug me for no reason!”.</p> <p>Participant 13 – “I was groomed by 3 elder men on the internet when I was not even 15, my parents were both working, they never monitored my internet activity since most of the Indian parents did not really know at that time what went on the internet and how dangerous it could be for children. These elder men would ask me to send them pictures of my legs, would ask me colour of my panties and bombard me with sexual conversations, I mean I was just a baby!”</p> <p>Participant 14 – “Nowadays I feel panic, fear but also intense anger towards such advances that I receive on the internet, mostly on twitter. I am really good at confronting and I make sure I use the most diabolical language before I report and block them”.</p> <p>Participant 16 – “Social media sites such as Facebook and Instagram sensor women nipples, but take their time to review cases of sexual violence, they give no follow-up after reporting any such case of sexual violation, that is so sexist and vile against women. It really disgusts me to the fucking core. Women are not meant to be violated like that, even by the very same authorities that are supposed to keep a watch on their safety”.</p>	perpetrators
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After reviewing the interview transcripts and carefully going through the experiences of the participants, it was important to form codes so that the main themes of the research could be taken out which can provide efficiency to our study. The codes taken out express the feelings, beliefs and opinions of the participants by giving major emphasis to their responses.

It is important to generate themes, which are generally broader than codes. Multiple codes are generally combined within a single theme.

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Codes	Themes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Constant comparison • Low morale due to comparing oneself to others 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Constant comparison
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feeling underconfident • Insecurities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low self-esteem
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feeling lost • Feeling of inadequacy • Feeling of being left out and all alone 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feeling of Despair
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gender based violence • Feeling of entitlement • Belittle women • Inappropriate behaviour • Inappropriate messages 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gender based discrimination
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feeling of agitation • Annoyance • Feeling being bothered again and again 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rage and anger of women
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No appropriate measures to safeguard women against such violation on the internet • Being confrontational • Not having complete faith in the authorities as they take a lot of time to take action against online predators • Reporting and blocking the perpetrators 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Distrust in content reviewers and authorities that run social media giants

Ethical Considerations

This research paper is titled as “Impact of sexual violation in the digital space on women's psyche”, hence it is given how sensitive this topic can be for women who have gone through such online gender-based bigotry on social media sites. It was of the top most priority for me, as a researcher to be extremely mindful with the questionnaire schedule, the tone of the questions being asked and to use proper, meticulous vocabulary in order to maintain ethicalities as the interview and the research progresses. After preparing the questionnaire, I got them verified by my respective guide, made some necessary changes which were pointed out to me, and then got it further approved and went along with it.

Before commencing the one-on-one interviews, it was made clear to the participants that this interview is completely voluntary, and if at any time, during any question or response, they feel like stopping the interview, they are free to do so.

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The subject that entails in this research can be sensitive and triggering to some, hence every ethical technicality was of top priority and was taken care of in order to make the participants feel completely safe and comfortable with their information regarding their demographic details or their experiences and responses.

RESULTS

Introduction

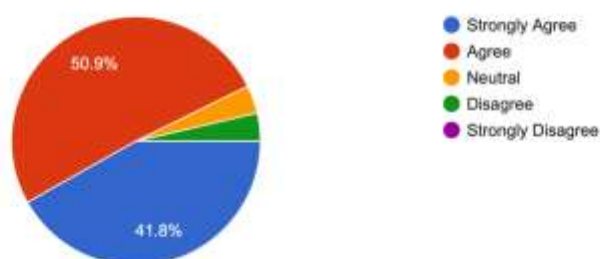
As an amateur researcher, it was necessary for me to first off, set the basis for the topic of the researcher. Apart from my own personal experiences as a woman, who has been actively using digital platforms from the last 10 years, it was necessary to get an idea of whether other women of my age have also been victims to online sexual violation or not. All of the 20 participants were females, between the ages of 19 – 27 years, with their daily average screentime ranging between 3 hours or more. To put emphasis on their thinking process, emotional regulation and anxiety levels was the main aim for this study. In this research, we did not want to diminish the true beliefs and feelings of the participants since many a times a victim's anguish is side-lined and their suffering becomes the point of contention.

