



The Impact of Social Media Hostility on Women's Self-Esteem: A Qualitative Study

Priyanka Kalita, *MSc Clinical Psychology, Kristu Jayanti (Deemed to be University),*

Bengaluru

priyankakalita034@gmail.com

Abstract: Communication and self-perception have been taken over by social media. Social media such as Instagram and YouTube enable individuals to exchange pictures, videos and remain in touch with one another with minimal effort. Although this may be empowering, women are usually subjected to hostility on the internet. Most of them are subjected to body shaming, sexualization, threats, and unconsented spread of intimate photos. The effects such experiences are likely to have include a severe damage to self-esteem and body image, which is usually underestimated. A qualitative research investigated the impact of online hostility on self-esteem of women. The semi-structured interviews with women who had encountered online aggression were conducted and themed data analyzed by researchers. The results indicated that the repetition of the negativity resulted in self-doubt, emotional distress, identity conflict, and withdrawal. The participants reported shame, lack of confidence and insecurity. Nevertheless, as numerous women were resilient despite such difficulties. They dealt with it by establishing online limits, blocking abusive individuals, reducing online interaction, finding allies, and affirming themselves. Nevertheless, resilience could not be cultivated automatically and had to be worked on. In general, the research points out the gendered aspect of online aggression and the psychological effects of such aggression. It brings out the importance of harsher digital laws, awareness campaigns, and easy access to mental health services to make online settings safer and friendlier to women.

Keywords: *Social Media Aggression, Females, Self-Worth, Online Bullying, Qualitative Study, Gender Violence, Psychological Effects.*

1. Introduction

The social media has now become intrinsically integrated into the lives of young adults, as not merely a communication device, but also a primary area in identity development, social validation, and this interaction with others. Instagram and Facebook give users the opportunity to select and share lives, successes, and the most important moments of their lives in a way that causes others to view them in a specific manner. In contrast to the real-life communication, online platforms offer instant and measurable feedback in the form of likes, comments, sharing and the number of followers. This apparent acceptance may have a powerful impact on the sense of belonging and self-esteem. One such aspect that is very sensitive to social feedback is self-esteem, which is described as the overall assessment of a person on his or her value and ability (Rosenberg, 1965). Therefore, the psychological effects of negative or aggressive interactions on online spaces may have been reinforced.

A theory that can be used to interpret self-evaluation in the digital world is the Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954). According to the theory, when there are no objective standards people evaluate themselves and their capabilities and worth by comparing themselves with others. The use of social media increases this process by exposing users to a form of carefully filtered and idealized images of peers. Photographs are filtered, accomplishments are flaunted and difficulties are hidden, invoking comparisons to superior and less attractive people or accomplishments in social life. These comparisons have been referenced to the low self-esteem and inadequate psychological well-being (Vogel et al., 2014). The appearance-based comparisons are especially salient among women because, due to sociocultural pressures on beauty and outward validation, this may lead to body dissatisfaction and self-criticism.

Even though social media leads to the creation of empowerment and connection, it supports hostility and gender-based aggression. Body shaming, sexual harassment, derogatory comments, trolling, moral policing, and public humiliation are some of the common aspects of online abuse. The study has shown that women are unfairly targeted, especially by appearance-oriented, sexualized attacks (Tripathi, 2022). These actions mirror the wider societal standards that question and control the way women express themselves, and digital environments tend to support the status quo of gender inequality.

Such hostility has other psychological implications, which are further elaborated by Objectification Theory (Fredrickson and Roberts, 1997). The theory assumes that women are often diminished to their physical appearance which results to the self-objectification and the constant feeling of body surveillance. In the long run, this internalization can lead to shame,

anxiety and low self-esteem. These may be enhanced by repetitive remarks in the online setting regarding outlook or beauty.

The self-esteem is conceptualized through Sociometer Theory (Leary et al., 1995) which views the self-esteem as a measure of social acceptance. Online negativity, mockery, or condemnation can be an indicator of rejection, and include emotions of shame, sadness, anger, and anxiety. This impact can be increased by the public and permanent character of the interaction between digital interactions. Also, there is the Online Disinhibition Effect (Suler, 2004) which hypothesize that anonymity and decreased accountability in the Internet environment decreases social restraints and enhances aggression.

