"They Don't Leave Us Alone Anywhere We Go":
Gender and Digital Abuse in South Asia

Bibliographic Reference

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- According to Authors date of publication is May 9 2019.

- Paper was published in Glasgow, Scotland UK.

- Paper contains 14 pages.

ABSTRACT

▶   South Asia faces one of the largest gender gaps online globally, and online safety is one of the main barriers to gender equitable Internet access [GSMA, 2015].

▶   Authors present a qualitative study of the online abuse experiences and coping practices of 199 people who identified as women and 6 NGO staff from India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, using a feminist analysis.

▶   We found that a majority of our participants regularly contended with online abuse, experiencing three major abuse types: cyberstalking, impersonation, and personal content leakages.

INTRODUCTION

▶ Only 29% of users from India are women . Likewise, women in South Asia are 26% less likely than South Asian men to own a phone and 70% less likely to connect to the Internet via a mobile device .

▶ One of the largest barriers to gender-equitable participation in this region is online safety (among other barriers like affordability and relevance),driven in part by fear of contending with harassment and risks to one's reputation.

▶ Abuse in South Asia is materially different from what is reported in other geographic or cultural contexts. Even seemingly minor infractions, such as a stranger lifting a participant's profile photo or leaking their name, carried significant consequences.

RELATED WORK

- Prior research has explored abuse online in the context of sexual harassment, cyberstalking , catfishing , revenge porn , doxing, sextortion, intimate partner violence and more.

- Cyberstalking

- Impersonation

- Personal content leakages.

RELATED WORK

Strategies for coping with abuse:

- ▶ victims tend to ignore low severity abuse.

- ▶ More severe forms can result in victims withdrawing from platforms.

- ▶ feeling anxiety

- ▶ Some rely on reactive strategies like ignoring abuse, confronting abusers, avoiding location sharing, editing privacy settings, and deleting accounts.

- ▶ For more severe incidents, victims seek support from law enforcement.

- ▶ Similarities across these prior results from the West and

our results from South Asia include that women commonly

experience online abuse; with marginal sub-groups reporting

more abuse

METHODOLOGY

- They conducted semi structured ,in-person interviews and focus groups with a total of 199 cisgender and non-cisgender members from India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh.

- They conducted 58 focus groups and 25 interviews with participants. They also interviewed 6 non-governmental organization (NGO) staff members for two hours each in four women's safety and LGBTQ+ NGOs tackling online abuse in South Asia.

- All ten researchers share diverse ethnicities, birth countries, religions, and sexualities, but share political solidarity on feminism and technology design within which we locate this research.

PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT AND MODERATION

▶ They recruited participants through a combination of recruitment agencies, NGOs, and personal contacts.

▶ They determined sample size based on ensuring representative coverage, balanced with recruitment resources available in each country.

▶ Participants ranged from 18 to 65 years old. All were mobile phone owners, with 177 smart phone owners and 22 feature phone owners, with 161 prepaid subscribers.

▶ Three-fourths of participants lived with their families, with an equal mix of nuclear families with spouse and children, nuclear families without children, and multi-generational families with parents, relatives, and/or in-laws ;one-fourth lived alone or with roommates.

Analysis and coding

Transcripts were coded and analyzed for patterns using an

inductive approach:

- ► Access to devices and technology usage

- ► Abusive incidents online

- ► abusers and perceived causes of online abuse

- ► strategies for coping with online abuse

- ► The role of formal and informal support systems in dealing with online abuse

Analysis and coding

- Numbers reported throughout the paper represent the percentage of participants who self-reported a personal abuse experience, harm, or coping practice, in a focus group or interview setting.

- Percentages are derived from coding each transcript for each individual's personal occurrences of abuse types, harms, and coping practices (for focus groups, each participant was coded individually).

Country-specific demographics & details

India:

103 participants in India included college students, housewives, domestic maids, village farm workers, IT professionals, bankers, small business owners, and teachers.

Pakistan:

52 participants in Pakistan included housewives, students, gym trainers, janitors, beauticians, teachers ,security professionals, and home tutors.

Bangladesh:

44 participants in Bangladesh included garment workers, housewives, teachers, medical doctors, engineers, and day laborers.

