

Harassment Experiences of University-going Female Facebook Users in Bangladesh

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[Abstract: Cyber-harassments on social networking sites have become an everlasting issue in present situation and women using Facebook have been found as the victim of these harassments (Choja & Nelson, 2016). Intended to identify the harassment patterns on university-going female Facebook users of Bangladesh by taking the Muted Group Theory and the Standpoint Theory as theoretical frameworks, this descriptive study has surveyed 307 female university-going Facebook users from five universities of Bangladesh through online. Findings of the survey show that 61.9% of the university-going female Facebook users of Bangladesh is being victims of different types of harassments on Facebook in different frequencies by different types of people according to their relation with them. Moreover, 84.21% of them have never taken any steps to stop these harassments, mostly because they do not know where to seek help and what is the actual procedure. Findings of the survey also portray the lack of confidence and communication gap between victims of these types of harassments and law enforcing agencies of the country.]

Key-words: harassment on Facebook, sexual harassment, cyberbullying, cybercrime, universities of Bangladesh

1. Introduction

Internet is spreading rapidly all over the world since its invention and it is considered as an agent of change in personal, social and international level. The increasing use of internet as a tool of communication has changed the interaction patterns of people (Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008). Though the reason behind the increasing popularity and use of different forms of

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communication instead of any single medium is so far unclear (Quan-Haase & Young, 2010), Social Networking Sites (SNS) are continuously attracting academic researchers to have more emphasis on this sector due to its regularly increasing popularity, use and reach (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). The reason behind the uprising popularity of SNS may be because these SNSs are the platform where the youth get the opportunity to present themselves as they want to be seen by others (Oberst et al., 2016). And Facebook is considered as the most popular social networking site among many of them (Fuchs, 2014).

On the other hand, harassment on Facebook users have been analyzed in various studies and misbehaviors like bullying, harassment and other inappropriate behavior are now considered as a very common phenomenon in various social media sites (Geach & Haralambous, 2009; Lyndon et al., 2011). This study has tried to discover the nature of harassments currently present on university-going female Facebook users of Bangladesh as there are a considerable number of youths who actively use Facebook; the number was 44.7 million till January 2022 (Statista, 2022).

With unfolding the nature and various kinds of harassments on university-going female Facebook users of Bangladesh, this study has tried to find out the people who are usually behind these harassments, the possible causes behind these harassments and the possible ways to resist these harassments according to female Facebook users.

2. Operational Definition of Concepts

Two concepts of this research topic are needed to be defined according to the goals and purposes of this research. They are,

- **Harassment:** Harassment means any kind of behavior in Facebook or related to Facebook by anybody which is unwanted to a specific woman who uses Facebook.
- **University-going female Facebook user:** The users of Facebook who are female as their sexual identity and were attending any university of Bangladesh as student during the period of current study.

3. Literature Review

3.1. Facebook, Its Users and Bangladesh

Bangladesh is experiencing rapid growth of internet users for last several years (Haque, 2019). Number of social media users is also growing ‘melodramatically’ in the country (Siddik & Rahi, 2020). Facebook is one of these social networking sites or platforms where different media,

information and communication technologies are integrated as well as other social networking site to allow describing its users, their connection and communication among users (Fuchs, 2014). Four Harvard students, Mark Zuckerberg, Eduardo Saverin, Dustin Moskovitz and Chris Hughes founded Facebook in the year 2004 (Fuchs, 2014). It became a public company in 2012 and describes advertising as its revenue generating source (Fuchs, 2014).

According to Boyd and Ellison (2007, p. 211), Social Networking Sites are the sites,

...(that) allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. The nature and nomenclature of these connections may vary from site to site.

Facebook has 2.91 billion monthly active users and 1,93 billion daily active users, most of the active Facebook users use it through mobile phone, which is 2.75 billion in number (Omnicores, 2022). As per the statistics, among all Facebook users, 44% are female and 56% are male, users between age of 25 to 35 and between 18 to 24 years are the two biggest demographic groups on Facebook and users aged 65+ are the smallest (Omnicores, 2022).

