



Cyber sexual harassment in a state university in Zimbabwe: Voices of female students

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Abstract

Social media has become a very popular means of communication between and among people as Internet use has increased globally. This means of communication has led to an upsurge in negative online behaviours such as cyber sexual harassment. Cyber sexual harassment as a negative online behaviour adversely impacts on university students' well-being and interferes with their ability to learn. Whilst there has been intensive research on offline sexual harassment, there is a paucity of empirical examination of cyber sexual harassment especially among female university students. Addressing cyber sexual harassment in universities is important and makes the object of this research. This case study research therefore investigated female undergraduate students' experiences of cyber sexual harassment. This is a study in which voices of cyber sexual harassment victims were captured through interviewing undergraduate female student participants. Qualitative data was collected from in-depth interviews with purposely selected undergraduate female student participants. Twenty undergraduate female students of the 2022 academic year at a selected university were purposively sampled for the study. Cyber sexual harassment experiences of participants emerging from the qualitative interview exercise were: receiving explicit images and videos; being requested for sex and nude pictures by perpetrators and being subjected to sexually explicit hate speeches. In view of these findings the recommendations of the study are that: awareness programmes should be mounted in the university to inform students about the dangers of cyber sexual harassment; there is need to educate students about their rights and dangers obtaining in the cyber space; anti-cyber sexual harassment programmes tailored for university students may be a step in the right direction; the need to encourage conversation about cyber sexual harassment within the university community cannot be overemphasized.

KEYWORDS: Sexual harassment, cyber sexual harassment, online harassment, digital harassment, internet, university students.



Introduction

Internet use has grown throughout the world. The Internet has enabled us to connect with others, share valuable information and raise awareness on issues of concern to us as people, among other benefits. The Internet, indeed, has revolutionised the way things are done. However, in as much as the Internet has brought into play convenience to everyday life that has never been thought of, it also has provided a fertile ground for antisocial behaviours like cyber-sexual harassment, a type of violence that occurs through electronic media (Li, 2006). Existing research shows that the Internet has also contributed to cyber-sexual harassment. Some of the key findings indicate that cyber-sexual harassment has become so pervasive in the digital spaces that it is often viewed as the ‘norm’ by the student population who appear willing to tolerate it, rather than take actions to address it (Haslop, Rowke, & Southern, 2021).

Not much research has examined sexual harassment in an Internet context (Schenk, 2008). Cyber-sexual harassment is an issue that is emerging with a potential to adversely impact on victims who experience it. In the United Kingdom, there is a dearth of empirical research about the extent, nature and impact of online harassment in students’ peer-to-peer interactions on university campuses (Cowie, 2017). In universities in Canada, online-sexual harassment has continued to be a pervasive force (Rangaswami & Gevargiz, 2021). In Australia, more than one in five students experienced online sexual harassment in 2016 (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2017).

In Zimbabwe, cyber-sexual harassment of female undergraduate students has been underreported. A recent study on cyberbullying in higher and tertiary education institutions by Sibanda (2020) focused on forms, extent, effects and contributing factors to the phenomenon. Sibanda (2020) revealed that cyberbullying was very high in these institutions. The phenomenon affected students in their relations on campus. The main contributing factor being gender issues.

In the context of Zimbabwe universities, apart from Sibanda’s (2020) study, knowledge and understanding of the phenomenon is limited given that not much research has been conducted to examine sexual harassment online, digitally or in cyber space. This study, therefore, endeavours to study cyber-sexual harassment experiences of female undergraduate students in a university environment in a rigorous way capturing their lived experiences through interviews.

What is cyber-sexual harassment?

Cyber-sexual violence refers to a form of harmful sexually aggressive behaviour committed with the facilitation of the internet. The phenomenon has to do with sending of sexual messages, comments, posts or images to a targeted victim. These sexually aggressive or harassing images or texts are delivered through the use of digital mediums that include mobile phone and other electronic communication devices (Powell, Scott & Henry, 2018; Reed, Wrong & Ray, 2019; Rangaswami & Gevargiz, 2021).

Cyber-sexual harassment is repeated behaviour intended by the perpetrators to scare, anger, or shame intended victims. The messages, images and comments lead to many negative emotional consequences. Victims are left with feelings of awkwardness, discomfort and lack of safety. The mental health of victims can also be undermined. By and large, cyber-sexual harassment as a form of abuse is unwanted and unwelcome (Champion, Oswald, Khera & Pederson, 2022).

