Silenced Voices: Understanding Sexual Harassment on Anonymous Social Media Among Bangladeshi People

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Abstract

This paper presents the findings on the use of Anonymous Social Media (ASM) in Bangladesh based on an anonymous online survey of 291 participants and semi-structured interviews with 27 participants. Our study shows a wide prevalence of sexual harassment on anonymous social networks in Bangladesh, the relationship between a closely-knitted communal culture and anonymous harassment, and the lack of infrastructural support for the victims. These findings advocate for a safe and supportive online environment for its users, especially for women who are the primary victims of profanity or defamation in Bangladesh.

Author Keywords

Anonymity; Social Media; Anonymous Application; Harassment;

Introduction

While online sexual harassment has been studied from various perspectives in the context of 'developed' and western countries [8], the case of Low and Middle Income Countries (LMICs) has remained mostly under-studied. We posit that studying online harassment in the context of LMICs not only reveals how many underprivileged women struggle on digital platforms, but also expose many infrastructural tensions that may remain invisible in a similar discourse within the

Questions	Percentage
From Whom You Expected to Get Posts	Someone Known (58.14%)
Did You Face Any Kind of Harassment	Yes (40.6%) **Women (69.24%) Men (30.76%)**
Could Guess Anonymous Sender	Yes 35.65%
Less Resilience Against Harassment	Yes (31.8%) **Women (51.9%) Men (48.1%)**

Table 1: Survey insights on anonymous applications

'developed' world. Our study situates itself in a male-dominated Bangladeshi culture that has historically been suffering from patriarchy, misogyny, domestic violence, public sexual harassment, and systematic gender bias [11]. Like many other countries in the world, social media have become very popular in Bangladesh in the last decade, like Facebook [12].

Most mainstream online social media, including Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, often do not provide their users with a convenient and normative way to communicate with each other [13]. However, Anonymous Social Media (ASM) like Ask.fm, Yik Yak, Secret, and Sarahah have brought changes to that practice by allowing people to express their thoughts and opinions anonymously. But several studies have also shown how people often misuse these platforms to sexually harass others [2]. In this study, we focus on the anonymous social media (e.g. Ask.fm, Sarahah) to understand the severity, nature, process, experiences, and aftermath of online sexual harassment in Bangladesh on such anonymous social media.

Background
Online anonymity broadly involves the concepts of availability and unavailability of the person's physical existence rather than true traceability [7]. In computer-mediated communication, anonymity has been linked to less accountability [4] and more disinhibition [10]. In one study, people on Ask.fm were found to be more negative than the people on some other social media apps (like Instagram) [5]. This implies that, anonymous social media are often guilty of hosting online harassment. Online harassment slowly triggers egregious psychological impacts including depression, low self-esteem, and even suicide [6]. In

fact, several suicides are thought to be directly associated with Ask.fm [5]. Though online harassment has always been in existence, dissenting against it by victims is interestingly infrequent. Although both sexes engage in and experience online harassment, research has shown that women appear to be the primary target in cyber spaces, and that gender and sexual harassment are the most prevalent forms of cyberbullying or online harassment [9]. Women who face such harassment, often prefer to be passive, pretend to not notice, walk away rather than giving any response or reaction to the harassment [3]. Without support, they feel unsafe and vulnerable to go through the stressful experience, which holds them back from protesting. Based on these research elements, we ask:
RQ1. How do ASM provide a platform of harassment, suspicion and emotional distress to its audience in Bangladesh?
RQ2. How can we explain resilience, support, and non-use among users in ASM in Bangladesh?

Method
We conducted a mixed-methods study that included an online survey and a set of semi-structured interviews in Dhaka, Bangladesh. 291 anonymous Bangladeshi voluntarily participated in the online survey (76% resided in the country and 24% were in abroad at that time) that was distributed and shared publicly by the researchers in their extended social networks. Similarly, 27 interviewees (14 women, 13 men) were selected from the same platforms through invitations. The questions of the interviews were designed to understand the individual insights and opinions. The interviews continued for two months by two of the researchers. We analyzed the interview data following

*"Someone asked why I was in a relationship with my boyfriend (my present husband), mentioning his name, the sender asked if there was lack of boys out there that I was in a relationship with him. Other messages were like if **I kissed** my boyfriend, if I use **dild**o, if I was interested to give a **blow job** to the sender."* – (Woman, 24 years, Undocumented job)

*"I guess it would be my very **close people who were staying around me like my campus people**, classmates who can notice me easily… They also gave me suggestion about my dress like by **which kind of dress** I would be looked **good, hot or sexy**."*- (Woman, 24 years, Student)

*"**I suspected** 4 or 5 seniors from my department because they wanted to flirt with me once…I was **shattered** after getting those messages and I **deleted my Sarahah account**"*- (Woman, 22 years, Student)

the grounded theory method [1], which leaded us to the themes that we inform below.

Results
Harassment, Suspicion, and Emotional Distress
Through our survey and interviews, it became evident that the events of harassment through ASM were prominent among the users, especially against the women users in Bangladesh. The frequency of facing harassment was higher in women (69.24%) as opposed to men (30.76%) (Table 1). Harassing messages mostly included sharing offensive undesirable comments, sexual desires etc. Anonymity provided a platform to those people who were looking for a chance to be abusive toward certain people without the risk of being caught directly. Interestingly, when our participants received a harassing message through their ASM, they mostly suspected people from their known connection. Although theoretically the harasser can be anyone stranger, because of the sharing pattern and the kind of relation/tie they have on their Facebook profile/real life, they could develop this suspicion. Just like negative ties, positive ties like close friends or batch mates, juniors were also sometimes responsible behind harassment including sexual one (e.g. asking about sexual relations with boyfriend or looking "sexy" in western clothes in campus etc.). As, in Bangladesh, the preference of communication through anonymous applications mostly revolves around known ties (Table 1), it is safe to assume that the messages or posts sent by the sender may contain the identifying elements that give away the true essence of anonymity. This disclosure of identity or more generally, being harassed by someone known has been a horrific experience for

many of the participants described as "disgusted", "shattered", "extremely sad" and "shocked" etc.

Resilience, Support, and Non-Use
How victims responded to or resisted harassment is also an interesting factor in our study. According to the survey (Table 1), women, in comparison to men, showed less resilience against harassment (51.9%). The reason behind it included the fear of social humiliation or shame and the prediction of worse outcome. Many times, the lack of social help, justice and law also stop the victims from raising voice. Through the interviews, it has been noticed that the frustration of lack of support, justice and actions are few of the reasons of not protesting against any harassment in Bangladesh. Not only does frustration of not having support exists but also being blamed for it instead was another reason of being silent against harassment. There are some incidents where the victims were brave enough to protest against it through sharing in their existing social medias (e.g. Facebook), but many of them reported that after their protesting against the harassing posts, the level of harassment only increased. Events like these discouraged victims to raise their voice against the harassment in public platforms and forced them to discontinue using the applications. From the survey, almost 17.6% of women and 8.3% of men have mentioned bad experiences as the reason of not using the anonymous applications anymore. Though there were a few women participants who successfully fought against harassment, the number of them was very small. For the fear of dire consequences of raising voice against the anonymous

online bullies, the incidents of women harassment are increasing with a diminishing level of defense against it.

Conclusion

While our study is limited by the quantity of data, the location where we conducted the interviews, participants' age and professions, results demonstrate how sexual harassment on ASM takes a severe form in closely-knitted communities in Bangladesh. Though we have discussed the status quo of ASM in Bangladesh, our future works of this study will address such limitations and include design implications that address the harassments and retaliation approaches in ASM.

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