Studies show that 85 to 90% of college students use Facebook (Hargittai, 2007). Jones and Fox (2009) states that a study of Pew Internet and American Life Project have found that 67 to 75% of college-aged youth (not necessarily college students) use social networking sites (cited in Junco, 2012). Smith and Caruso (2010) state that among 36,950 students of 126 U.S. and one Canadian university, 90% of them use social networking sites and 97% of them use Facebook; and they are actively engaged in this site on daily basis (cited in Junco, 2012).

Nadkarni and Hofmann (2012) have proposed that users want to fulfill their two needs by using Facebook. They are 'the need to belong', which is fulfilled by the demographic and cultural factors and 'the need for self-presentation', where neuroticism, narcissism, shyness, self-esteem and self-worth are the contributing force. These contributing forces are similar to the result of the study of Ryan and Xenos (2011), where they mentioned about neuroticism, loneliness, shyness and narcissism as features expressed by the users of facebook. Grimmelmann (2008) argues that people use Facebook to share information about them. Another study argues that users interact through Facebook message to increase in bridging their social capital

(Burke et al., 2011). Zhang et al (2011) find six aspects of gratification of Facebook users insist them to use the site; they are social surveillance, entertainment, recognition, emotional support, network extension and maintenance. Making new friends and locating old friends are also two vital reasons for using Facebook (Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008).

In a study on female Facebook users, result shows that ‘lonely’ users expressed information about their personal life, relationship, address than ‘connected’ users and ‘connected’ users share their views in Facebook wall more than ‘lonely’ users (Al-Saggaf & Nielsen, 2014). Another study states that female users present themselves in Facebook in a less gender-stereotypical way than male users (Oberst et al., 2016).

On March 2022, number of total internet users in Bangladesh was 124.89 million according to Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission, BTRC (BTRC, 2022). Users who have accessed in the internet in last 90 days have been enlisted here as internet users. During the early phase of Covid-19 pandemic in Bangladesh, the number of internet users increased 7.83% from February to March, 2020, which was 9.99 crore to 10.32 crore in actual figure (Islam, 2020). A study states that almost 20% of the population of Bangladesh use Facebook and 46% of them are aged between 18 and 24 years (cited in Sayeed et al., 2020). According to the statistics of January 2022, Bangladesh has 44.7 million Facebook users, which is 10th highest in number across the world; this number of Facebook users derived from counting the Facebook users aged 13 or more and who has accessed their Facebook account at least once per month using any of the devices (Statista, 2022). This number of active Facebook users in Bangladesh was 33.71 million in January 2019 (Islam, 2019) and in April 2017, according to a study of We Are Social and Hootsuit, there were 22 million active Facebook users in Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh and a mega city, which was 1.1% of the monthly active users of Facebook across the globe (Murad, 2017).

3.2. Harassment on Cyber-space and Facebook

Cheris Kramarae, the theorist of Muted Group Theory was quite ambitious about the rise of internet hoping that it will decrease the gender discrimination and uphold the sense of gender equality and gender balance; but it did not happen as gender discrimination, gender inequality and gender based violence have been spread in internet as well (Griffin, 2012).

Fuchs (2014) argues that Facebook users’ privacy is in threat because of this sites capital accumulation process which is targeted advertising. But bourgeois scholars defer from Fuchs’s argument and say that Facebook users’ privacy is under threat due to their openness and disclosing too

much about them, as a result they (users) become targets of criminal activity and harassment (Fuchs, 2014). On the other hand, Grimmelmann (2008) argues that Facebook is a platform where peer-to-peer privacy violations are facilitated and as a result users harm privacy interest of each other.

Lyndon et al. (2011) state that there are numerous encounters of inappropriate behavior on Facebook. Bullying and harassment are very much common behavior of one user to another on social networking sites (Geach & Haralambous, 2009). The study of Lyndon et al. (2011) indicates that Facebook stalking results into three factors, covert provocation, public harassment and venting and stalking occurs in offline as well.

