

Social Media Exposure and Its Impact on Awareness of Sexual Harassment among Female College Students in Salem District

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ABSTRACT

The rapid growth of social media has significantly influenced the way young individuals access information and develop awareness of social issues. This study examines the impact of social media exposure on awareness of sexual harassment among female college students in Salem District. A descriptive survey research design was adopted, and data were collected from 300 female students in arts and science colleges using a structured questionnaire. The study employed both descriptive and inferential statistical techniques, including mean, standard deviation, correlation, and regression analysis. The findings revealed that the majority of students exhibit moderate to high levels of social media exposure and awareness of sexual harassment. A significant positive relationship was identified between social media exposure and awareness, indicating that increased engagement with social media enhances students' understanding of sexual harassment, including its forms, consequences, and preventive measures. Furthermore, social media exposure was found to be a significant predictor of awareness levels. The study also identified significant differences in awareness based on demographic variables such as year of study and type of college. The results highlight the dual role of social media as both a source of risk and a powerful tool for awareness creation and empowerment. The study concludes that effective utilization of social media, along with improved digital literacy, can play a crucial role in promoting awareness and fostering a safer environment for female students.

Keywords: *Social Media Exposure, Sexual Harassment Awareness, Female College Students, Digital Literacy, Online Safety, Women Empowerment, Higher Education*

The rapid advancement of digital technology has significantly transformed patterns of communication, interaction, and information dissemination across the globe. Among these technological developments, social media platforms have become deeply embedded in the daily lives of young people, especially college students. Applications such as Instagram, Facebook, and WhatsApp are widely used not only for social interaction but also for accessing information, expressing opinions, and engaging in discussions on social issues. In recent years, social media has emerged as a powerful medium for shaping awareness and attitudes toward critical societal concerns, including sexual harassment (Keles et al., 2020; Statista, 2024).

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Sexual harassment is a pervasive issue that affects women across various settings, including educational institutions. Traditionally, harassment was largely confined to physical spaces; however, with the growth of digital platforms, it has extended into virtual environments. This form of harassment, often referred to as technology-facilitated sexual harassment, includes behaviors such as sending unsolicited explicit messages, online stalking, sharing private images without consent, and engaging in abusive or degrading communication (Henry & Powell, 2018; Powell & Henry, 2017). Such experiences can lead to serious psychological consequences, including anxiety, fear, reduced self-esteem, and social withdrawal.

Young women, particularly college students, are among the most active users of social media and are therefore more vulnerable to online harassment. Empirical studies indicate that female students frequently encounter various forms of gender-based harassment in digital spaces, including cyberbullying, body shaming, and unwanted sexual attention (Vogels, 2021; European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2023). Despite these risks, social media also provides opportunities for awareness creation, peer support, and access to information about rights and legal protections.

In recent years, social media has played a crucial role in raising awareness about sexual harassment through online campaigns and digital activism. Movements such as #MeToo have demonstrated how social media can amplify voices, encourage victims to share their experiences, and challenge societal norms surrounding gender-based violence (Mendes et al., 2019). These platforms facilitate the dissemination of educational content related to consent, legal rights, and reporting mechanisms, thereby contributing to increased awareness among users. Furthermore, exposure to informative and awareness-oriented content on social media has been found to enhance individuals' understanding of sexual harassment and related issues. Studies suggest that higher levels of social media engagement are associated with increased awareness, particularly when users interact with educational content, advocacy campaigns, and peer discussions (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021; Sundaram & Sreekumar, 2022). This indicates that social media can serve as an informal learning environment that complements formal education. However, the level of awareness gained through social media may vary depending on factors such as frequency of usage, type of content accessed, and digital literacy skills. Not all users engage critically with content, and misinformation or normalization of inappropriate behavior can sometimes undermine awareness efforts. Therefore, it is essential to examine the nature and extent of social media exposure in relation to awareness of sexual harassment. In the context of Salem District, the increasing accessibility of smartphones and internet services has led to a significant rise in social media usage among college students. Female students in arts and science colleges represent a key demographic group that actively engages with digital platforms. Understanding how social media exposure influences their awareness of sexual harassment is crucial for developing effective educational strategies, promoting digital safety, and fostering a more informed and empowered student community. Hence, this study aims to investigate the impact of social media exposure on awareness of sexual harassment among female college students in Salem District.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The growing integration of social media into everyday life has significantly influenced the experiences, perceptions, and awareness levels of individuals, particularly young women.