FINDINGS

▶ A majority of participants (72%) reported facing online abuse, and many narrated severe abuse incidents. Out of the remaining 28%, 7 participants explicitly reported not having faced any online abuse, and the rest did not mention any abuse incidents.

▶ South Asian women are not a singular group and these abuse experiences, impacts and resources vary across social class, age, sexual identity and community, and we attempt to underscore some of the variations.

Types of online abuse reported

Participants primarily reported three forms of abuse: cyberstalking, impersonation, and personal content leakage:

Cyberstalking (66%):

Cyberstalking involved participants receiving constant, unwanted contact from male strangers online. Cyberstalking was the single most common form of abuse reported, with 66% discussing at least one form of cyberstalking, and 5 distinct incidents from NGOs.

Friendship requests (55%):

"Once I got a friend request from a girl who said we met at an arts college event. So I became friends. Then she was messaging me everyday. Then I got a suspicion that she is a he. No girl will chat so much and send hearts. Then she said 'I love you'."

Types of online abuse reported

Participants primarily reported three forms of abuse: cyberstalking, impersonation, and personal content leakage:

Unwanted phone calls and SMS (34%):

"I get these calls a lot. Mainly after I recharge [top-up]my phone at the shop. It's so irritating. I tell them I am married, have a baby, but still they call. My father asks me, 'who is calling you so many times, is it a man'."

"Every time I take a taxi, I get 'good morning' or'I love you' messages. It disturbs [bothers] me."

Types of online abuse reported

Impersonation (15%).:

Impersonation was another frequent type of abuse reported by participants, with 15% reporting at least one type of impersonation threat, and 7 distinct incidents from NGOs. Impersonation was reported more commonly in Bangladesh (34%) and Pakistan (19%), compared to India (5%). Impersonation was more commonly reported by lower-income participants, younger participants, and sexual minorities.

Personal content leakages (14%):

"Sharing a girl's picture may not be a big deal for U.S. people, but a fully-clothed photo can lead to suicide here in conservative regions of Pakistan."

"I was feeling so guilty. I felt that every neighbor was laughing at me and started wondering what he has seen about me. It was terrifying."

Coping practices to deal with online abuse

To resolve online abuse, participants often sought support from family and friends, but rarely turned to online platforms or law enforcement for support.

Support from family and friends (47%)

Appealing to NGOs (7%) and the police (1%)

Reporting abuse to platforms (2%)

"To register a complaint you must bring the printouts or photos. So for a nude photo for which someone is blackmailing me, I have to give the printout to the investigation officer. Now that file can be placed on any desk or cupboard and seen by any officer as per his convenience."

Abuse types	Mechanisms	Harms	Coping practices
Cyberstalking (66%) Undesired contact from strangers on platforms. *IN: 73%, PK: 65%, BG: 50%*	• Friendship requests from strangers (55%) • Unwanted SMS and calls (34%)	• Self censorship and limited participation • Emotional damage • Physical violence	• Block requests • Limit information online • Use fake identities • Check for mutual trust
Impersonation (15%) Malicious likeness of a victim's identity, created or modified without consent. *IN: 5%, PK: 19%, BG: 34%*	• Synthetic porn (6%) • False profiles using a victim's identity (12%)	• Reputation damage • Emotional damage • Physical violence	• Proactively change profile photos to non-face images • Support from family and friends • Support from NGOs
Personal leakages (14%) Non-consensual exposure of interactions and content in unwanted social contexts. *IN: 7%, PK: 25%, BG: 18%*	• Non-consensual sharing of photos, conversations, and identity (14%)	• Reputation damage • Emotional damage • Coercive romantic involvement • Physical violence	• Support from family and friends • Support from NGOs • Support from police

Types of online abuse reported

CONCLUSION

They presented a qualitative study of online safety among 199 cisgender and non-cisgender people who identified as women and 6 NGO staff members, across a diverse socioeconomic spectrum in India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh.

They presented three major abuse types experienced by our participants, primarily on social media platforms: (i) cyberstalking,(ii) impersonation, and (iii) personal content leakages.

Their results show that online abuse was commonly experienced by the participants (72% experienced at least one abuse type) and created severe consequences such as reputation harm, emotional harm, coercive relations, and physical harm.

Given these results, we discussed opportunities, open questions, and challenges for technologists and policy makers to consider in advancing a gender-equitable Internet .

THANK YOU