To be specific on harassment of women in Facebook, Ostini & Hopkins (2015) refer to cyber-stalking, non-consensual internet pornography, exposing private information, reputation damage, impersonation or false representation etc. And these kinds of harassment on women is now a global concern for social workers, policy makers, social scientists etc. (Choja & Nelson, 2016). Ostini & Hopkins (2015) consider Facebook as new tool of domestic violence where these types of media are used to monitor, track and harass victims' children, friends and other family members. Ostini & Hopkins (2015) argue that as a result of these kinds of harassments, victims withdraw themselves from social networking sites. In United States, one on every four stalking victim reported that they are stalked in cyberspace and majority of them find their former intimate partner as the stalker (Ostini & Hopkins, 2015). According to Ostini and Hopkins (2015), 66% of the harassed internet users say that they have been harassed in social networking sites. Another dark side of Facebook is constantly trolling, which is considered as problematic for other users of computer mediated communication (Craker & March, 2016). Finally, ubiquity of Facebook is considered as the victims of harassment are constantly under surveillance or under attack (Ostini & Hopkins, 2015).

On the other hand, a study shows that awareness level of cyber security among Bangladeshi internet users is 'patchy' and 'not satisfactory'; moreover commoners of Bangladesh are unaware about general practices of cyberspace (Ahmed et al., 2017). An important characteristic of cybercrime in Bangladesh is that this crime mostly against individuals and females are the more vulnerable to these (Kabir, 2018). Data shows that 68% victims of the cybercrime in Bangladesh are female (Amin, 2020), mostly aged between 16 to 24 (Dhaka Tribune, 2020). Common forms of violence against women in cyberspace are offensive comments and images, hate speech, sharing contents without consent, malicious impersonation,

pornography etc. (Kabir, 2018). Cyberbullying, threat, stalking, identity theft, obscenity etc. are some other forms of harassments (Siddik & Rahi, 2020).

3.3. Government Initiatives to Combat Cybercrime and Harassment in Bangladesh

Government of Bangladesh has taken some measures to combat cybercrime and cyber harassments. Existing laws are Information Communication Technology Act 2006, Section 500 of Bangladesh Penal Code 1860, Pornography Control Act 2012, Bangladesh Telecommunication Control Act 2001, Nari O Shishu Nirjatan Daman Ain 2000 (Prevention of Repression on Women and Children Act 2000) and , Dhaka Metropolitan Police Ordinance 1976 (Kabir, 2018). Later Digital Security Act 2018 has been passed to ensure security in digital world (Siddik & Rahi, 2020).

Along with these there are regulatory bodies to combat cybercrime. Some of these bodies are Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (BTRC), Information and Communication Technology Department, Computer Security Incidence Response Team (CSIR Team), Digital Security Agency (DSA), National Computer Emergency Response Team (CERT), DMP Cyber Crime Unit, Counter Terrorism and Transnational Crime (CTTC) (run by Dhaka Metropolitan Police), Cyber Security and Crime Division (run by Bangladesh Police) etc. (Siddik & Rahi, 2020).

On November 2020, Bangladesh Police has launched ‘Police Cyber Support for Women’, a specialized unit for supporting the female victims of cybercrimes by the female police officers and this unit got 25 complaints within first six hours of its launching (Amin, 2020), which indicates the intensity of cybercrimes against female in Bangladesh.

4. Theoretical Framework

This study has intended to identify how females are dominated by various kinds of harassments in a social media platform like Facebook and eventually become used to these silently. Muted Group Theory and Standpoint Theory are taken as the theoretical framework for the present study. Muted Group Theory was developed by Cheris Kramarae in the 60’s of last century (Griffin, 2012). The theory was initially developed by Edwin Ardener and Shirley Ardener who has focused on the communication process between dominant group and other marginal groups of a society (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009). After the initial development of the theory Kramarae has described it as a feminist theory by describing women as a marginalised group where men are the dominant group (West & Turner,

2010). The theory asserts that being member of the dominant group, men try to dominate women to mute them in various ways. West and Turner (2010) has stated four such ways as ‘process of silencing’ the marginal groups; they are ridicule, ritual, control and harassment.