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Existing literature highlights that social media functions as both a risk environment and an educational platform in relation to sexual harassment.

Recent empirical studies have emphasized the increasing prevalence of technology-facilitated sexual harassment among young people. A study by Durán-Guerrero (2025) validated instruments measuring online sexual harassment among peers and found that digital environments have intensified the forms and frequency of harassment experienced by youth. Similarly, Bulut (2025) reported that social media platforms have become key spaces where adolescents and young adults encounter sexual violence, emphasizing the role of digital interaction in shaping harassment experiences.

In the context of female youth, research indicates a significant relationship between social media usage and exposure to harassment-related risks. Mohamad (2022) conducted a quantitative study among female youth and found that increased social media use was significantly associated with higher exposure to sexual harassment-related behaviors, highlighting the vulnerability of young women in online spaces. These findings suggest that while social media enhances connectivity, it simultaneously increases the likelihood of encountering inappropriate or harmful interactions. Beyond exposure, several studies have explored the psychological and behavioral impacts of online sexual harassment. Research by Biswas (2025) highlights that excessive social media usage is associated with emotional distress, anxiety, and negative mental health outcomes, particularly among educated individuals. Supporting this, recent findings indicate that cyber sexual harassment leads to serious emotional consequences and influences coping mechanisms among victims (Anderson et al., 2025). These studies collectively emphasize that the effects of harassment extend beyond immediate experiences, affecting long-term well-being and social participation.

At the same time, social media has been recognized as a powerful tool for awareness creation and social advocacy. Silalahi (2025) found that social media platforms play a crucial role in exposing sexual violence cases through viral messaging and collective action, enabling victims to gain public support and visibility. This aligns with earlier research on digital activism, which demonstrates that social media campaigns contribute to increased public discourse and awareness regarding gender-based violence (Mendes et al., 2019).

The influence of awareness-oriented content on students' knowledge has also been widely documented. A study on digital-age education revealed that exposure to content related to individual rights, consent, and online harassment significantly enhances students' understanding of sexual harassment issues (Pérez-Torres, 2024; Oksanen et al., 2022). Furthermore, educational interventions delivered through digital platforms have been shown to improve awareness and promote responsible online behavior among adolescents and young adults. Research focusing specifically on college students indicates that awareness levels are closely linked to patterns of social media engagement. Shapiro (2025) found that cyber abuse experiences among college-age individuals vary based on age, gender, and online behavior, suggesting that awareness and vulnerability are influenced by user characteristics and digital habits. Similarly, studies on female university students highlight that perceptions of sexual harassment are shaped by exposure to online discussions, peer interactions, and social media campaigns, such as the #MeToo movement (Mou et al., 2022). In addition, the role of digital literacy has emerged as a critical factor in understanding and responding to sexual harassment. Studies indicate that individuals with higher digital

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literacy are better equipped to identify inappropriate behavior, access support systems, and take preventive measures. Conversely, lack of awareness and inadequate digital education may lead to normalization of harassment or inability to respond effectively (Livingstone et al., 2019; Sundaram & Sreekumar, 2022). Despite the growing body of literature, gaps remain in understanding how social media exposure specifically influences awareness levels among female students in localized contexts. Most existing studies are conducted in global or urban settings, with limited focus on semi-urban regions such as Salem District. Additionally, while many studies examine either exposure to harassment or awareness independently, fewer studies integrate both variables within a single analytical framework.

Need and Significance of the Study

Sexual harassment continues to be a critical issue affecting the safety, dignity, and well-being of women across the world. In recent years, the nature of harassment has evolved with the rapid growth of digital technologies, extending from physical environments into online spaces. This shift has given rise to technology-facilitated sexual harassment, which includes behaviors such as cyberstalking, unwanted explicit communication, and online abuse. Studies indicate that young women, particularly college students, are among the most vulnerable groups exposed to such forms of harassment due to their high engagement with social media platforms (Henry & Powell, 2018; Vogels, 2021). At the same time, social media has emerged as a powerful medium for information dissemination and awareness creation. Platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube provide access to educational content, legal information, and awareness campaigns related to sexual harassment and women's rights. Research suggests that exposure to such content can significantly enhance individuals' understanding of issues like consent, reporting mechanisms, and legal protections (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021; Sundaram & Sreekumar, 2022). However, the extent to which social media exposure translates into meaningful awareness remains a subject of investigation.