There is concurrence between Arafa, Elbahrawe, Saber, Ahmed & Abbas (2018) and European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) who spell out the forms of cyber-sexual harassment as: unwanted sexually explicit emails and text messages; inappropriate and or offensive advances on social networking websites or internet chat rooms; threats of physical and or sexual violence by e-mail, text or online messages; hate messages, that is language that denigrates, insults, threatens or targets an individual based on her identity or gender.

Online disinhibition effect model of cyber sexual harassment

Online disinhibition effect model forms the basis of the study. Suler (2004) and Schenk (2008) explain the occurrence of cyber sexual harassment. The model argues that perpetrators of cyber-sexual harassment feel lack of restraint when they are communicating in an online platform unlike when they are communicating in-person. The Internet provides perpetrators with the opportunity to act out much more than they would do in-person (Suler, 2004).

Online disinhibition effect tends to appear in two different ways for perpetrator internet users. These are benign disinhibition and toxic disinhibition. Benign disinhibition has to do with sharing personal things about one's self, for example, emotions, fears, wishes, acts of kindness and generosity. On the other hand, toxic disinhibition has to do with compulsion and acting out with a personal growth for example, rude pornography, anger, hatred, threats, looking at pornography among others (Suler, 2004). What is important to note is that

a perpetrator is less likely to exhibit this malevolent behaviour outside of the Internet.

The model refers to dissociative anonymity as a factor which explains the online disinhibition effect by describing how being anonymous online provides a feeling of protection from the consequences of behaving in a malevolent manner. Sexual harassment perpetrators dissociate themselves from their identity when online, attributing how they behave there to an online identity without link to their offline identity (Suler, 2004) In other words, dissociative anonymity allows perpetrator Internet users to separate their in-person life style and identity from the identity they create on the Internet. Therefore, through this factor, the perpetrator may feel less vulnerable about self-disclosing and acting out (Schenk, 2008).

The model also refers to invisibility, a factor in which the cyber-sexual harassment perpetrators are not visible to the victim physically. They do not worry about verbal and other body cues. The invisibility factor enables these perpetrators to visit sites and do things on the Internet that they would not do in a face-to-face encounter with the victims. Even though one's true identity may be known among other Internet users, being physically invisible still amplifies online disinhibition (Schenk, 2008).

The model also identifies the non-physical nature of online spaces as a factor leading to cyber sexual harassment. This factor leads perpetrators to think that the normal social etiquette rules that apply in face-to-face everyday life do not apply in the virtual space (Suler, 2004). Online environments, therefore, become places where one can escape into to act out that which they would not dare do in the physical environment. The availability of an online platform, therefore, becomes a vehicle facilitating cyber sexual harassment.

Barak (2005) proceeds to categorise the model into four specific parts. These are; active verbal sexual harassment, passive verbal-sexual harassment; active graphic gender and passive graphic gender harassment. However, in this study only two categories are examined. These are active verbal-sexual harassment and active graphic-gender harassment. Active verbal harassment entails offensive sexual images directed towards the victim. The examples are gender humiliating comments, sexual remarks, and dirty jokes among others. Active graphic gender harassment occurs when erotic and pornographic pictures or videos are intentionally sent through email and peer to peer messenger programmes.

It is through the anonymity, invisibility and non-physical nature of online spaces among other factors that enable cyber sexual harassers to act out in such negative ways as to harm other Internet users. Barak (2005) further argues that the Internet creates a lack of accountability, unclear legal boundaries, invisible authorities, and insignificant sanctions. Therefore, cyber-sexual harassers act as they like without any restraints. Given that universities are male dominated spaces, it is not surprising that in these institutions deviant male norms of behaviour are likely to be high.

Studies on cyber-sexual harassment

Whilst several studies have indicated the omnipresence of sexual harassment offline, however few studies deeply examined the experiences of undergraduate students online. In fact, sexual harassment has become even more rampant online recently. A study by Mergan and Krysik, (2012) established that 43.3% of college students experience online sexual harassment. This study points out that types of harassment vary from stalking, identity theft and revenge pornography, exposure of personal and private information and threats of violence among others. Another study has revealed the repercussions endured by victims of harassment as emotional and health problems especially by female students (Van Royen, Poels, & Vandebosch, 2016).

