



The Role of Social Media in Shaping Women's Paranoia about Harassment and Safety

¹**Tamanna Sahu**, *Amity Institute of Psychology and allied sciences, Amity University, Noida, Uttar Pradesh (AUUP), India*

sahutamanna41@gmail.com

²**Dr.Ritu Raj**, *Amity Institute of Psychology and allied sciences, Amity University, Noida, Uttar Pradesh (AUUP)*

Indiarraj@amity.edu

Abstract: This research paper investigates the relationship between age and paranoia levels among women in India in the context of harassment and cybercrime. Utilizing a quantitative research design, data were collected from 300 female participants aged 15 to 55 years, residing in urban regions such as Delhi, Odisha, Mumbai, Bangalore, and Kolkata. Participants were recruited via random sampling from social media platforms, university networks, and professional contacts. A structured Likert-scale survey assessed paranoia in domains like cyberstalking, harassment, and online safety. Data analysis was performed using Microsoft Excel with linear regression to explore the predictive value of age on paranoia. The analysis revealed a statistically significant yet modest positive correlation between age and paranoia levels ($R^2 = 0.0496$, $p = 0.00116$), indicating that paranoia tends to increase slightly with age. Despite its statistical significance, the relationship demonstrated limited explanatory power, suggesting that additional factors contribute to paranoia beyond age alone. Notably, older participants reported higher levels of anxiety related to digital safety, while younger participants expressed concern about online harassment and trolling. The findings highlight the importance of age-sensitive digital safety interventions and underscore the broader need for psychological support systems that address women's online safety concerns across all age groups. Future research should incorporate a multivariate approach to examine other influential

factors such as previous harassment experiences, digital literacy, and social media usage patterns.

Keywords: *Paranoia, Women, Harassment, Safety*

1. Introduction

The role of social media in shaping women's paranoia about harassment and safety. For a woman who deals with the issue of harassment every day, online and offline, social media is a powerful tool for making public opinion safe in the age of the internet. Women have used Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok to share personal experiences in gender-based violence and seek safety information. #MeToo and #SafeStreets are very popular and a cause of discussion on harassment, which has helped bring out the systemic problems that encourage violence against women and let people speak up. Social media has been a powerful tool in advocacy, learning and growing fear and paranoia. Continuous exposure to disturbing material – viral crime news, firsthand descriptions of assault and abduction reports – has made the perception of danger even more continuous. As such, it gives women the impression that harassment and violence are more widespread and happen closer to them than they may seem.

In general, paranoia is fear and suspicion of danger and that others are conspiring against them (Dictionary.com | Meanings & Definitions of English Words, 2020). Excessive or irrational suspiciousness and distrust of others (2025, Definition of PARANOIA). Some facts about paranoia are as follows:

- **Mental Disorder:** It Context Paranoia is a symptom of mental disorders like schizophrenia, schizoaffective disorder, or post-traumatic stress disorder (Arantes-Gonçalves et al., 2018). In such cases, persecutory delusions may be present, in which the person thinks others are harming him/her (Arantes-Gonçalves et al., 2018).
- **Paranoia:** Systematized delusions of persecution or grandeur without hallucination (Definition of PARANOIA, 2025).
- **Excessive mistrust:** In mental health disorders, it can be corrosive to adolescent social relationships (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2023).
- **Anxiety:** Anxiety can lead to paranoid thoughts, which cognitively interpret ambiguous events negatively and feel vulnerable (Freeman et al., 2014).
- **Cyber-Paranoia:** As technology has increased, so has its use. As the years go by, more and more people are reported to have paranoid delusions of technology as a central theme (Mason et al., 2014).

Amongst the most important ways social media influences women's perception of safety is through algorithmic content curation. Engagement and sharing of content on social media are encouraged to create a robust emotional response, such as fear and anger (Park et al., 2023). Consequently, users who regularly read posts about bullying and crime will unlikely not see the corresponding content. Like with any routine activity, a feedback loop will stimulate the idea of being exposed (Yadav et al., 2020). Additionally, rumour and untrue reports of what human traffickers or abductors do, like hearsay and unsubstantiated reports, spread rapidly and cause reality to become distorted so that public spaces are viewed as much less safe than they genuinely are (KhosraviNik & Esposito, 2018). However, these warnings are valid to an extent. However, constant exposure to this material aids in exacerbating the paranoia that these women face and creates excessive paranoia that permeates women's lives and lifestyles every day (Vitak et al., 2017).