The need for the present study arises from the dual nature of social media. While it exposes users to potential risks, it also offers opportunities for empowerment and education. Understanding this dual role is essential for developing strategies that maximize the benefits of social media while minimizing its risks. In particular, there is a growing need to assess how social media influences awareness of sexual harassment among female students, who are both active users and vulnerable targets in digital environments. In the Indian context, and specifically in semi-urban regions like Salem District, the use of smartphones and internet services has increased significantly among college students. Despite this growth, there is limited empirical research examining how social media exposure affects awareness of sexual harassment among female students in such regions. Most existing studies are concentrated in urban or international contexts, leaving a gap in localized understanding (Livingstone et al., 2019). Therefore, this study is necessary to provide context-specific insights that reflect the experiences and awareness levels of students in Salem District.

The significance of the study lies in its potential contributions to multiple domains. From an educational perspective, the findings can help institutions design effective awareness programs and integrate digital safety education into the curriculum. From a social perspective, the study can contribute to promoting gender equality and empowering women with knowledge about their rights and protections. Additionally, the study can assist policymakers and stakeholders in developing strategies to address online harassment and improve student safety. Furthermore, the study is significant in highlighting the role of

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digital literacy in shaping awareness. As students increasingly rely on social media for information, their ability to critically evaluate content and understand digital risks becomes crucial. Enhancing awareness through social media can lead to more informed, confident, and empowered individuals who are better equipped to respond to harassment. In conclusion, the present study is both timely and relevant, as it addresses a pressing issue in the context of increasing digital engagement. By examining the impact of social media exposure on awareness of sexual harassment among female college students in Salem District, the study aims to contribute to academic research, educational practices, and societal development.

Objectives of the Study

The present study is designed to examine the relationship between social media exposure and awareness of sexual harassment among female college students in Salem District. The specific objectives are:

1. To determine the level of social media exposure among female students in arts and science colleges in Salem District.
2. To assess the level of awareness of sexual harassment among female college students.
3. To identify differences in awareness of sexual harassment based on selected demographic variables such as year of study, and type of college.
4. To examine the relationship between social media exposure and awareness of sexual harassment among female students.
5. To analyze the impact of social media exposure on awareness of sexual harassment among female college students.

Hypotheses of the Study

Based on the above objectives, the following hypotheses are formulated:

1. There is no significant level of social media exposure among female college students in Salem District.
2. There is no significant level of awareness of sexual harassment among female college students.
3. There is no significant difference in awareness of sexual harassment among female college students with respect to selected demographic variables such as year of study, and type of college.
4. There is no significant relationship between social media exposure and awareness of sexual harassment among female college students.
5. Social media exposure does not have a significant impact on awareness of sexual harassment among female college students.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The present study adopts a descriptive survey research design to investigate the impact of social media exposure on awareness of sexual harassment among female college students. This design is considered appropriate as it enables the researcher to systematically describe existing conditions and examine relationships between variables without manipulating them. It is particularly useful in educational and social science research where the objective is to understand patterns, behaviors, and associations in a natural setting.

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Population of the Study

The population of the study comprises female students enrolled in arts and science colleges in Salem District, Tamil Nadu. This group was selected because of their active engagement with social media platforms and their relevance to the issue of awareness of sexual harassment. The population represents a significant segment of young women who are both users of digital technology and potential beneficiaries of awareness initiatives.

Sample and Sampling Technique

A sample of 300 female students was selected from various arts and science colleges in Salem District. The sample size is considered adequate to ensure meaningful statistical analysis and generalization of results. The study employed a simple random sampling technique, which ensures that each individual in the population has an equal chance of being selected. This method helps in reducing sampling bias and enhances the representativeness of the sample.

Variables of the Study

The study focuses on two main variables: social media exposure as the independent variable and awareness of sexual harassment as the dependent variable. Social media exposure refers to the extent of students' engagement with social media platforms, including frequency, duration, and type of content accessed. Awareness of sexual harassment refers to the level of knowledge and understanding related to forms of harassment, legal rights, preventive measures, and reporting procedures.

Tool for Data Collection

Data for the study were collected using a structured questionnaire developed by the researcher. The questionnaire consisted of three sections, including demographic information, items measuring social media exposure, and items assessing awareness of sexual harassment. A five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree was used to capture respondents' opinions. The tool was designed to ensure clarity, simplicity, and relevance to the objectives of the study.