A survey was prepared that contained 35 questions which helped me to at least get an idea of how prevailing this issue is.

The responses clearly indicate towards how social media sites and digital spaces in general have become a hotspot for predators to torment women and it does not even matter if they personally know them or not.

A chart pie chart has been shared below from the survey, in which 50.9% of women between the age of 19-27 years believe that social media platforms have made it easier for sexual violators to find and target women online.

Do you think that digital space, social media platforms have made it easier for sexual violators to find and target women online?
55 responses



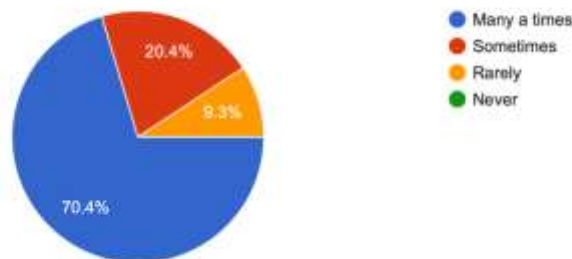
Another survey question indicates towards how exasperated these women have felt after experiencing online sexual violation and, out of a scale of 1-10, at least 38.9% of women have rated their level of anger a 10, and 18.5% have rated it an 8. These findings show us that apart from feeling helpless and anxious during such circumstances, women also tend to feel agitated and frustrated towards the abusers, an emotion which is very often side-lined or diminished. Female aggression is often seen as non-existent, and their embodiment is often portrayed as soft, sufferable and submissive, although these findings put a great light on how indignant women have felt throughout the course of going through their social media inboxes where they have been ridiculed, called out by slurs and have received unsolicited nude pictures that have made them feel extremely violated without even crossing a physical

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boundary of violation. There is not any defined boundary when it comes to the digital world which has made it easier for violators to find multiple ways to spew hatred towards women. About 43.6% of women have agreed that they have come across messages from men in which they are being extremely sexist towards them, telling them things like “go back to the kitchen”, and calling them by slurs. About 41.9% of women have stated that they have received spamming links to pornographic sites in their inboxes from men. This further goes on to indicate how common it has become for men to just randomly seek women in order to demean them rigorously until it torments them to the core and makes them feel extremely transgressed and feeble. Out of the very few measures to protect oneself from such harassment, removing or blocking the profile altogether can help a woman to get away from it. Even though it should be common knowledge to behave appropriately with another human being, nevertheless, it is easier to just block the harassers. About 70.4% of women have stated that they feel the need to remove or block people from their social media profiles, which clearly points towards that there is a lack of safety-net available for women in specific.

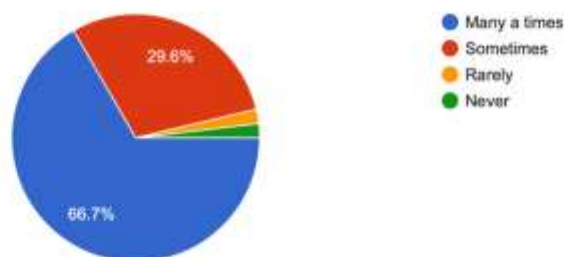
Do you feel the need to remove/block unknown people from your social media profile?

54 responses



Do you feel the need to make your profile private and limited to only friends and family, in order to protect yourself and your identity from online sexual violation?