With social media platforms being an empowerment space as well as a spawning ground for paranoia, more so for women, it is in this highly connected world. While these platforms are hubs of community building and social movements (Park et al., 2023), they have also exposed women to a disproportionately high amount of harassment and safety threats (Yadav et al., 2020). Social media has a significant influence on present-day life, but what it is precisely doing to women's safety and well-being is just becoming a concern. Studies suggest that women are desensitized to certain types of abuse because online harassment is common (Vitak et al., 2017). These platforms are essential in today's communication, but they have many barriers to women in the form of harassment and safety (Yadav et al., 2020). Unintentionally, the architecture of these platforms, built primarily for connectivity and information sharing, allows for several different types of abuse, from cyberstalking to online misogyny, which in turn influence women's perception and experience of safety (KhosraviNik & Esposito, 2018; Women, 2020). They encourage women to join the online community, but at the same time, they always have to be on the lookout for potential threats (Popescu, 2020). Buni (2014) observes that violence against women is currently a worldwide health problem, and social media is a new space for the expression of violence against women. Online stalking and targeted threats, among other behaviours, are aimed at women in various forms of harassing behaviours, which make women feel unsafe.

Online harassment and abuse are rampant, and online free-flowing discourse is a massive challenge, which is what the Internet was built on (Lenhart et al., 2016). One of these phenomena is the phenomenon of online hate speech directed at women (hate speech against women) (KhosraviNik & Esposito, 2018). It has, however, gone beyond the threat of physical

harassment to include a virtual threat, which artificial intelligence (AI) has recently added to the already complicated web of women's safety dynamics. The AI-powered software can now create hyper-real false images and videos or deepfakes, which have now been becoming an increasing tool to harass women. The technology enables perpetrators to alter images or create non-consensual explicit material from a woman's likeness, which brings serious ethical and psychological issues. Digital safety is an even bigger issue if you are an active social media user because AI-generated fake content can be used for online harassment, blackmail, and reputational harm. These photos are a combination of realistic and falsified. This contributes to a significant privacy issue and creates a culture where women are always concerned that their online presence will be changed. Gender-based violence facilitated through technology is widespread and intensifies already misogynistic patterns with new forms of intrusions, abuse and surveillance (Harris, 2020).

At the same time, the concern about women's security has been caused by cyberstalking, digital surveillance, and online harassment. Women are worried about physical safety and the risk of exposure in the digital world in cases where women are increasingly being tracked using devices such as AirTags and Doxxed, and their data is manipulated through AI (Dunn, 2020; Henry et al., 2020). Social media makes it easier to connect and advocate, but it has also become a playground where women are harassed, receive unwanted attention and have their privacy violated. Abusive partners also sometimes use technology to find out where their victims are going and check their communications, which increases the feeling of being vulnerable and paranoid overall (Dunn, 2020; Henry et al., 2020).

This research paper investigates the twofold effect of social media in constructing women's attitudes toward harassment and safety. On the other hand, the thesis will also look to investigate how the same digital platforms empower and facilitate fear, such as the psychological effect of being exposed to harrowing content for extended periods and spreading misinformation, which begins to create paranoia and even a more prominent social effect of the same. The study will also look at the growing threat of AI-powered threats, such as deep fakes and cyberstalking, to heighten the fear of safety. In this research, I seek to contribute to our understanding of how emerging technologies and social media influence the struggle for women's safety or whether the technologies and social media create women's anxiety and fear when going about their daily lives.

I surveyed almost 300 participants from different major cities of India online and offline. I surveyed four online harassment scenarios, seven different ways a platform could respond to

content on social media, personal experience, and the situation in which content was created to cause paranoia

2. Methodology

2.1 Aim

To examine the relationship between women's age and their levels of paranoia in the context of online threats, posts on assaults and abuse or personal experience on social media.