Although quantitative research supports this claim by illustrating the positive connection between social media and self-esteem, more studies are required to examine the lived experiences of women with regards to online hostility. The cognition and emotional interpretation of these encounters by women is vital in creating suitable psychological interventions and digital policies. The current qualitative research fills this gap as it takes a glimpse of the emotional, cognitive and behavioural impacts of social media hostility on women self-esteem as well as the coping mechanisms of women.

2. Method

2.1 Participants

The participants of the study were 15 women between the ages of 18 to 25 years old, who were active on social media and had at least 1 case of hostility on the Internet. Participants were recruited through purposive sampling because the sampling technique is suitable in qualitative studies that aim to investigate phenomena that have a direct experience with the phenomenon studied (Creswell, 2017). Inclusion criteria were that the participants needed to be female, fall within the given age bracket and that they had experienced forms of hostile behaviors in the form of derogatory comments, moral policing, sexualization, trolling or humiliating situations on sites like Instagram, Facebook or other networking platforms.

This age bracket is a developmental phase in which there is the exploration of identity and an increase in sensitivity towards the appraisals of peers. It is believed that young adulthood is instrumental in terms of self-concept development, as well as social comparison (Vogel et al., 2014). Thus, this sample became especially useful regarding the investigation of the correlation between social media hostility and self-esteem.

2.2 Measures

An interview schedule of semi-structured nature was prepared. It contained open-ended questions that covered the experiences of social media hostility, emotional responses, perceived impact on self-esteem, behavioural changes in regard to online behaviour and coping mechanisms. The open format gave participants a chance to elaborate their experiences in a more detailed way and think over their personal meaning.

Even though the use of a standardized scale of measurement was not done, self-esteem was conceptualized on the definition of self-esteem fronted by Rosenberg (1965) which defines self-esteem as the general assessment of self-worth. The questions were centered on the subjective perspectives of the participants as to the changes in their self-esteem and not on the numbers, which is also aligned with the depth element rather than the statistical measure of the study.

At the start of the interviews, some basic demographic information, such as age and general trends in the use of social media, was gathered.

2.3 Procedure

Ethical clearance was sought from the relevant authority in the institution before the data collection process. The participants were sought through academic networks and referrals. They were made aware of the study's objectives, its voluntary nature, and their right to withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences. Informed consent was sought before engaging the participants in the interview process.

The interviews were either face-to-face or online, depending on the participants' preference and convenience. They lasted for about 45 to 60 minutes. The interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' consent to ensure accuracy. The participants were encouraged to be candid with their responses, and confidentiality was guaranteed.

The audio files were transcribed verbatim after each interview. The participants' identities were anonymized to ensure anonymity, and the files were stored safely with restricted access to the researcher only.

2.4 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis of data were done according to Braun and Clarke (2006). There were six stages involved in the process. First, relevant parts of the text were coded and that were of interest as far as the research aims were concerned. These codes were then analyzed in terms of patterns and put in possible themes. The themes were checked and clarified to have internal consistency and distinctiveness. Then they were categorized and labeled properly to determine

the information. Lastly, the themes were arranged into a logical story of answering the research purposes.

The interpretation was based on the well-known theoretical frameworks such as the Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954), Objectification Theory (Fredrickson and Roberts, 1997), Sociometer Theory (Leary et al., 1995) and the Online Disinhibition Effect (Suler, 2004). These structures served to put the results in context without losing the originality of the stories of the participants.

3. Results

Thematic analysis yielded seven major themes and corresponding subthemes. The themes and subthemes are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. *Themes and Subthemes Identified Through Thematic Analysis*

Theme	Subthemes
Types of Social Media Hostility Faced by Young Women	Body shaming and appearance criticism; Moral policing and character judgment; Sexualisation and objectification; Trolling for opinions; Public humiliation through screenshots and sharing
Emotional Reactions to Social Media Hostility	Shock and embarrassment; Shame and guilt; Anger and helplessness; Anxiety and fear; Sadness and emotional breakdown
Long-Term Impact on Self-Esteem and Self-Identity	Self-doubt and feeling inadequate; Increased social comparison; Fear of judgment; Reduced confidence in self-expression; Persistent psychological stress
Behavioural Changes in Social Media Use	Self-censorship; Switching to private accounts; Blocking or reporting users; Avoiding photographs or videos; Social media detox or temporary withdrawal
Coping Mechanisms and Support Systems	Emotional processing; Seeking peer support; Family reassurance; Positive self-talk; Setting digital boundaries

Role of Family, Culture, and Society	Gender norms and expectations; Moral surveillance of women's behaviour; Fear of social stigma
Expectations for Digital Reform	Stricter content moderation; Identity verification systems; AI-based filtering of abusive comments; Digital literacy programs; Accessible mental health support

These themes mirror the nature of online aggression encountered, related emotional and psychological effects, psychological changes, coping mechanisms, sociocultural factors, and reform expectations. Quotations of the participants have been quoted verbatim in order to retain authenticity.