54 responses

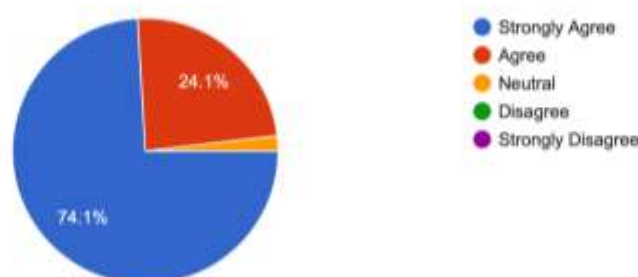


Another safety measure that can be adopted is to just limit the amount of people that one can add to their social media profile, and about 66.7% of women agreed to it while 29.6% of women felt that sometimes it definitely makes them feel like that, however, for some, it might be a little difficult to do so since for many, social media profiles are used as their resumes hence it is important for them to keep their profiles open for everyone. This can be the case for those who work in the media, marketing, or small-business owners. The survey also evidences towards the trauma that online harassment of such cases can inflict on the minds of women, as 98.2% of women state that online sexual violation can be as traumatic as physical sexual violence. Receiving constant unasked advances, being demeaned on the basis of your gender, becoming soft targets just for existing and feeling unsafe because of being violated while being in your home can be really tormenting.

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In your opinion, can online sexual violation become as impactful on the mind of a woman as physical sexual violation?

54 responses



Participant 19 discusses an extremely disturbing instance of when she was sexually harassed in a moving bus while returning from her college, which led her to never travel in public buses anymore.

“I felt numb, the bus was crowded and he was standing just behind me, rubbing his penis against my hip, it was the most jarring experience of my life that left me scarred and I was so helpless and scared that I could not move at all”. The same participant further provides a detailed instance of a time when she was being harassed online by someone who lived near her house and constantly bugged her texting her every day, sending her pornographic videos, calling her by slurs and sending videos of him masturbating. “The fact that he lived two blocks away from where I lived was really scary for me, one time he sent me a picture of myself on the road and that made me really scared! I don’t know how he got my number and my Facebook profile, I remember blocking him from every account, even his number, but then he would text me from a new number and the cycle continued! He would send me videos of him fapping and links to dirty videos, it would disgust me to the fucking core! I wish I had the guts to report him or to tell about him to someone earlier, I was so alone and it really fucked with my head every single day, I would go to sleep crying in anxiety and would just beg him to stop doing it! These two of my experiences made me feel vulnerable, anxious and so freaking agitated at the same time! I wanted to just smash their heads with a rod! That’s how angry I was and think that even now, deep down inside, I still carry that trauma and anger within me. I have so much anger towards men who see women as nothing but objects that they’re supposed to just fuck with! I still remember exactly how I felt and what I was going through after both of these things happened with me”

Participant 3 discusses in the interview that she was harassed as a child by her tuition teacher and even though she has overcome her trauma and that memory does not affect her much now, but she remembers a very similar ray of emotion when she received a threatening message from an anonymous account on her Instagram page. “It felt so weird and as a small girl to becoming a woman and still going through such violation, in different ways, one online other in physical sense, it feels so demeaning and even if we have come far in life, it still happens in life and constantly remind us that as females, we are seen as incompetent, weak and as “second genders”. Disgust is an understatement for such experiences! Sometimes it feels so limiting to be a woman since we cannot even stay safe and protected, without anyone trying to objectify us even inside our homes. It may sound way too dramatic but sometimes I just hate the entire men population to my core! It is so easy to be a man, to be able to go outside without having any thought that you might get violated on your way home.”

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It has been found that clearly online abuse can be as staggering as any other form of abuse. Bullying is another big issue that we have been dealing with ever since digital spaces and social media have expanded, and it is very much evident that when bullying is being done on a female, it is bound to involve rape threats, objectification or “sextortion” etc.

Participant 1 goes in details to discuss how she was being persuaded by adult men on the internet when she was barely 13.