Littlejohn and Foss (2009) has considered this muting of women as silent crisis distinguishing it from other crises of the society and as a result this crisis fails to get attention of the sector of media and research. This study has tried to explore the present condition and frequency of harassment of the female students of the universities of Bangladesh in Facebook taking these kinds of harassments as process of silencing women in broader social context according to the Muted Group Theory.

On the other hand, Standpoint Theory was developed by Sandra Harding and Julia T. Wood where theorists see mentionable differences between men and women where women are considered as the marginalized group (Griffin et al., 2019). This theory states that if the knowledge is produced from the dominant group of the society as source of information, that knowledge would be ‘distorted and partial’ as the dominant group would try to serve their interest and maintain the status quo (Steiner, 2014). In contrast, as the members of marginalized groups want to understand the oppression, their participation in producing knowledge is also partial but surely less partial which help to have better understanding of the condition (Steiner, 2014). In this study, all data has been collected from female Facebook users who are normally considered as the victim of online harassments and eventually members of marginalized group of the society according to the Standpoint Theory, as a result exploring a less partial view on the condition and remedies of online harassment in Bangladesh has become possible according to the theory.

5. Research Questions

This study has tried to find the answer of four specific questions. They are,

RQ 1: *What kinds of harassments are present towards university-going female Facebook users of Bangladesh?*

RQ 2: *Who are behind these harassments?*

RQ 3: *What are the possible causes of these harassments?*

RQ 4: *How can be these harassments resisted?*

6. Methodology and Sampling

The author has taken survey as the research method of this study. Survey is one of the widely used research methods to collect primary data (Kothari, 2004) and it “has always been open to technological advancements...”

(Vehovar & Manfreda, 2017, p. 143). In this study, descriptive survey has been used, which is a kind of survey where the intention of the survey is to describe the current phenomenon about a certain practice (Wimmer & Dominick, 2011).

In this study, online survey has been conducted by using non-list-based random sampling which is a random sampling method allows “the selection of a probability-based sample without the need to actually enumerate a sampling frame” (Fricker Jr., 2017, p. 167). Fricker Jr. (2017) states that these kinds of online surveys highly depend on contacting potential respondents by any of the traditional means.

Using this type of sampling, the author had intended to take 250 female students from five universities (50 respondents from each university) who use Facebook as sample. The universities are University of Dhaka (DU), Jahangirnagar University (JU), Chittagong University (CU), Daffodil International University (DIU) and University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh (ULAB) and these universities have been selected on the basis of the convenience of data collection. The author has finally got 307 responses through google form questionnaire-based survey where at least 50 responses have come from each university.

7. Data Analysis and Findings

7.1. Respondents and Their Facebook Using Pattern

A total of 307 responses have been collected from five universities to conduct this study through online survey. From these responses, 61 came from University of Dhaka (DU), 63 from Jahangirnagar University (JU), 69 from Chittagong University (CU), 60 from Daffodil International University (DIU) and 54 from University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh (ULAB).

Table 01

Respondents from Universities

University	Number of respondents	Percentage (%)
University of Dhaka (DU)	61	19.87
Jahangirnagar University (JU)	63	20.52
Chittagong University (CU)	69	22.48
Daffodil International University (DIU)	60	19.54
University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh (ULAB)	54	17.59
Total	307	100

From the respondents, 270 are students of Under-Graduate program and 37 of them are from Graduate programs from 52 different majors. Age of the respondents varies from 18 to 29 years with the average of 21.74 years (standard deviation, $s = 1.90$ years). These respondents have been using Facebook for minimum three months and maximum 13 years. 17 of the respondent use Facebook for less than an hour per day, 54 of them uses for one to two hours, 85 of them uses for two to three hours and 151 of them uses for more than three hours every day.

Table 02

Use of Facebook by the Respondents

Hours (per day)	Number of respondents	Percentage (%)
<1	17	5.54
1-2	54	17.59
2-3	85	27.69
>3	151	49.18
Total	307	100

7.2. Harassment Pattern on Facebook

Findings of the study show that, 190 (61.9%) out of total 307 respondents have told that they have been harassed while using Facebook at least once. 12 of them have mentioned the frequency of harassment as regular, 64 have mentioned as irregular and other 114 have mentioned as seldom.