2.2 Hypothesis

Increased exposure to social media content highlighting incidents of harassment and safety threats contributes to heightened paranoia and perceived vulnerability among women, influencing their behavioral and psychological responses to public and private spaces

2.3 Research Design

This study employed a quantitative research design to systematically explore the paranoia levels among women in India regarding their safety and experiences with harassment, particularly about their use of social media (Jain & Sinha, 2021; Panda & Mishra, 2020). The goal was to understand whether a correlation exists between age and the degree of paranoia experienced and how exposure to online environments influences this relationship (Thakur & Jha, 2023). Quantitative methods allow for statistical measurement and objective data interpretation, critical in identifying trends across large populations (Livingstone & Byrne, 2018). The use of a cross-sectional survey approach enabled the researcher to collect data simultaneously, making it feasible to gather responses from a broad and diverse group within a relatively short duration (Cross, Richards, & Smith, 2016).

2.4 Participants

Three hundred women participated in the research study, with ages varying from 15 to 55 (Jain & Sinha, 2021; Panda & Mishra, 2020). A broad range of female participants from 15 to 55 years old were selected to include women throughout their developmental phases from youth to adulthood and middle age (Panda & Mishra, 2020). The researchers employed random sampling to recruit participants because it helped represent multiple perspectives and minimize sampling bias, as noted by Livingstone and Byrne (2018). The researchers recruited participants using various methods, including social media platforms (WhatsApp, Instagram, and Facebook) and student universities, inviting enrollment and professional acquaintances and relatives of the researcher's network (Cross, Richards, & Smith, 2016; Jain & Sinha, 2021). The diverse participant recruitment strategy resulted in participants who differed by educational level, professional experience, and social interaction backgrounds. Participants

originated from five crucial Indian cities: Delhi, Odisha, Mumbai, Bangalore and Kolkata (Jain & Sinha, 2021). The researchers chose this distribution method to include various regions and cultural perspectives to make their study findings more widely applicable (Panda & Mishra, 2020). The strict requirements for participant selection included female identification and a one-year minimum experience on social media platforms. The selected participants possessed enough experience with online spaces to provide meaningful information about harassment and online safety (American Psychological Association, 2017).

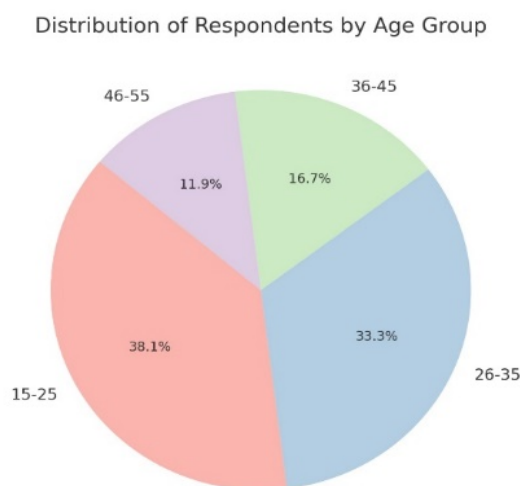


Figure 3.1: *Distribution Of Respondents by Age Group*

2.5 Materials /Instruments

The primary data collection tool consists of a Likert scale format structured questionnaire (Cross, Richards, & Smith, 2016). The survey included detailed development to assess four essential domains: cybercrime awareness, paranoia, personal harassment experiences and digital safety perceptions (Panda & Mishra, 2020; Jain & Sinha, 2021). The Likert scale is a standard methodology in psychological research since it enables researchers to collect subjective data through structured measurements (Livingstone & Byrne, 2018). The survey incorporated statements in which respondents assessed their perspective using a five-point scale that demonstrated agreement or disagreement from “Strongly Disagree” to “Strongly Agree” (American Psychological Association, 2017). The study utilized several statements to evaluate psychological and behavioural signs of paranoia through measures of surveillance anxieties, online posting inhibition, and interactive avoidance related to safety concerns (Thakur & Jha, 2023). The survey included questions to gauge participant knowledge about online threats such as phishing incidents and both stalking and data breach occurrences

and their observed experiences with harassment in digital spaces (Duggan, 2017; Redmiles et al., 2019).