“On sites such as Google plus, Hangouts, WhatsApp, Tumblr, I would get a lot of sexual messages. It was also during the time when I was bullied a lot in my school, so I sought validation online, from people I did not know personally. I remember a man asking me what colored panties was I wearing and the other one asked for my feet pictures! At that time I did not understand how dangerous it really was but that definitely made me feel so bad about myself. Even though I had female friends as well, I never experienced any such thing with them. It was always the males! They did not know their limits, they were just disgusting and sick! It is not even annoying, it is traumatic”.

Participant 6 introduced herself as a singer and she is quite active on digital spaces such as YouTube and Instagram. “I have been performing since I was 13, and internet has been my safe haven. I get to perform and do what I love the most every single day because of social media and even though I did not have any support from my dad, who is my only parent, YouTube and Instagram became blessings to me. I gained thousands of views and some of my reels went viral as well! As much as I want to be happy about it, it is also important to acknowledge that I have also been bullied because of my appearance and received a lot of nasty comments under my video. I remember getting one comment that said “cheap Korean whore”, I did not even understand the context of it, maybe because I sing Korean songs and not Hindi songs? Nevertheless it is really difficult to get noticed on the internet because of your pure talent and hard-work, along with every struggle, getting constantly bullied comes along with it”. She further adds on being asked what went through her mind when she got such comments, “obviously I felt angry and devastated. I remember not being able to focus on anything else, I could not study and even could not edit my new videos or to shoot anything. I would constantly check and refresh my comment sections because I was so scared of these bullies. I was angry at the same time, I wanted to just shout and cry but I could not do that in my house, it was a really difficult time, although now I think I have thick skin and I have learned to how to deal with such people”.

The present study hence showed how women are used to gearing up against men who are using their internet access to constantly displace their blatant misogyny and bigotry against women. It also sheds light on the unfair bridges of our society, women seem to be under constant unjust and inequitable scrutiny all based on just one factor, that they are women!

The outcomes of the interviews paint a picture of how sexual predators are constantly on a look out for their victims. Another major finding in the present research was on how anguished women get and apart from feeling anxious, scared; they also tend to get exasperated and very often fantasize about how, if they could, curb the mess of whatever they are going through by making the perpetrators suffer.

Participant 7 mentioned “I wish life was fair and we, as victims, had the right to make the violator suffer! I wish I could just smash his head! I am really sorry for getting so hyper and hyperventilated, ugh but it all feels so unjust to me. And I am sure most of the girls would feel the same. I am sure you also feel the same, that's why you're conducting this research in the first place!”

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In an another interview, Participant 11 talks about how she responded to one of the messages she received. "There was this time when I received a dm by this guy, I did not know him at all, he was just a random stranger and he had commented 'I would like to fuck you rough, you slut'. I was left aghast and was stunned to react with anything. I responded with 'I wish I could slap you so hard right now that your tongue bets bit in half, you motherfucker'. Every such interaction made me so angry that I could not control my thoughts properly and it made me so angry that I used to literally shiver!!!"

All of the themes which were analyzed were constantly reoccurring and based off of the transcripts.

Since this chapter is focusing on the outcomes of the research, it is also necessary to interpret thematic analysis, as they were extracted out of the interview transcripts and show a pervasive pattern of increase usage of social media and rise in sexual violation in the digital space.

Constant Comparison – The present study relied on focused interviews with young participants from the age of 19-27. Social media sites play a crucial role in marketing and selling ideas as well. It has been found that sites such as Instagram, Facebook are portals of memories where people post and share their memories and lives. Very often these instances become source of unhappiness as many people tend to compare their lives with everyone else. It is given that sharing of happy moments and successes are more in number than sharing one's vulnerable moments.

Low self-esteem – Social media sites are also a main source of insecurities since comparing lives also creates a shallow sense of self, and this has come up again and again in the interview. This can arise due to body-image issues, fear of missing out, all of these can lead to feeling of inadequacy, unfulfillment, social exclusion.