- **Validity of the Tool:** The validity of the instrument was established through content validation. The questionnaire was reviewed by experts in the fields of education, psychology, and social sciences to ensure that the items were appropriate, relevant, and comprehensive. Based on their feedback, necessary modifications were made to improve the quality and effectiveness of the tool.
- **Reliability of the Tool:** The reliability of the questionnaire was determined using the Cronbach's Alpha method. The reliability coefficient obtained was 0.82, indicating a high level of internal consistency among the items. This suggests that the tool is reliable and suitable for measuring the variables of the study.

Data Collection Procedure

The data were collected from selected arts and science colleges in Salem District after obtaining permission from the respective authorities. The researcher personally administered the questionnaire to the respondents and provided necessary instructions to ensure accurate responses. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study and were assured that their responses would remain confidential and used only for academic purposes. The data collection process was carried out systematically to ensure completeness and authenticity.

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Statistical Techniques Used

The collected data were analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistical techniques. Descriptive statistics such as mean and standard deviation were used to determine the levels of social media exposure and awareness of sexual harassment. Inferential statistics, including Pearson correlation and regression analysis, were used to examine the relationship and impact between variables. Additionally, t-tests and ANOVA were employed to analyze differences based on demographic variables.

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to standard ethical guidelines. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all respondents. Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained throughout the research process. The study ensured that no harm, discomfort, or risk was caused to the participants.

DATA ANALYSIS

Level of Social Media Exposure

Table 1: Level of Social Media Exposure among Female College Students

Level of Social Media Exposure	Frequency	Percentage
Low	42	14.0%
Moderate	138	46.0%
High	120	40.0%
Total	300	100%

Interpretation

The table indicates that the majority of female college students (46.0%) have a moderate level of social media exposure, followed by 40.0% with high exposure and only 14.0% with low exposure. This clearly shows that most students are actively engaged with social media platforms, indicating a significant level of exposure.

Level of Awareness of Sexual Harassment

Table 2: Level of Awareness of Sexual Harassment among Female College Students

Level of Awareness	Frequency	Percentage
Low	36	12.0%
Moderate	144	48.0%
High	120	40.0%
Total	300	100%

Interpretation

The above table shows that 48.0% of the students possess a moderate level of awareness, while 40.0% have high awareness and 12.0% have low awareness. This indicates that awareness of sexual harassment among female college students is generally moderate to high, reflecting a reasonably good level of understanding.

Hypothesis 3

H₀₃: There is no significant difference in awareness of sexual harassment among female college students with respect to demographic variables.

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Table 3(a): ANOVA – Awareness based on Year of Study

Source	SS	df	MS	F	p-value
Between Groups	162.3	2	81.15	5.12	0.007
Within Groups	4705.7	297	15.84		
Total	4868.0	299			

Table 3(b): t-test – Awareness based on Type of College

Variable	Group	Mean	SD	t-value	p-value
Awareness	Govt College	3.62	0.71	2.48	0.014
	Private	3.81	0.66		

Interpretation

The ANOVA result shows a significant difference in awareness based on year of study ($F = 5.12, p = 0.007$). Similarly, the t-test reveals a significant difference based on type of college ($t = 2.48, p = 0.014$). Therefore, the null hypothesis (H_{03}) is rejected, indicating that awareness levels differ significantly across demographic variables.

Hypothesis 4

H₀₄: There is no significant relationship between social media exposure and awareness of sexual harassment.

Table 4: Pearson Correlation Analysis

Variables	r-value	p-value
Social Media Exposure & Awareness	0.68	0.000

Interpretation

The correlation coefficient ($r = 0.68$) indicates a strong positive relationship between social media exposure and awareness. The p-value is less than 0.05, indicating statistical significance. Hence, the null hypothesis (H_{04}) is rejected.

Hypothesis 5

H₀₅: Social media exposure does not have a significant impact on awareness of sexual harassment.

Table 5 (a): Model Summary

R	R ²	Adjusted R ²
0.68	0.46	0.45

Table 5 (b) Regression Analysis

Variable	B	Beta	t-value	p-value
Constant	11.82	-	4.96	0.000
Social Media Exposure	0.76	0.68	14.85	0.000

Interpretation

The regression results indicate that social media exposure significantly predicts awareness of sexual harassment ($\beta = 0.68, p < 0.001$). The R² value (0.46) shows that 46% of the variance in awareness is explained by social media exposure. Therefore, the null hypothesis (H_{05}) is rejected.

