



The Socio-Psychological Impact of Unwanted and Abusive Calls and Messages from Unknown Numbers on Young Women: A Study of Anxiety, Stress, and Emotional Distress and Social Consequences

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Abstract

This research paper explores the psychological and social consequences of telephone-based harassment in young women of the University of Sargodha. The sudden and uninvited calls or messages by anonymous persons disrupt the feeling of safety of the victims and eventually destabilize their emotional balance. Empirical evidence supports the presence of a strong correlation between the prevalence of intrusive contact and high rates of anxiety, psychosocial stress and social withdrawal. The percentage of affected persons that limit communication with peers is quite substantial and thus feels more isolated and less well in general. These challenges are further advanced by the lack of institutional support and awareness at the campus communities. The current rules and policies of online safety, as well as the policies of universities, often fail to cover the actualities of such harassment. The research, therefore, highlights the urgent need of the context-relevant protection measures and the revision of the policy to ensure psychological wellbeing and the development of secure communicative conditions among the learners.

Keywords: Phone Harassment, Psychological Well-Being, Anxiety, Social Isolation, University Students, Online Safety, Gender-Based Violence, Policy Response

Introduction

The digital age, where communication devices like smartphones and instant messaging apps have been growing in significance, has radically changed interpersonal connections, with young generations being affected by the influence the most. In Pakistan, the use of mobile phones has been almost universal and affects social interactions as well as personal relationships (Pakistan Telecommunication Authority, 2023). Nevertheless, the very tools that allow connecting and expressing also reveal the users, especially young women, to the new types of harassment in form of unwanted and invasive, and sometimes anonymous messages or calls. This shape of digital abuse has been underinvestigated in the academic research, despite its ever-growing popularity and severe psychological and social consequences.

The current research on the topic of digital harassment in Pakistan remains mostly focused on the issue of online harassment on the regular social media websites like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter (Shahid and Iqbal, 2020; Jamil and Mahmood, 2022). However, a harassment, which is organized with the help of personal means of contacts, i.e., text messages or telephone calls, is equally destructive but less apparent. Such

invasions can cause profound emotional distress, anxiety, and withdrawal in the community, as they are likely to cause in conservative societies, where cultural norms greatly value female decency and privacy (Mahmood, 2019). The fact that personal devices can be contacted by unknown people can cause anxiety and stress and disrupt the normal life of many victims, who are forced to limit their interactions with the rest of society or isolate themselves to prevent infection (Baig et al., 2022).

The recent studies have started to recognize the psychological health consequences of online harassment, especially in the case of university students (Khalid et al., 2021; Mehmood and Gul, 2020). It has been shown that continued exposure to intrusive forms of digital interaction is among the factors that lead to anxiety, depressive symptoms, and a sense of helplessness (Ashfaq et al., 2023). Nevertheless, the small amount of context-specific evidence corresponds with a lack of information on the lived experiences of young women in institutions of higher learning in the Pakistani context. Based on this, the proposed research will fill this gap through investigating the psychological and social impacts of phone-related harassment on female university students.

Placing the phenomenon into the cultural and educational framework of Pakistan, the study allows adding to the better comprehension of the intersection of gender, technologies, and social norms to define the digital vulnerability. It further highlights the extreme requirement of policy changes and institutional interventions to consider showcasing the students digital security and mental health. Finally, the article aims to offer a theoretical underpinning on how to create culturally responsive strategies to reduce the harassment and help victims in both academic and online environments.

Literature Review

Digital harassment is a phenomenon that has become extremely relevant in recent years as the widespread use of smartphones and means of online communication has increased a potential of connecting and abusing. Globally, empirical studies have identified digital harassment as a cause of adverse mental health effects, such as increased anxiety, depression, and social loneliness (Henry and Powell, 2018; Barlett et al., 2021). In South American communities, where a person cannot go online without a substantial impact on gender norms and social expectations, these effects can be even stronger (Haque and Tariq, 2020). Throughout the literature, it is always stressed that women, especially women associated with education institutions are the most vulnerable in such experiences and have to face both emotional and reputational damage.

Mobile technology in Pakistan has been accompanied by an increase in cases of harassment of women online and by phone (Pakistan Telecommunication Authority, 2023). Shahid and Iqbal (2020) also found out that 72 percent of surveyed young women had experienced one or more types of digital harassment, most often in the form of anonymous phone calls or text messages. On the same note, Mehmood and Gul (2020) have stated that female university students experience constant invasive digital contact, which leads to the emergence of increased psychological stress and changes in everyday communication patterns. These results shed light on the politically ambiguous nature of both digital and physical security of women in conservative cultures.

The body of global studies is large, and its focus is on harassment through social media, including Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter (Baig et al., 2022; Jamil and Mahmood, 2022). Nevertheless, there are a relatively small number of studies that look at harassment in more confidential communication environments like text messaging or phone calls modalities that can be more intimate and, therefore, more traumatizing. Ashfaq, Raza, and Hanif (2023) argue that this gap inadequately understands the seriousness of the so-called direct-contact digital harassment, which can have a more urgent psychological impact than the online harassment of an audience. Compared to blatant cyberbullying, subtle harassment is often not reported because of the cultural embarrassment and victim blaming (Mahmood, 2019).