Feeling of Despair – All of the above themes can also lead to feeling of extreme hollowness, where one has no idea of their own existence and they lose track of their own lives. This can arise out of feeling of inadequacy, abandonment. Getting triggered by anything and everything on social media can cause this feeling, seeing other people achieving their goals can cause this negative thought process to arise. This is also constantly arising in interviews again and again.

Gender based discrimination – The main focus of this research, violence and violation against women, treating them in an extremely demeaning manner just to satisfy their own urges. The outcomes of this research has provided how many women go through this on a daily basis, on the streets, in the buses, amidst a crowded lane or markets, and even on the internet whilst sitting in their own houses and yet being abused and harassed.

Rage and anger of women – The genesis of this research was to not diminish the anguish of the victims and give their rage a voice and not just sideline it by overshadowing their emotions by portraying them as mere victims of harassment and abuse by men who out themselves on a pedestal. It was important for this research to make the participants feel comfortable enough to talk about their true emotions while receiving anything that made their minds lose control. Most of the respondents mention the instances where they have felt so angry that they wanted the predators to suffer painfully.

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Distrust in content reviewers and authorities that run social media giants – The results point out that eventually women have to take properly required safety measures themselves, since the helping centers set up by the social media companies not always help on time. Hence it is important to stay vigilant and mindful of what women put out there while keeping a track of their own social media activities.

DISCUSSION

The Internet provides an environment in which healthy and pathological behaviours may be pursued (Suler, 1999). Indeed, the Internet is known to possess the two contradictory aspects, as it is exploited for good or for evil purposes. All three types of SH that exist on the internet. However, because of the virtual nature of cyberspace, most expressions of SH that prevail on the net appear in the form of gender harassment and unwanted sexual attention. Nevertheless, as sexual coercion is the type that occurs the least often offline, too, it is impossible to conclude whether its relatively low prevalence in cyberspace is a result of the medium or its very nature (Barak & King, 2000).

Most of the studies and even the findings of the present paper point towards how online sexual violation refers to a range of problematic behaviours that involve the use of digital spaces to perpetrate sexual violation. This can include non-consensual sending of sexually explicit images or videos, or links to pornographic sites, cyberstalking, online grooming of young girls or boys, and sexual extortions. Online sexual violation can pose as a serious problem that can have significant and long lasting traumatic consequences, including psychological distress, reputational damage, isolation, anxiety, breakdowns, etc.

A survey conducted by the Pew Research Center found that 21% of women aged 18-29 in the United States have experienced online sexual harassment, compared to 9% of men in the same age group (Duggan & Smith, 2013). Other studies have reported even higher rates of online sexual violation, particularly among adolescent and young adult populations (Henry, Powell, & Flynn, 2013).

Understanding the research findings

The present study was able to gather a rich data that focused on the feelings and psychological state of young women who are exposed to these sexual violation threats on a daily basis, be it in offline, physical world or the online world. The findings of this research accentuated the major or minor inconvenience that females face due to sexual predators and contribute in limiting their access to the internet. Even though in this study, we did not really find any such case where a woman have felt the need to leave the digital space altogether to protect herself from online sexual violation, but we do have many examples of women who felt the need to limit their accounts or to make their profiles private and to block people on a daily basis to get away from any such violation that puts them in danger, or that uses them as dumping subjects where they can throw their diabolical, baseless, inappropriate and ludicrous opinions.

Since the data collection was done via interviews, it was really affective and convenient to get honest responses. The effort was solely to focus on the thought process, analytical aspect and psyche of the victim, to be able to understand what went inside the minds of the victims, how did they think of preventing it, with what measures and to how any such violation shaped their mind, with what all impact it left. Since we could extract a number of codes from the interview transcripts which were found common in almost all of the interviews, goes on to show that online sexual violation can be just as impactful and serious as an offline sexual violation. Digital spaces does not have a defined set of boundaries with which

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you can judge that this isn’t supposed to get trespassed. However, many interactions over the internet can leave you astonished. Ever since the rise of the internet and then growth in the usage of social media giants, harassment has found a way to seep in and make these supposedly safe spaces to be hotspots for violators to find and abuse victims.