DISCUSSION OF THE STUDY

The present study examined the impact of social media exposure on awareness of sexual harassment among female college students in Salem District. The findings of the study are discussed in relation to existing literature and theoretical perspectives. The results revealed that female college students have a moderate to high level of social media exposure, which reflects the increasing integration of digital platforms into students' daily lives. This finding is consistent with recent studies indicating that social media has become a dominant medium of communication and interaction among youth, significantly influencing their attitudes and behaviors. Research suggests that college students actively engage with social media for information, entertainment, and social connection, thereby increasing their exposure to both positive and negative online experiences (Shapiro, 2025).

The study also found that respondents possess a moderate to high level of awareness of sexual harassment. This suggests that students are increasingly informed about issues related to harassment, including its forms, consequences, and preventive measures. This finding aligns with earlier research indicating that exposure to educational content and discussions on digital platforms enhances awareness and understanding of sexual harassment (Pérez-Torres, 2024; Oksanen et al., 2022). Social media serves as an informal learning environment where users acquire knowledge through shared experiences, awareness campaigns, and peer interactions. A key finding of the study is the significant positive relationship between social media exposure and awareness of sexual harassment. This indicates that higher levels of engagement with social media are associated with increased awareness. This result is supported by previous studies which highlight that social media platforms facilitate the dissemination of information related to gender-based violence, consent, and legal rights, thereby contributing to awareness among users (Mendes et al., 2019). Furthermore, social media posts and discussions help individuals understand the dynamics and consequences of sexual harassment, making them more informed and vigilant.

The regression analysis further confirmed that social media exposure has a significant impact on awareness of sexual harassment, explaining a substantial proportion of variance in awareness levels. This finding suggests that social media is not merely a passive platform but an influential factor shaping knowledge and perceptions. Similar findings have been reported in recent studies, which indicate that educational content related to online harassment and individual rights significantly influences awareness and behavioral outcomes in the digital age at the same time, the findings must be interpreted in light of the dual role of social media. While it enhances awareness, it also exposes users to risks. Studies indicate that a significant proportion of women experience online harassment, highlighting the pervasive nature of the issue. For instance, global reports show that a large percentage of young women have encountered some form of online harassment, including unwanted messages and abusive content. Similarly, research on social media interactions reveals that harassment can take multiple forms, including verbal, visual, and psychological abuse, all of which negatively impact victims' well-being. Another important finding of the study is the significant difference in awareness based on demographic variables such as year of study and type of college. This suggests that awareness is influenced by exposure, maturity, and educational environment. Senior students may have higher awareness due to increased experience and exposure to academic and social discussions, while institutional differences may affect access to awareness programs and digital resources. This finding is supported by research indicating that demographic and contextual factors play a crucial role in shaping perceptions and experiences related to online harassment (Emerald Study, 2026).

CONCLUSION

The present study examined the impact of social media exposure on awareness of sexual harassment among female college students in Salem District. In the context of rapid digitalization and increasing use of social media platforms, understanding how these platforms influence awareness of critical social issues has become highly important. The findings of the study provide meaningful insights into the role of social media as both an informational and influential medium. The results of the study indicate that female college students possess a moderate to high level of social media exposure, reflecting the widespread use of digital platforms in their daily lives. This high level of engagement provides opportunities for accessing information, interacting with peers, and participating in discussions related to social issues. At the same time, the findings also reveal that students have a moderate to high level of awareness of sexual harassment, suggesting that they are increasingly informed about its forms, consequences, and preventive measures.

A key conclusion of the study is that there exists a significant positive relationship between social media exposure and awareness of sexual harassment. Students who are more actively engaged with social media tend to have higher levels of awareness. This highlights the role of social media as an effective platform for spreading information, raising awareness, and promoting discussions on sensitive issues such as sexual harassment. The study further confirms that social media exposure significantly influences awareness levels, indicating that it serves as an important predictor of knowledge and understanding among students. The study also found that awareness levels vary based on demographic factors such as year of study and type of college. This suggests that exposure, educational environment, and experience contribute to differences in awareness. Students in higher years of study and those in more resource-rich environments may have greater access to information and awareness programs, which enhances their understanding. Overall, the study concludes that social media plays a crucial role in enhancing awareness of sexual harassment among female college students. While it presents certain risks, it also offers significant opportunities for education, empowerment, and social change. The findings emphasize the need to utilize social media effectively as a tool for awareness creation while promoting digital literacy and responsible usage. In conclusion, fostering awareness through social media can contribute to building a more informed, confident, and empowered generation of young women who are better equipped to recognize, prevent, and respond to sexual harassment in both online and offline environments.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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