Harassment scenario	"Imagine a person has [...]"
sexual photos	"taken sexual photos of you without your permission and shared them on social media."
spread rumors	"spread malicious rumors about you on social media."
malicious messages	"created fake accounts and sent you malicious comments through direct messages on social media."
insulted or disrespected	"insulted or disrespected you on social media."
Perceived harms	
psychological harm	"Would you be concerned for your psychological wellbeing?"
personal safety	"Would you be concerned for your personal safety?"
family reputation	"Would you be concerned for your family reputation?"
sexual harassment	"Would you consider this sexual harassment against you?"
Platform responses	"The social media sites responds by [...]"
removing	"removing the content from the site."
labeling	"labeling the content as a violation of the site's rules."
banning	"banning the person from the site."
paying	"paying you money."
apology	"requiring a public apology from the person."
revealing	"revealing the person's real name and photograph publicly on the site."
rating	"by giving a negative rating to the person."

2.6 Procedure

The research data was collected within two months, according to Jain and Sinha (2021). The survey was published online along with paper-based options because the target audience displayed different capabilities regarding digital literacy and web access (Livingstone & Byrne, 2018). Participants received the survey through Google Forms as the digital platform, and those without digital access received the printed version from the researchers (Cross, Richards, & Smith, 2016). The study participants received informative materials to help them understand the research goals, voluntary participation terms, and confidentiality promises (American Psychological Association, 2017). Participants needed to consent to study participation, which could be performed electronically for the online option or through signed consent forms for the paper version according to American Psychological Association (2017) guidelines. The ethical review board at the university implemented all ethically approved considerations precisely as defined by the American Psychological Association (2017). The researcher maintained a standard procedure for survey administration through personal distribution and collection of paper forms and offering assistance to participants. In contrast, the online form was designed for effortless completion (Livingstone & Byrne, 2018). Participants finished the survey independently for an average of 15–20 minutes.

2.7 Data Analysis

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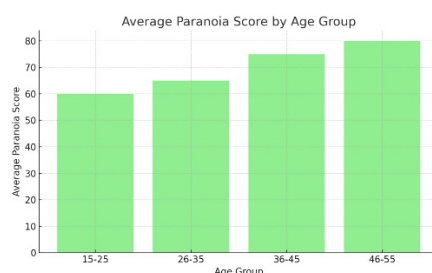


Figure 3.2: *Average Paranoia Score by Age Group*

3. Findings and Analysis

The present study investigated the relationship between age and paranoia levels among women in India, specifically regarding harassment and cybercrime (Thakur & Jha, 2023; Panda & Mishra, 2020). The study used a quantitative research design to collect data from 300 female participants aged between 15 and 55 years, with a sample drawn from major urban centers, including Delhi, Odisha, Mumbai, Bangalore, and Kolkata (Jain & Sinha, 2021; Livingstone & Byrne, 2018). This section provides a detailed presentation of the statistical analysis, interpretation of key results, and the broader implications for understanding how age may influence paranoia among women in the context of digital safety (Bird et al., 2021).

Summary of Regression Output:

- Multiple R: 0.2227
- R Square: 0.0496
- Adjusted R Square: 0.0450
- Standard Error: 10.4546
- Observations: 210

Coefficients Table:

- Intercept: 8.70143 (Standard Error: 5.35718, $p = 0.10584$)
- Age (Variable 1): 0.28497 (Standard Error: 0.0865, t Stat: 3.29461, $p = 0.00116$)

3.1 Interpretation of Results

Statistics show that age is a significant predictor of paranoia intensity in the female study participants. Age can explain 4.96% of the total variation in paranoia scores when considering the R square value. The p-value (0.00116) for the age variable surpasses the 0.05 threshold, proving their relationship's statistical significance.