As pointed out above, in universities in Canada, online sexual harassment has continued to be a pervasive force (Rangaswami & Gevargiz, 2021). Various technological mediums have been used by male perpetrators to sexually harass female student victims. Mediums that have been employed to sexually abuse victims include Facebook, emails, phone calls and text messages, among others.

In Australia, 20% of the students experienced online sexual harassment in 2016. The online harassment ranged from repeated and inappropriate advances on email, social networking websites and internet chat rooms, and sexually explicit e-mails or short message service (SMS) messages.

The specific behaviours in this particular study included repeated and inappropriate advances on email, social networking websites and internet rooms, sexually explicit emails or SMS messages or any other unwelcome conduct of a sexual nature that occurred online. The forms of sexual harassment experienced by female students varied from repeated requests for dates, receiving inappropriate pictures of a sexual nature, to threats of sexual assault.

By and large women victims were more than twice as likely as men to have been sexually harassed online (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2017).

Although internet has revolutionised the way things are done, it has provided ground for potential victims to be open to sexual harassment attack online. Cyber sexual harassment has created an environment in which violence against women and girls is 'normalised'. Technology based sexual harassment behaviours emanating from the studies done so far can be broadly categorised into two. These are:

- Sexual harassment including inappropriate pictures and comments of a sexual nature sent via technology, and
- Image based abuse – intimate or sexual photos or videos being shared online without consent, either to humiliate or shame someone, or for the 'entertainment' of others. Image-based harassment is viewed as a situation when intimate or sexual photos or videos are shared online without consent, either to humiliate or shame someone, or for entertaining others (Australian High Commission, 2017, pp. 68-69)

Cyber sexual harassment perpetrators hide behind fake accounts on Facebook to maintain anonymity. These accounts are primarily used to post sexually explicit comments and rape threats. In a study in Canada, cyber-sexual harassment perpetrators engaged in name-calling and labelling their victims as prostitutes (Rangaswami & Gevargiz, 2021). Perpetrators also directed sexually explicit hate comments to their victims' specific body parts such as external genitalia and breasts.

In a study in Egypt, cyber sexually harassed female students responded mostly by anger, fear, hatred, and sorrow towards the harassment incidents (Araf, Elbahrawe, Saber, Ahmed, & Abbas, 2018). This study also revealed that female student victims devised tactics to counter the backlashes. These included filtering and restricting the comments on their Facebook pages among other tactics.

In Zimbabwe, as pointed out earlier, a study carried out by Sibanda (2020) focused on forms, extent, effects and contributing factors to cyberbullying in higher and tertiary education institutions. Main finding was that cyberbullying was rife in these institutions. Cyberbullying came in forms of phone calls, e-mails, text messages, video clips and online chats. Students were affected in their relationships on and off campus and they also faced mental health

problems. Contributing factors to this form of harassment were identified as gender issues, cultural and or ethnic differences, general dislike and some taking it as an online game.

Although research outside Zimbabwe has indicated the omnipresence of sexual harassment on the internet, few studies deeply examined the experiences of female undergraduate students online. In fact, at the time of reporting, there was no study to the knowledge of the researcher having been carried out in Zimbabwe on cyber-sexual harassment experiences of female undergraduate students. Researches conducted so far have revealed that female students bear the brunt of cyber-sexual harassment more than their male student counterparts (Mergan & Krysik, 2012; Carly, 2020; Sibanda, 2020).

Globally, from the studies conducted so far, cyber-sexual harassment could be categorised into four types. These include Non-consensual sharing of intimate images and videos. In this type of cyber-sexual harassment, a person's sexual image and video is shared or taken without consent. Exploitation, coercion and threats is the other type in which person receives sexual threats, being coerced to participate in sexual behaviour online, or blackmailed with sexual consent. Sexualised bullying, which is designed to make a person feel sexualised, discriminated based on gender or sexuality, humiliated and threatened. Unwanted sexualisation in which a person receives unwelcome sexual requests, comments and content (Rangaswami, & Gevargiz, 2021; Carly, 2020; Mergan & Krysik, 2012).