Throughout the interviews, there are so many discussions on feeling vulnerable, helpless, violated, disgusted, weak, tormented, etc, which further proves our point that sexual violation over the internet can be really damaging to the victim. In a society like India’s, young people have often found it difficult to approach their parents whenever it came to online sexual harassment, which makes them feel more vulnerable since many a times, it may not be possible for parents to even guess that their children could be getting harassed over the internet by some stranger.

Statistics on Online Sexual Violations

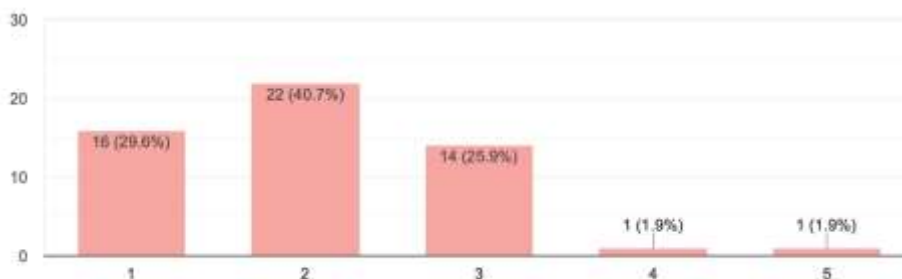
According to the Cyber Crime Statistics of India, 1,500 cybercrime instances are reported everyday but only 30 are processed into FIRs (First Information Report).

In only 35% or 18,744 cases a chargesheet was filed, while the number of convicted cases was less than 1% at 491 cases. The situation of those arrested for cybercrimes remains the same. In 2021, there were 27,374 arrests. Over 93% of these 25,512 people were charge-sheeted. These findings by the Cyber Crime Statistics of India corroborate that even though the amount of impact can be similar to physical sexual violation, still the available measures and data regarding online sexual violation is still lacking and does not cater to the amount of victims that have been suffering on the hands of these predators.

Even when it comes to reporting the abuse to sites, they might not always respond the way they should. As Participant 15 noted “I have reported comments so many times, but instead every now and then I get a new comment full of slurs and cuss words. Instagram needs to do better. I don’t want to deal with such people who can’t respect other people’s boundaries”. The survey responses showed that sites are not that well equipped with protecting women.

In your opinion, how well social media agencies are equipped to protect women against such sexual violations over their sites?

54 responses



As Brut India reported, famous Indian journalist Rana Ayyub spoke about the violence, the harassment women journalists in particular, faced on Twitter and in real life at UNESCO for World Press Freedom Day. “I’m attacked every 19 seconds on the internet. A death threat, a rape threat. I file complaints against these online threats in Mumbai police stations, the city where I live...The cops look at me and say but it happened online”. Then she goes on to cite example of another female journalist, Gauri Lankesh, who was shot outside of her house, and she had been receiving death and rape threats on Twitter routinely. “I have a guy who messages me almost everyday that I saw you outside your apartment, names my building

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and then proceeds to send me rape threats and says that he's going to gangrape me, my sister, my mother. That's how brazen it is". In this interview, Rana Ayyub clearly states that it is a very big misunderstanding that online threats cannot get spilled offline. The online perpetrators has powers to hunt you down and then harm you, which has been seen in a number of cases. It goes on to portray how journalists, especially female journalists are in constant danger and social media sites such as Twitter and Facebook play a big role as sources of those threats.

Since technology has become an integral part of our lives, for most of the people it is inevitable to just leave the digital world and go about in life without it.

According to the Pew Research Center, 41% of US adults have personally experienced online harassment, and 25% have experienced more severe harassment. "On a broad level, Americans agree that online harassment is a problem plaguing digital spaces. Roughly 9 in 10 Americans say people being harassed or bullied online is a problem, including 55% who consider it a major problem".