Theme 1: Types of Social Media Hostility Faced by Young Women

Respondents were found to have experienced various types of digital hate such as body shaming, moral policing, sexual objectification, trolling, and public humiliation; evident examples of gender-based online violence. Body shaming was widespread, as far as the skin tone, weight, and appearance were concerned. One of the participants told, *"I had a comment made on my picture; so dark that I cannot wear bright colors. I felt I wasn't good enough"* (R3). Another has commented, *"I was too skinny and not professional-looking. I started feeling insecure"* (R5). These looks-based criticisms are also associated with low self-esteem in young women (Papageorgiou et al., 2022; Merino, 2024).

Moral policing was noted, too, participants were called shameless because they published photos, which is a result of the control society has over women expressing themselves. Sexualization was very upsetting with one of the participants saying that *"They were specific on my body parts and made dirty remarks. I was grossed out"* (R4), which was congruent with Objectification Theory (Fredrickson and Roberts, 1997). Emotional distress was also aggravated by trolling of feminist opinions and humiliation by means of screenshots and memes.

Theme 2: Emotional Reactions to Social Media Hostility

The immediate emotional responses reported by the participants included shock, embarrassment, shame, anger, fear, and sadness, whereas the physical symptoms reported included elevated heart rate and insomnia. One of them said, *"I was ashamed although I was in my room by myself"*. (R1). Particularly notable were feelings of shame and guilt; one of the

participants removed her photo and apologized even after not having done anything wrong (R3), which was an internalized culture (Ghowrui, 2024).

Powerlessness was frequently accompanied by anger. *"I was so angry, but I did not answer, as one of us remarked. They would target me more"* (R10). The latter results can be explained by the fact that research has associated online harassment with acute stress and emotional dysregulation (Pantic, 2014). There was also the mention of anxiety and rumination by participants, with one saying that they heard abusive comments like a tape recorder (R5), which aligns with reports of cybervictimization having a relationship with anxiety and overthinking (Kowalski et al., 2014).

Theme 3: Long-Term Impact on Self-Esteem and Self-Identity

Being regularly exposed to online hostility contributed to lower self-esteem and identity issues. One of the participants expressed, *"After such comments, I started thinking that I am not pretty enough to post pictures"* (R3). This is supported by Merino (2024), who discovered that appearance-related hostility is associated with long-term self-esteem decline.

Hostile interactions also increased social comparison. One participant expressed, *"I started comparing myself with other girls who were prettier and thinner; I felt I was not good enough"* (R1). According to Social Comparison Theory by Festinger (1954), being exposed to idealized images has a negative impact on self-esteem, especially among young females (Vogel et al., 2014).

Being judged also occurred offline. A participant expressed, *"Now, in real life, I talk less because I feel that people are judging me"* (R9). Sleep problems and chronic mental exhaustion were also experienced, which is supported by research that discovered a connection between cyber victimization and psychological problems (Patchin & Hinduja, 2010).

Theme 4: Behavioural Changes in Social Media Use After Facing Hostility

Participants changed their digital behavior in order to deal with hostility. There was a large scale of self-censorship. He says that he continues to take pictures but does not post them anymore (R8). Some of them migrated to their personal accounts or blocked.

Cameras and video recording were avoided. *"Previously I loved to take selfies. Now I do not stay anywhere with cameras"* (R6). Digital withdrawal is being considered as a coping mechanism to online stress (Pantic, 2014). Others were temporally shutting down social media. I turned off my Instagram at some point just to be able to breathe normally (R2). Even though it is protective, such withdrawal can be restrictive to self-expression and social interaction.