Methodology

Given that the study aimed at exploring the digital sexual harassment experiences of female undergraduate students at a state university in Zimbabwe, a qualitative research approach was employed. The research was a very sensitive one given that it was of a sexual nature and personal to the victims.

An exploratory research design was adopted for the study due to the fact that there are very few studies conducted on this area in the literature reviewed. The study therefore aimed at providing more insights into the experiences of cyber sexual harassment in universities in Zimbabwe. Female undergraduate students constituted the population of the study. In the study 20 undergraduate female students of the 2022 academic year were purposively sampled.

Purposive sampling is usually employed when a researcher wants to discover, understand and gain insight into a phenomenon such as one under study as

noted by Meriam & Tisdell, (2015). Therefore, the researcher had to select a sample from which the most could be learned. This sampling procedure was used to explain sexual harassment perpetrated through digital means. Female undergraduate students who were cyber-sexual harassment victims were chosen as they were critical for the study. The sample selected possessed rich information for the study.

In-depth qualitative interviews were carried out with participants who had experienced cyber-sexual harassment in their peer-to-peer interactions. Prospective participants responded to an e-mail requesting female students' participation in the study on cyber-sexual harassment experiences at the university.

In this type of study, interviews help in research data and appreciate the respondents' feelings and views. Semi-structured interviews were carried out to gather data from the respondents on a one-to-one basis. A digital voice recorder was used during the interview process after the respondents had consented to capture their voices. Each interview session lasted about 30 minutes. Collected data was transcribed.

The objective of data analysis is to make sense of the data (Meriam & Tisdell, 2015). As such data analysis was done to consolidate, synthesise and interpret the information on cyber-sexual harassment experiences of victims obtained during the interviews (Meriam & Tisdell, 2015). Thematic content analysis method was employed to analyse the data. Findings were coded to enable the sorting and organising data into meaningful categories. In qualitative research, coding is essentially the process in which one labels and organises findings collected in order to identify different themes and relationships between them (Medolyan, 2020).

Approval to carry out the study was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee of the target public university. The researcher observed informed consent by appraising the participants about the background, and aim of the study, and benefits derived therefrom. Anonymity was also observed as no names were captured during the data collection process.

To ensure the comfort of respondents during interviews, they were informed of the purpose of the study before the interview session began. The interviewees were assured that the interview questions were optional, meaning that if they felt they could not respond to a given question they were free not to answer.

Furthermore, the interviewees were given interview numbers to ensure their safety and anonymity.

Research on technology facilitated sexual harassment of female undergraduate students in universities in Zimbabwe is in short supply. Universities in Zimbabwe currently promote and facilitate online learning. Since 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic intensified the need to conduct online teaching and learning. In the process of using the Internet for learning, students prone to malevolent behaviour misused technology to traumatise other students online. Therefore, whilst the issue of sexual harassment in universities has increased tremendously, there is not much research carried out to examine cyber-sexual harassment of female undergraduate students in these institutions.

Only undergraduate female university students known to have been victims of cyber-sexual harassment were respondents in the study. Given that the study focused solely on self-reports of female undergraduate students' cyber-sexual harassment experiences, they could have over or under reported their experiences.

This study, therefore, hopes to guide future initiatives to tackle cyber-sexual harassment with the ultimate goal of improving university learning environments. This study, therefore, sought to examine the cyber-sexual harassment experiences of female undergraduate students in a Zimbabwe university campus. The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. Which forms of cyber sexual harassment do undergraduate female students experience at the university?
2. How do perpetrators cyber-sexually harass victims and using which social network platforms?
3. How do cyber-sexually harassed female students cope after experiencing cyber-sexually harassment?

Results

The purpose of the study was to augment the body of literature on cyber-sexual harassment especially as it relates to institutions of higher learning. The interviews were carried out in order to understand the female students' lived realities in so far as their cyber-sexual harassment experiences were concerned. The idea was to get them to unravel and expose, their cyber-sexual harassment experiences given that this experience was one of the most deeply personal, sensitive and confidential issues of their lived experiences.

Receiving explicit images and videos, requesting for sex and nude pictures and sexually explicit hate speeches were the main sub-themes that emerged from the study.

Receiving explicit images and videos

Receiving explicit images and videos as a form of online-sexual harassment occurred in three main forms. These included sending of explicit images and videos to the victim; sending of nude images to the victims and sending of sexually charged jokes to the victims.