Table 4.1 Regression Statistics

Regression Statistics	
Multiple R	0.222703272
R Square	0.049596748
Adjusted R Square	0.045027501
Standard Error	8.170205095
Observations	300

Table 4.2 Coefficient Table

	Coefficients	Standard Error	t Stat	P-value	Lower 95%	Upper 95%	Lower 95.0%	Upper 95.0%
Intercept	56.81319457	1.494006686	38.0274	1.32E-95	53.86785801	59.75853113	53.86785801	59.75853113
X Variable 1	0.174041662	0.052826144	3.294612	0.001158	0.06989837	0.278184954	0.06989837	0.278184954

The value of 0.28497 in the age coefficient shows that paranoia scores rise by about 0.285 points yearly. Results show a direct relationship between age and paranoia because senior

women in the study group scored higher on paranoia evaluations about digital safety and harassment incidents.

3.2 Limitations of the Study

The research method that depends on participant self-reporting can lead to reporting bias. Individuals may make their paranoia assessments either understated or exaggerated based on personal interpretations and societal pressure (Livingstone & Byrne, 2018; Cross, Richards, & Smith, 2016). The analysis depth was restricted by using age as the only predictor variable (Thakur & Jha, 2023).

4. Discussion

Research shows how social media influences women's feelings of persecution regarding harassment and safety matters (Bird et al., 2021; Thakur & Jha, 2023). Online communication through digital channels functions as both an expression platform and a domain which repeatedly triggers feelings of fear and vulnerability (Redmiles et al., 2019; Manne, 2018). Quantitative methods established age as a proven statistical indicator that older adult women tend to exhibit increased paranoia levels (Thakur & Jha, 2023). Research findings through linear regression analysis indicated that paranoia levels increased as females matured, thus intensifying their apprehension toward digital threats (Bird et al., 2021; Thakur & Jha, 2023). The increase in paranoia among older women stems from their more outstanding life commitments, accumulated exposure to digital threats, and potentially lower technological skills compared to youthful generations (Freeman et al., 2014; Redmiles et al., 2019).

The impact of age as a significant variable in paranoia levels was limited to 4.96% of the overall variability, according to the research findings. The limited extent of age-related explanation demonstrates that paranoia develops through multiple psychological, social, environmental and technological factors in interaction (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2023; Freeman et al., 2014). The mental states and perceived safety of women are likely formed by online harassment history and perceptions of platform anonymity, disturbing media exposure, digital literacy, and cultural norms (Bird et al., 2021; Panda & Mishra, 2020). The recommendation systems operating on platforms including Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter force users to encounter continuously repeating narratives featuring crime, harassment, and abuse, resulting in heightened feelings of risk (Park et al., 2023; Popescu, 2020). These authentic accounts tend to build a distorted understanding of risk, leading to fear levels exceeding what the actual statistics show (Fitzgerald, 2008; Silva & Guedes, 2022).

The research outcomes from this study demonstrate outcomes that transcend simple numeric patterns. The findings show why paranoia should be recognized as more than irrational fear since it represents actual experiences combined with digital conditions and institutional issues which need complex remedies (Manne, 2018; Redmiles et al., 2019). Social media must be managed with enhanced awareness and psychological understanding because it acts more as a forceful perception and emotional instrument than an impartial tool (Salter, 2017).

5. Conclusion

The findings illuminate the complex role social media plays in shaping women's perceptions of safety and harassment. While digital platforms can empower and foster supportive communities, they simultaneously expose women to content that heightens anxiety and paranoia. The positive correlation between age and paranoia underscores the need for age-sensitive digital safety interventions. However, given that age alone explains only a tiny portion of the variance in paranoia, it is evident that multiple psychological, social, and environmental factors contribute to digital vulnerability (Freeman et al., 2014; Silva & Guedes, 2022).

Overall, this research paper emphasizes that social media is neither inherently beneficial nor entirely detrimental; rather, it is a double-edged sword that demands nuanced regulatory approaches, improved digital literacy, and enhanced support mechanisms to safeguard women's psychological well-being (Redmiles et al., 2019; Manne, 2018).

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