The reason why I chose females regarding this topic was simply because various researches have proven that women are children are comparatively more vulnerable to online sexual violations and I have also been through online sexual violation a multiple times, as someone who is still active on social media sites, I take all the required preventive measures to stay safe from such harassments.

Another major aim of this study is to focus on the enraged, resentful, irritated and indignant side of the women who fall victims of such harassment and yet these feelings are often overshadowed by portraying them as vulnerable, weak and just 'victims'. It is necessary to realize and accept that they are more than that, they have been through sexual harassment, these feelings are bound to arise against the perpetrators. The study goes on to consolidate that victims have gone through feelings of anguish and even fantasized about getting violent with them, just to ease their trauma.

Being victims of sexual harassment offline or even online, can affect the women psyche in a lot of ways, many respondents reported that it is common for them to get angry, frustrated and sometimes even inconsolable.

Feeling anxious – More than half of the participants mentioned that anxiety has been a constant emotion that stuck with them whenever they felt threatened or violated over the internet. "I feel so unsafe and shiver-y. I don't trust anyone online and it is so scary out there, these abusers who are sitting behind their laptop screens could be someone with whom we walk on the roads, share metro coaches with. Thought of being in the same space as someone who abuses and harasses women online scares the shit out of me!".

Feeling frustrated – An experience that leaves you in distraught, makes you feel violated, frustration is bound to happen. "Of course it leaves you frustrated, it became so common for me to check my phone in every 5 seconds, because I was so scared that someone will send me another disturbing message or post a new sexist comment under my tweet. I remember crying in my bathroom once with my head in my hands because I had received a text from an anonymous account that said – 'I want to rape you, hear you scream, bitch and then I will cut you in pieces! I will then do the same to your mother'. This message was a response to a tweet that I had made regarding the Delhi riots and I remember that I received at least 15

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rape and murder threats on that day! Alongside every emotion, I have been on the internet for 15 years, I have thick skin now but sometimes when you have your moments, you cannot just take it!”.

Feelings of anger, exasperation, violent thoughts – Findings of this study also point towards that women who receive such unwelcomed advances from men on the internet go through acute exasperation, which may come after frustration. A few of the participants recalled that they felt really angry at the messages that they received. “I wanted to smash his head, the moment I checked this man’s profile after he sent me a text that said ‘I like ur boobs, so big I want to suck them’, I saw his picture and wanted to slap the shit out of him...it made me so angry!”. Another participant discussed that she was really young when she encountered sexual violation on the internet, and now when she looks back, it makes her so angry, “I was being groomed by these ugly adult men on the internet, I was really alone at that time and had been through bullying, it made me seek attention on the internet”, she goes on to describe that now when she looks back, she feels like smashing their heads for being so inappropriate with young children, “I really wish I could smash their brains out, disgusting old men, I hope they are dead now and in hell”.

Distress and revulsion – Sexual violation and harassment are the most distressing experiences that one can have, the suspicion of being harassed by someone can become so difficult to deal with, it can impact one’s self esteem and may make them feel isolated since our findings also showed that for most of the participants, it was difficult for them to approach their families, or parents, “I don’t think they would understand it and I knew that they would blame me in the end...they do not really understand the digital world”. A research was done by Pew Research Center, where it shows that, those who knew their harasser "tend to be more deeply affected by their experience and to express greater concerns for their safety". This research was focused in the Western context, however a research done by Nova, F. F., Rifat, M. R., Saha, P., Ahmed, S. I., & Guha, S. (2019, January) found a similar association of distress and known perpetrator through their study in Bangladesh. A number of previous studies have also shown that after going through any such online harassment and violation, victims seek to tend support from friends, families, acquaintances or even co-workers and this pertains to the idea that the source of safety and confinement comes from online relationships, where they can freely and accurately describe their feelings while seeking a safe space to confide in. Our data show that the experience of being harassed online brings a lot of resilience and disgust. Most of the respondents mentioned feeling disgusted towards the kind of messages or comments they received, and towards the perpetrators as well. This feeling of disgust stems from being put down by random strangers on the internet, from being violated in such a degrading manner that it may cause severe distress.