In Pakistan, gendered digital experiences are intersected with the expectations of the society in terms of modesty, privacy and honor. According to Mahmood (2019), when it comes to women, even unimportant breaches of privacy like an unsolicited message have devastating emotional and social consequences. This

scenario explains why digital harassment to an extent breeds silence, self-censorship, and withdrawal. According to Hafeez, Saleem, and Abbas (2021), female students, who are habitual phone users or socialisers, do so as a coping mechanism, which, although protective in the short term, leads to isolation and reduced well-being.

Studies have also attributed digital harassment to disruption of studies and poor mental health in students. Exposure to constant harassment significantly raises psychological distress, decreases concentration, involvement, and peer relationships (Khalid, Bashir, and Rehman, 2021). Similarly, Baig et al. (2022) have found correlation of frequent harassment with anxiety and depression symptoms among urban Pakistan university students. These findings suggest that the emotional impact of digital harassment does not end with short-term pain, but on larger aspects of personal and academic lives.

Although laws and regulations like the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) 2016 of Pakistan are designed to control the problem of online harassment, their application is insufficiently covered, especially when it comes to anonymous or indirect contact (Rehman, 2022). In addition, the majority of the awareness strategies focus on the more evident type of social media abuse, overlooking the more insidious aspects of harassment via the phone calls or messages. According to Ashfaq et al. (2023), effective interventions have to be based on the lived experiences of the victims, combining policy change with institutional assistance and awareness tools.

To conclude, the literature indicates that harassment of young women via the phone in Pakistan is a poorly discussed but an urgent problem. The available literature indicates strong associations between online harassment and psychological distress, social isolation and diminished school attendance. However, the dynamics of the abuse of the form of private communication, in particular its cultural context, prevalence, and long-term effects, need a more in-depth empirical research. The research will fill that gap as it offers context-specific findings based on female Pakistani university students.

Methodology

The current study used a quantitative research design to test the relationship between telephone based harassing behaviors and psychological well-being amongst young female students of the University of Sargodha. The paper set out to outline the prevalence, nature and psychological impact of such harassment, especially focusing on anxiety, stress, emotional disturbance, and withdrawal.

Participants

The study involved 129 female students who were between 18 and 30 years old. Sample size has been chosen using stratified random sampling method, thus, representing the various academic departments and levels of study. The participants in each stratum were sampled randomly to reduce the bias of selection and increase sample representativeness. The data collection time was the period when all participants were enrolled students of the University of Sargodha.

Research Design and Instruments

The current research was based on cross-sectional survey design and the primary data collection instrument was the structured questionnaire. The questionnaire was split into two major parts; demographic factors and psychological tests. Age, department, academic year, and habits of using mobile phones were included. Generalized Anxiety Disorder Scale (GAD -7) was used to measure the symptoms of anxiety (Spitzer et al., 2006). Perceived stress Scale (PSS) was used to assess the level of perceived stress (Cohen et al., 1983). New variables were created to assess the frequency and nature of harassment (e.g., unwanted calls, threatening messages, anonymous contact, etc.) and self-reported alteration of social behavior (e.g., withdrawal, less frequent communication, etc.). Each of the scale-based items had a five-point Likert scale, with a range of 1 (Never) to 5 (Very Often) and thus allowing the respondent to express the degree or frequency of his/her

experiences.

Procedure

The data were obtained on the university grounds during two weeks. The subjects were notified of the purpose and ethical considerations of the study such as voluntary participation, confidentiality, and anonymity. The informed consent was provided by each participant before filling in the questionnaire. Data were collected through self-administered questionnaires with the researchers being present to help in clarifying question where there has to be.

Data Analysis

The coded data were analyzed using SPSS (Statistical Package to the Social Sciences), version 25. Frequencies, standard deviations, and means were calculated to give a summary of the responses of the participants. Pearson correlation and linear regression analyses were run to explore the interrelationships between the frequency of harassment and the psychological variables (anxiety, stress, social withdrawal); by doing so, it was possible to determine the degree and direction of relationships between the main variables.

Ethical Considerations

The research was conducted in accordance with the set ethical research standards that went hand in hand with the institutional review board. The confidentiality of the participants was carefully observed by covering all the identifying data. In addition, the participants were provided with psychosocial support mechanisms in case they experienced emotional distress whenever recollecting the experiences of harassment.

Finding

The current study provides an in-depth representation of the impacts of telephonic harassment on the emotional health, routine activities and academic engagement of young ladies studying at the University of Sargodha.

Demographic Overview

Out of the 129, most of the participants being 83% of the total population were aged between 18-22 years, which is the average population of undergraduates. More than two-thirds (approximately 67) of them lived in urban areas, with all respondents owning a personal mobile device. This mass access to mobile phones emphasizes the paramount position of digital communication in the social life of students and their vulnerability to possible digital threats.