On sending of explicit images and videos to the victims, respondents' excerpts below bear testimony:

One of the male students in the same study group with me sent me disturbing pictures of male genitals, which I could suspect could have been his, several times. It was disgusting to say the least. I was not only shocked, but, disturbed and embarrassed as well (Interviewee 1).

I had a male friend, we used to work together on how to tackle assignments in all our modules from Level 1 to level 2.1. When we were in Level 2.2, he sent me images of male genitals. I could only guess it could have been his genitals in the pictures. These images were unwelcome and unwanted to say the least (Interviewee 7).

When I got to the university for the first time as a first year, a senior male student who was in level 2.1 assisted me to carry my luggage from the bus stop into the university campus. He asked for my phone number. I gave him the number. He told me that if I faced any challenges at the university, he was ready to assist me. After about three weeks at campus, he sent to my phone an image of a penis, probably his (Interviewee 10).

I had a boyfriend I fell in love with. Once in a while we used to engage in sexual intercourse. One of these sexual intercourse encounters was recorded without my knowledge. When the relationship went bad the sexual encounters went viral (Interviewee 16).

My nude pictures were posted on pornographic sites when our relationship had gone bad (Interviewee 9).

Female students in this study were exposed to active graphic cyber-sexual harassment after a relationship had turned sour as alluded to by Barrack (2005). The male students whose egos had been deflated could not stomach the rejection and decided to revenge by posting the sex videos with a view to hurt the victims.

The above behaviours by perpetrators were unsolicited by victims. The victims were left with feelings of surprise, shock, and in complete disgust. The

perpetrators hid behind the anonymity provided by the Internet (Suler, 2004). Such perpetrators could continue to harass the female undergraduate students' victims with impunity, especially in the absence of measures, policies or rules against digital sexual harassment.

Receiving requests of sex and nude images from perpetrators

This study showed that perpetrators requested the victims to send them nude pictures of themselves as well as requesting sex as evidenced by the excerpts below:

A group mate in level 4.1 sent me pornographic videos. I told him I was not comfortable with that kind of behaviour. He stopped sending such videos thereafter (Interviewee 3).

A colleague who became close to me as we went for university sports competitions together on a number of occasions surprised me when he requested me to send him an image of my breasts (Interviewee 12).

One of the digital sexual perpetrators requested me to strip naked for him online (Interviewee 5).

Requests of that nature online showed that the cyberspace provided a platform where perpetrators boldly engaged in cyber-sexual harassment hiding their identity. These behaviours are exhibited in the environment provided by virtual reality. The perpetrators feel safe to harass victims using technology. It should be noted that this is something they may not have attempted to do in non-online situations.

Posting online offensive sexual comments and videos

A male student at the university, who happened to be a member of the Student Representative Council, approached me several times trying to establish a love relationship with me without success. He ended up posting my personal details online saying I am available to have sex with anybody interested (Interviewee 19).

'You have dropping buttocks and dropping breasts' was a comment about me posted online by a male student I did not have any relationship with. This offensive sexual comment did not go down well with me when I got to know about it (Interviewee 4).

One of the male students has a tendency of posting on WhatsApp that female students at the institution are slay queens or campus prostitutes (Interviewee 11).

I was sexually assaulted by one of the male students whilst the assault was being filmed. The footage was uploaded on the Internet and distributed to his friends. I felt emotionally strained and traumatised. My integrity and my character were questioned by those who had access to this exposé (Interviewee 20).

One of our sexual encounters with my boyfriend was recorded without my knowledge. When our relationship ended, when he did not want it to end, the sexual encounter went viral (Interview 12).

Recording of a female student in a sexual encounter without their knowledge let alone consent and sharing of the video on-line, and the video going viral, is an example of a lived reality of female students suffering on-line. The excerpts above show that female students are subjected to both active verbal sexual harassment and active graphic sexual harassment in the cyber space.

Body shaming victims

Body shaming victims is another form of digital sexual harassment common on-line. This is evidenced by the following excerpt:

I had an interpersonal relationship with a male student harasser. We used to share learning material with him. So, he had my phone number. One day I received from him a WhatsApp message saying "You have big buttocks and a big stomach." This male student shamed and badmouthed my body when I had not provoked him at all (Interviewee 4).