Theme 5: Coping Mechanisms & Support Systems

Emotional release and journaling as well as seeking a peer support were the coping

strategies. “*My best friend informed me, it was not my fault. That helped me settle down a lot*” (R1). Psychological effect of cyberbullying is reduced when the person receives peer support (Kowalski et al., 2014).

Nevertheless, most of the participants did not want to inform the family members because of the fear to be blamed. Lack of professional mental health assistance points at the barriers related to stigma (Raguram et al., 2004).

Theme 6: Role of Family, Culture & Society

Responses of the participants were largely influenced by cultural requirements. People were afraid of social stigma, which meant that they should not confront. “*When I share the information with my parents, they will respond--“Why are you posting pictures?”*” (R6). These dynamics indicate the patriarchal rules that govern the behavior of women (Papageorgiou et al., 2022).

Theme 7: Expectations for Change

The participants promoted the idea of more rigorous platform responsibility and identity verification, AI-based filters of abusive remarks, online learning, and free mental health resources. The suggested recommendations are consistent with the current discourse on gender-sensitive content moderation (Enock et al., 2024).

4. Discussion

The findings demonstrate that social media hostility operates as a significant psychological stressor that negatively affects young women’s self-esteem. Consistent with Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954), exposure to idealized digital representations intensified self-evaluative processes. Objectification Theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) explains the internalization of appearance-based scrutiny observed among participants. Furthermore, the association between cybervictimization and decreased self-esteem supports existing empirical evidence (Patchin & Hinduja, 2010).

Cultural context further amplified emotional distress, highlighting the intersection between digital aggression and patriarchal norms. The findings extend existing cyberpsychology literature by situating online hostility within the Indian socio-cultural framework.

5. Conclusion

This study concludes that social media hostility is not merely an online inconvenience but a significant psychological and socio-cultural concern. Online harassment reflects systemic

gender inequalities and contributes to reduced self-esteem, identity disturbance, and behavioral withdrawal among young women. Addressing this issue requires coordinated efforts involving technological regulation, digital literacy education, and accessible mental health support systems.

References

- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Festinger, L. (1954). A theory of social comparison processes. *Human Relations*, 7(2), 117–140. <https://doi.org/10.1177/001872675400700202>
- Fredrickson, B. L., & Roberts, T. A. (1997). Objectification theory: Toward understanding women's lived experiences and mental health risks. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 21(2), 173–206. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1471-6402.1997.tb00108.x>
- Henry, N., & Powell, A. (2018). Technology-facilitated sexual violence: A literature review of empirical research. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*, 19(2), 195–208. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1524838016650189>
- Kowalski, R. M., Giumetti, G. W., Schroeder, A. N., & Lattanner, M. R. (2014). Bullying in the digital age: A critical review and meta-analysis of cyberbullying research among youth. *Psychological Bulletin*, 140(4), 1073–1137. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0035618>
- Leary, M. R., Tambor, E. S., Terdal, S. K., & Downs, D. L. (1995). Self-esteem as an interpersonal monitor: The sociometer hypothesis. *Psychological Review*, 102(3), 518–530. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-295X.102.3.518>
- Pantic, I. (2014). Online social networking and mental health. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*, 17(10), 652–657. <https://doi.org/10.1089/cyber.2014.0070>
- Papageorgiou, A., Fisher, C., & Cross, D. (2022). “Why don’t I look like her?”: How adolescent girls view social media and its connection to body image and self-esteem. *BMC Women’s Health*, 22, Article 261. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12905-022-01845-4>
- Patchin, J. W., & Hinduja, S. (2010). Cyberbullying and self-esteem. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*, 13(5), 559–564. <https://doi.org/10.1089/cyber.2009.0105>

- Raguram, R., Weiss, M. G., Keval, H., & Channabasavanna, S. M. (2004). Stigma, depression, and somatization in South India. *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 161(12), 2138–2144.
<https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.ajp.161.12.2138>
- Rosenberg, M. (1965). *Society and the adolescent self-image*. Princeton University Press.
- Suler, J. (2004). The online disinhibition effect. *CyberPsychology & Behavior*, 7(3), 321–326.
<https://doi.org/10.1089/1094931041291295>
- Vogel, E. A., Rose, J. P., Roberts, L. R., & Eckles, K. (2014). Social comparison, social media, and self-esteem. *Psychology of Popular Media Culture*, 3(4), 206–222.
<https://doi.org/10.1037/ppm0000047>