Prevalence and Nature of Harassment

The statistics indicated that harassment via phone was a popular phenomenon among the participants. Over fifty percent of the participants indicated that they received unwanted or intrusive calls and messages, and almost a quarter of participants stated that such messages and calls were perpetrated by first-time or unidentified sources. Though the proportion of people exposed to overtly hostile and threatening material was lower, the proportion of people experiencing such content noted higher levels of emotional strain and distress. The issue of anonymity became a significant aspect of the increase in the perceived danger: more than 40% of participants said they would feel unsafe when contacted by anonymous persons. The lack of identifying or tracking the cause of harassment was one of the contributing factors to continuous anxiety and a feeling of helplessness.

Psychological and Emotional Effects

The authors discovered that there are severe psychological implications associated with the experience of

harassment. Almost half of the respondents stated that they were anxious about the possibility of being harassed and over a quarter suffered some sleep problems because of it. Themes that kept reoccurring were emotional exhaustion, worry, and preoccupation of personal safety. These affective reactions are indicative that harassment via mobile communication is not a minor annoyance but a severe stress factor on the psyche.

Behavioral and Social Impacts

There was also behavior change in reaction to repetitive harassment. Approximately, 25 percent of the interviewees evaded phone calls so that the risk of additional intrusion could be reduced. Approximately 22 percent decreased the numbers of their involvement in social activities, and about 29 percent cited their problems with focusing on academic activities. These results show that harassment does not only disrupt emotional well-being but also disrupts social connectedness and academic performance two important elements of student life.

Correlation Analysis

Finding of statistical significance between exposure to harassment and psychological variables:

Anxiety was moderately positively correlated with the frequency of harassment ($r = .46$, $p < .01$), that is, the higher the exposure the higher the level of anxiety.

Perceived stress also showed mediocre connection ($r = .42$, $p < .01$) meaning that harassment is an element that leads to enduring experiences of pressure and anxiety.

Emotional distress showed a significant correlation ($r = .38$, $p < .05$), which indicated that such experiences had a strong emotional impact.

It was found that social withdrawal had a moderate correlation ($r = .33$, $p < .05$) indicating that harassment pushes individuals into lowering their interaction and isolating themselves.

Discussion

This research study has shown that the unwanted phone messages and calls cause a great deal of psychological and social burdens to young women in Pakistan. This is compounded by the anonymity of perpetrators that increase fear and a feeling of vulnerability. This is very much in line with Stress and Coping Theory (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984) which implies that lack of ability to recognize or manage the stressor intensifies the emotional strain and compromises the coping ability. The accumulation of repeated cases of digital harassment worsens over time, undermining mental resilience and interfering with daily life activities, including academic activity and interpersonal relationships.

One of the most vivid trends that can be identified is the fact that, in most cases, the victims do not seek help and instead tend to withdraw into silence. This reaction is both entrenched distrust of institutional processes and it brings out a larger cultural environment in which stigmatization and victim-blaming dishearten open conversations. Isolation is further promoted by the absence of confidential, responsive and empathetic reporting systems. These results lead to systematic failures in educational, legal and technological systems which are supposed to safeguard women.

In turn, the problem is not within the field of the individual experiences, but it is a more general societal problem of gender inequality, vulnerability to digital coverage, and inactive institutions.

The findings highlight the significance of focusing on the problem of digital harassment with a holistic approach, covering both emotional support and awareness-raising measures and structural changes. Through admitting the interaction between the social and cultural barriers and the technological abuse, policymakers and educators can become more effective in their intervention approaches to make young women speak out and seek assistance without the fear of being stigmatized or victimized.

Conclusion

This research finds that phone harassment is an immense and extensive phenomenon that affects the emotional, psychological and social well being of young Pakistani women. The results underline that digital harassment is not a technological problem but a social and cultural challenge that interferes with the education, mental well-being and involvement of women in the public life. The study can add new insight to a field of research where empirical research is scarce by highlighting this aspect of the problem of technology-related abuse that is frequently ignored.

To handle this increasing concern, there is a need to have a co-ordinated and multi-level response. Schools, policy makers and telecommunication regulators have a role to play towards creating safer online spaces. Protection should not be limited to punitive laws but should also apply to preventive education, ready psychological help and reliable reporting mechanism. In the end, cross-sectoral collaboration, cultural change, and long-term policy implementation are all that is needed to establish digital safety in Pakistan as a woman. Safety is not the sole issue of accountability and empowerment that is essential in the online space, but gender equality and digital inclusion as well.

Recommendations

Introduce awareness and digital safety classes in the university.

The system on personal reports might start with trusted employees addressing issues. Guided conversations can be used as assistance to follow.

Renewing anti-harassment regulations and regulations online may result in superior results in collaboration with the increased level of connection with phone network operators.

Introduce online security in school curriculums.

Introduce countrywide campaigns that diminish embarrassment around speaking up and bringing people to justice by applying the law. When they finally begin to shift they do not start with noise but with clarity.

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