Table 03

Being Victim of Harassment on Facebook

Frequency of being harassed	Number of respondents	Percentage (%)
None	117	38.11
Regular	12	3.91
Irregular	64	20.85
Seldom	114	37.13
Total	307	100

Asking to identify the types of harassments, 190 respondents have chosen different types of harassments they have been victims of and they are free to identify as many types of harassments they have experienced so far. Respondents have identified unwanted messaging (85.79%), unwanted friend requests (50.53%), unwanted page or group invitations (47.89%) as the three primary types of harassments along with unwanted tagging (21.58%). Embarrassing photo or video sharing, hate speech, stalking, sexual harassment, body shaming, surveillance and threat have become the

responses as harassment types varying from 20 to almost 35%. Other types of harassments include hacking, content sharing without consent, troll and pornography. Some of the respondents have mentioned creating fake id using their photo and asking for their photos as some other types of harassments. These responses indicate to the answer of RQ 1.

These 190 respondents have been asked to identify the people behind these harassments and different types of answers came out. 81.58% of the respondents have mentioned unknown males as the harassers, 14.74% of them have mentioned unknown females interestingly while another 12.10% have mentioned known females. Newly known males have come out as another common harasser having response from 30% of the respondents. Male friends, ex-boyfriend, relatives, boyfriend and male colleagues have been identified as harassers also as well as classmates, senior students, neighbors etc. from the responses. These responses can be considered as the answer of the RQ 2 of this study.

7.3. Causes of Harassment Identified by Users

Respondents who have been victims of harassments on Facebook have been asked to identify the prime cause behind these harassments according to them. From their responses, five broad areas can be identified as the main causes of these harassments which are also indicating the answer of RQ 3.

- a. **Mentality towards Women:** Social, cultural and personal views and mentality of the male members of the society towards the females have been identified as problematic and prime cause of these kinds of harassments on women by most of the respondents. They have also mentioned the patriarch character of the society from which the insecurity and sexual frustration of males evolve as another cause under this broad theme.
- b. **Education and Ethical Issues:** Respondents have identified the lack of proper family and institutional education as another source of nurturing these kinds of harassers. Lack of identification and implementation of moral and ethical values are also present in this category.
- c. **Weak Legal System:** A number of respondents have identified weak legal system of the country as one of the main causes behind these types of increasing harassments towards women.
- d. **Being a Female!:** Some of the respondents have mentioned being a female as the prime cause of these kinds of harassments on Facebook as well as various types of envy issues.
- e. **Others:** A significant number of respondents have mentioned that they actually do not know why they have to face these kinds of

harassments on Facebook while objectifying of the females, pornography, clothing of females and causing harm to career have been come out as some other causes. Some responses have tried to say that there is no specific cause behind these harassments.

7.4. Measures Taken by the Victims

160 of the respondents who have told that they have been harassed on Facebook have told that they have not taken any measure to prevent these harassments whereas only 30 of them have responded affirmative to take steps.

Table 04

Taking Steps by the Victims against Harassment

	Number of respondents	Percentage (%)
Have taken some steps	30	15.79
Have not taken any step	160	84.21
Total	190	100

Victims have not taken any preventive steps because of three reasons. Most of them did not know where they should complain against these harassments. Some of them have thought that these measures will create more harassments to them and rest of the respondents have sensed possibilities of dishonor to them and their family because of these steps.

Table 05

Causes of Not Taken Steps by the Victims

Causes	Number of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Did not know where to seek help	87	54.37
Thought it will create more harassments	52	32.50
Sensed possibilities of dishonor	21	13.13
Total	160	100

Steps taken by the victims against harassments depicts that some of these respondents did not know the proper process or places where to complain as well. 11 of them have filed complain to cybercrime department or police whereas others have reported harassment to Facebook, university faculty, friends and family and even to the family of the harassers. 16 of them told that they have not got any solution from taken measures. Only

seven of them have told that they have got some kind of solution. Other respondents have told that they have rarely got solution from these steps. One respondent has told that whenever she had tried to report the id of the harasser/s, harasser/s had blocked her on Facebook to resist her activities to stop the harassment.