Evidence of a close relationship between male student harassers and female victims is represented in the excerpt. There is hate speech associated with sexual harassment connotations in the above excerpt. The excerpt has language that is denigrating and insulting. The interpersonal relationship between the two created a space allowing for inappropriate and sexually harassing message.

When the respondents were asked whether they had reported to management their cyber-sexual harassment experiences, most of them indicated that they had not bothered to do so as they kept the abuses to themselves. Some of them thought management would not do anything to address the issue. Quin (2015) says that perpetrators tend to act in ways that they would normally not because they believe the Internet affords them the benefit of anonymity.

Online platforms prone to sexual harassment activities

Responses such as 'He sent the videos to my WhatsApp inbox' and 'we had exchanged contacts, so we were chatting on WhatsApp' were given as evidence of use of this platform. The WhatsApp social media platform was the cheapest and most accessible platform for the nefarious activities, where sexual harassment content was sent. The most harassment towards them, as the majority indicated, occurred on the WhatsApp platform. WhatsApp is mostly used by perpetrators who had interpersonal relationships with their victims as most of the material

shared with the individuals should have each other's contact details or at least the sender should have the phone number of the receiver. Over and above the dominant use of WhatsApp, Twitter, Facebook and Instagram were also used by male student harassers to pounce on their victims, however not as frequently as was the case with the WhatsApp platform.

Coping strategies for victims

Victims of cyber-sexual harassment adopted a couple of coping strategies. These included the victim ignoring the perpetrator, blocking the perpetrator and confronting the harasser. On ignoring the perpetrator respondents shared their experiences as illustrated below:

When the male student sent an image of his [purported] external genitalia to me via WhatsApp, I just kept quiet for him to see that I had not liked it and he stopped sending to me such images thereafter (Interviewee 6).

I just kept quiet for him to see that I did not like it and he stopped (Interviewee 11).

I wanted to minimize areas of friction. I just needed to study in peace, get my degree and go in peace. So, reporting the incidents was not necessary (Interviewee 8).

I was not sure whether I would be believed or taken seriously if I reported the harassment (Interviewee 12).

I did not report, although it bothered me. I felt like it would be treated as a trivial matter (Interviewee 15).

The female student victims completely ignored the perpetrators as a coping strategy. This could have been a way of comforting themselves. It could also be due to least expecting that kind of behaviour from students they were learning with or they had been shocked by the behaviour. On blocking the perpetrator from making further contact, one of the respondents remarked:

The male student requested for a sexual encounter with me through WhatsApp several times. I was disgusted and I blocked him (Interview 8).

Blocking the perpetrator was a strategy intended to extinguish the malevolent behaviour by the victim. It also goes to show that the victim had the courage and audacity to block the perpetrator as a coping mechanism. On confronting the perpetrator as a coping strategy one of the respondents remarked:

The male student sent me an image of [his] naked body on a number of occasions. I felt the need to stop this. I confronted him and told him in a very clear way that the practice should stop. I never received such images thereafter (Interviewee 13).

The excerpt above shows that the victim was becoming incensed by the images being posted to her. The victim could no longer endure the malevolent behaviour and gathered the courage to confront the perpetrator and told him to stop the behaviour rather than be traumatised and continue to suffer in silence. Other victims also found it easy to share their predicaments with their friends as a coping strategy. They were reluctant to report the behaviours to management. When victims do not trust the system, they do not report such incidents to management. This could be due to the thinking that they may not be believed or taken seriously.

Discussion

The study sought to find out cyber-sexual harassment experiences of undergraduate female students at a state university. The study found out that technology provides the cyber space and tools to sexually harass female students in the university. Cyber-sexual harassment was found to be taking place at the University under study. The forms of cyber sexual harassment taking place at the institution included receiving explicit images and videos; soliciting sex and nude pictures by perpetrators from the victims; sending sexually explicit jokes by perpetrators to the victims and posting online offensive sexual comments (hate speech) about the victims. The study found out that male students abused female students on-line and used the internet to get back at them if the relationship went bad.

The social network platforms through which the victims were subjected to cyber sexual harassment included Instagram, WhatsApp, Twitter and Facebook. However, the mostly used platform by perpetrators was WhatsApp.