Constant victim blaming over the years and not having proper measures to deal with such cyber-crimes have been making it difficult for equal opportunities for both men and women in the digital spaces. Although it is immensely commendable how women have been using the digital spaces for their own advancements despite all the intrusions and let downs.

Limitations

While our study reveals a lot of important and integral aspects of online sexual violation, there are several limitations in this study. First off, all of participants and respondents who participated in this study, belonged to the metropolitan cities such as, Delhi, Noida and Bangalore. This limits the study data since internet is really affordable in India, hence this

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study stays constricted to the experiences of females residing in the cities, and does not take into consideration the experiences of rural women who are actively using social media platforms and are going through the similar experiences. Another limitation is of the age constricted, the age group that was selected was 19-27, which narrows the expansion of the study since it is very normal for teens (13 years onwards) or even children (7-8 years onwards) to join social media accounts. A lot of studies provide data backing that pedophiles look for their victims online and it is evident by the kind of comments are left under the posts- pictures and videos of underage children. Hence, the present study only focuses on the sexual violation faced by women, and that to between the ages of 19 to 29 years, which makes it further narrowed and restricted and does not entirely represent the seepage of sexual violations in the digital space. Another limitation that pertains in this study is that we cannot generalize the findings merely on the basis of female victims, since males have also faced such violations, bullying on the internet. For my future work, I intend to at least expand the sampling criteria for better representation and to address the experiences of children, males and members of the LGBTQ community.

I also hope that future researches would be conducted surrounding this issue and it will serve the purpose of validating the experiences of the victims and also provide necessary information on how can one tackle such situation and how better security would be provided for people actively using digital spaces.

However, despite of all the limitations mentioned above, I do believe that this study provides some of the integral information and insights into the experiences of women on how sexual violation in the digital space impacted their psyche and how they processed the distress of it all.

CONCLUSION

This study suggest that online sexual violation has become a new form of sexual harassment that has become so common and yet there are not proper measures to tackle it and to provide safety for the victims. Many previous and this study also prove that most of the victims of online sexual violations are women and it causes severe distress, fear and anguish among those who go through it.

It can also be said that sexual violation over the digital space can be grouped into different categories – text messages that are sexual in nature, death or rape threats, unsolicited explicit images, cyberstalking, grooming, passing sexist and degrading comments.

There is also another factor that can play a major role in causing the distress to the psyche of the victims- if the perpetrator is known to them outside of the digital world, it becomes so much more difficult for them to deal with their emotions since alongside the feeling of being violated, they also question their safety and integrity of people they meet outside of the digital world. The present study also indicates towards the deep insight into the mindset and emotions of the victims and helps to give their anguish a voice, as very often their core feelings are sidelined and the common point of contention stays the harassment, prevalence of it and not the impact of its magnitude on the victims, who find it difficult to navigate their lives ahead of it. The findings of this study are crucial to understand the prevalence of such behavior and how it leaves an imprint on the limitations of women who want to access the digital platforms for themselves. Most of the participants mentioned how they rarely discussed their experiences with anyone and that led them to limit their online presence in order to protect their mental peace. However, this research is an extension to the already

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existing works on the phenomenon of online sexual harassment, internet violation and cyber-crimes.

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Acknowledgment

The author(s) appreciates all those who participated in the study and helped to facilitate the research process.

Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

How to cite this article: Mamgain, K. (2024). Impact of Sexual Violation in the Digital Space on Women's Psyche. *International Journal of Indian Psychology*, 12(1), 1486-1515. DIP:18.01.138.20241201, DOI:10.25215/1201.138