7.5. Recommendations by the Victims to Resist Harassment

Respondents of the survey have been asked an optional question to point out their recommendations to combat these types of harassments of Facebook and 147 of them have mentioned their recommendations which can be considered as the answer of RQ 4. These recommendations can be distributed into five following thematic areas.

- a. Facebook authority should increase its privacy control and security system for its users. A significant number of respondents think that removing fake ids forever from Facebook can be a very good solution.
- b. Legal system of the country regarding cybercrime and harassments should be stronger and more exemplary.
- c. Proper education should be offered and proper social values should be practiced in all aspects of the society. Though only one of the respondents has identified the need of media literacy and awareness as one of the solutions of this problem.
- d. Awareness and respect towards gender related issues should be confirmed.
- e. Banning pornography, use of Facebook for communication purpose only and even stopping the use of social networking sites have been come out as solutions of these harassments from the respondents. These recommendations can be identified as a part of ‘victim blaming’ regarding this issue.

8. Recommendations by the Author

This study has shed light on the current situation of harassment on university-going female Facebook users of Bangladesh from various angles. Findings of the study show that there are jobs to be done to improve this harassment prone sector. The author has identified two basic concerns where to work of this problem wants to meet a kind of solution. They are ethical and legal concerns.

a. Ethical Concerns

- Changing on attitude towards women in every aspect of the society is a compulsory measure to take if these types of harassments on women are wanted to be stopped.

- Increasing moral and ethical sense by endorsing compulsory philosophy, psychology and sex education in national curriculum.
- Setting ethical standards for social networking sites globally and locally and proper publicity for increasing consciousness on it.

b. Legal Concerns

- Making the available legal bodies to combat cybercrime and harassments more victims friendly, sincere and viable for people of all classes.
- Proper publicity of law enforcement agencies developed to combat cybercrime and harassment to the citizen of the country.

9. Limitations and Conclusion

This study has some limitations as well. The findings of the work would be more representative if the author could have taken more universities as sample or by increasing the number of the respondents. Another limitation of the study is that, more constructive questions could be introduced to the respondent in order to find out more sophisticated angle of the problem. But due to the lack of time and financial support provided for the study, it was not conveniently possible. Besides these, the result of the study can largely vary because there are different experiences available for each of the university-going female Facebook user of Bangladesh and they would have answered the questions asked in the study in very different ways which could lead the result also in very different point.

But harassment on female Facebook users is definitely a serious and regularly increasing phenomenon and this study has shown that the same things are also present in the context of Bangladesh. Though a significant number of university-going female Facebook users of Bangladesh are becoming victims of harassments on Facebook, very few of them are taking any actual steps to combat these. Moreover, responses of this study show that victims are not marking themselves safe from the legal steps to take while looking for any solution, which indicates the lack of confidence and communication gap between the victims of these harassments and law enforcing agencies of the country. As a result, a greater number of these kinds of incidents remain out of record and the harassers do not have to pay for whatever they have done and as a result, a culture of lawlessness occurs. This lack of confidence has been mentioned in earlier study of Tang et al. (2018), where organizational and political failure were portrayed as the

causes of criminal activities in Bangladesh, which in turn shape the lack of confidence on law enforcement agencies. On this note, on his study, Nabi (2013) has emphasized on the mutual beneficiary relationship between the police and mass public of Bangladesh. Moreover, study has also indicated the deficiency of moral and legal education of children which resulted in improper civic sense and imbalanced growing up (Tang et al., 2018), which resonates with the recommendation of the present author as well.

To conclude, if this situation of cyber harassment exists for long in Bangladesh, not only the virtual world of the female citizens of our country, but also the real life of them will be under more insecurity and threat; and that will damage the proper cohesion of the society. To get rid of this serious damage, proper moral and ethical improvement of all of the society is needed as well as establishing proper legal authorities. Both these initiatives should go together to make a society where any kind of discrimination and harassments of one over another will be absent and an environment of balance and sympathy will be developed.

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