Most perpetrators had interpersonal relationships with victims prior to the relationships going bad. Evidence of close relationship between the harasser and the victim was shown in the hate speeches that were directed by perpetrators on victims. This was evidence of male student perpetrators objectifying female students, abusing and discarding them thereafter.

Male students whose ego had been deflated after the relationships had gone bad could not stomach the rebuff and proceeded to revenge by posting the sex videos with a view to hurting the victims. The cyber-sexually harassed female student victims were surprised, shocked, and in complete disgust. The perpetrators hid behind the anonymity provided by the Internet (Suler, 2004). In

the absence of mechanisms against digital sexual harassment, the perpetrators could continue to harass the victims with impunity.

Perpetrators requested for sex and asked for nude pictures from the victims. Requests of that nature on-line showed that the cyberspace provided a platform where perpetrators boldly engaged in cyber sexual harassment hiding their identity. This is more so given the anonymity provided by virtual reality. The perpetrators felt safe to harass victims using technology. In the absence of measures against online sexual harassment, perpetrators would persistently and continuously harass the female student victims with impunity. This is something perpetrators may not have attempted to do in non-online situations. It leads into the explanations Suler (2004) and Quin (2015) noted that perpetrators tend to act in ways that they normally would not because they believe the Internet affords them the benefit of anonymity given that these behaviours did not occur interpersonally. Furthermore, even if their identities were known by the victims, being physically invisible still amplified online disinhibition (Schenk, 2008).

The coping strategies employed by victims to deal with cyber-sexual harassment when it occurred, included ignoring the perpetrator completely; blocking the perpetrator; or confronting the perpetrator. A few victims reported to the Dean of Students. Yet, others had to seek social support especially from friends. The harassment negatively impacted on them. Victims were left with feelings of shock and disgust by the harassment. Furthermore, these victims did not report most of the provocations to management. Some kept the abuses to themselves. These victims were neither bold nor assertive.

Victims who felt like sharing their abusive experiences found it easy to confide in friends. It would appear victims did not trust university authorities given that when the system is not trusted victims tend not to report. Victims indicated that even if they were to report, chances were that they would not be believed or taken seriously by management. This dovetails with what the Australian Human Rights Commission (2017) observed that cyber-sexual harassment victims did not believe that their experiences were serious enough to warrant making a report or did not know how or where to report.

Conclusion

The study has provided evidence that undergraduate female students experience many forms of cyber-sexual harassment. Students have embraced technological advances in their learning. It is also imperative that these students be in a position to recognise malevolent behaviour that takes place through the

use of technology. This becomes an important step in addressing cyber-sexual harassment in universities.

The cyber-sexual harassment victims are supposed to benefit from use of technology for their learning. However, they are at risk of experiencing cyber-sexual harassment as they use these technologies.

Universities are a critical part of modern society for teaching and learning. They are also a place where new generations of leaders will emerge. What should be guarded against is accepting and normalising cyber-sexual harassment behaviour. Assessing the safety of virtual space is more important than ever, particularly for groups like female undergraduate students who are most often subjected to cyber sexual harassment. In fact, there should be no space for cyber-sexual harassment against undergraduate female students in the digital world.

Recommendations

Given that cyber-sexual harassment does occur in the university and that it interferes with the learning of female students in particular, it is of critical importance for universities to mitigate incidences of this phenomenon. The university as an institution has a duty of affording care to all students who are its critical stakeholder by creating an enabling learning environment. In view of this, the following recommendations are made:

- The need to increase university accountability on cyber-sexual harassment cannot be overemphasised.
- Mounting cyber-sexual harassment prevention programmes tailored for university students may counter fight cyber-sexual harassment.
- Digital awareness can provide a valuable direction for students as they learn. Awareness programmes have to be embarked on with a view to informing university students in general and female undergraduate students in particular about the deleterious consequences of exposure to cyber sexual harassment. All this being done to encourage and promote positive online behaviour and improve learning outcomes.
- There is need to encourage conversation about cyber sexual harassment within the university community in general, and among female, and male undergraduate students in general.
- There should be very clear and specific policies for university websites and online services when it comes to online communication. Clarity of policies surrounding cyber sexual harassment and swift and consistent application of these policies cannot be overemphasised.

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