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The Rise and Normalisation of Hatred Towards Women on Facebook

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

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Abstract

According to feminist communication researchers, social media, like conventional media, has affected popular understanding of rape and sexual assault. Furthermore, rape-related tweets have been proven to be prejudiced towards women as perpetrators of sexual assault (Hasinoff, 2015). Because public perception and the media create a pervasive environment in which notions about sexual assault and gender inequality circulate, social media depictions are investigated to uncover these prevalent opinions. This study focuses on a qualitative analysis of the revival and normalisation of hate against women as well as prevalent myths and stereotypes in the social media environment, like Facebook, within the context of the perception of violence against women created by the mainstream media or traditional media. This paper examines the shifting of myths and stereotypes from the offline to the online world in three central ways. It sheds light on the mobilization of the audience on social media on women's issues; a positive or negative shift in the continuum of offline violence, myths, and stereotypes against women into the online environment; and how damaging social norms proliferate and are reproduced in social media.

Keywords

Social media, Sexual Violence, Online hate against Women, Traditional Media, Facebook, Gender Oppression.

Freedom of speech is certainly fundamental to the nature of democracy, and any expression of opinion on matters which are in the public interest must be encouraged. However, in recent times, freedom of speech has been abused by people who hide behind the security provided by the Internet and anonymity. And generalizations of destructive activities like rape, murder, and posting unpleasant thoughts have become socially accepted, something which is possibly very harmful and dangerous to a democratic society. Sociologists Desmond Patton, Dirk Butler, and Robert Eschmann have labeled this behavior "online banging." (Glance, 2017)

Under the guise of free speech and expression, rape films and revenge porn have been hosted on social media websites like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, which leaves female users feeling anything

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but free. The Canadian communications theorist Marshall McLuhan famously said that violence and brutality were pushed into people's living rooms through television. The Internet today is bringing violence against women out of it. Once largely hidden from view, this brutality is now being exposed in unprecedented ways (Buni & Chemaly, 2014).

Feminist communication scholars argue that just as the traditional media has shaped public perception of rape and sexual violence through messages, news, and insensitive reporting, so has social media (Jackson & Welles, 2015). Also, tweets related to rape have been found to be biased against women as perpetrators of sexual violence (Hasinoff, 2015). Since, public perception and the media, both create a pervasive climate of sexual violence in which ideas around sexual assault and gender oppression circulate, social media portrayals are studied to expose these prevailing attitudes.

Situated within the perception created by the main stream media or the traditional media and the socio-ecological framework of violence against women, this present study focuses on qualitative analysis of the re-emergence and normalization of hate against women and leading myths and stereotypes in the social media environment like Facebook. Specifically, this paper analyzes the shifting of myths and stereotypes from the offline to the online world in three central ways: (1) shedding light on the mobilization of the audience on social media on women's issues; (2) a positive or negative shift in the continuum of offline violence, myths, and stereotypes against women into the online environment; this paper also demonstrates that we can define and analyse Facebook-based activities as a type of online intervention that goes far beyond known individual-level risk factors to identify community-level and societal-level risk factors that include damaging social norms that proliferate and are reproduced in social media.

The structure of the paper

The first section of this article describes the backdrop for this study, starting with key terminology and previous research findings and progressing to a description of the social-ecological framework. The second section of this paper presents and discusses a qualitative analysis of the normalization of hate and violence against women in the traditional media and the prejudices it engenders. These discussions on Facebook by the users provide a valuable context for understanding the significant social media role in borrowing the normalization of hate and violence against women from the traditional media and the conceptual framing of these myths and prejudices. This section also demonstrates that social media is an important space for many pre-social media violence preconceptions (e.g., sexist and misogynistic attitudes of the general public and sexualized abuse and harassment) while also aligning to new contexts (e.g., mobilization in response to breaking news and popular hashtags) to capitalize on high-profile opportunities to analyze harmful narratives and contribute feminist insights to violence against women (VAW) discourse. While doing so, this work targets both individual comments and mass-media produced news content produced on social media by traditional media, thus representing the convergence of individual-level factors (i.e., attitudes and beliefs) with deeper societal and community-level variables (i.e., social norms).

The context of the research

Because of technological advancements, we can now communicate, share vital information, speak out, and raise awareness about human rights atrocities. However, it has also offered fertile ground for gender-based violence against women and/or girls to an alarming magnitude with little accountability. It has fueled the perpetration of insidiously destructive activities, frequently by known people but often by anonymous ones, thus maintaining a climate in which violence against women and/or girls appears to be socially acceptable. The COVID-19 pandemic's lockdowns merely exacerbated this long-standing problem, which has a significant number of cases of online sexual assault. While

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men and women can both be victims of online abuse and violence, women are far more likely to be targets of frequent and serious kinds of harmful behaviour online or through the use of technology. The intention of harassment varies depending on each and every situation, but it usually involves aiming to embarrass, shame, humiliate, intimidate, threaten, silence, extort, or, in certain cases, encourage mob assaults or malicious interactions.

An act of bullying is defined by the Berkman Center for Internet and Society as hostile acts or behaviors that share three characteristics: a) they are intentional; b) they involve a power imbalance between an aggressor (individual or group) and a victim; c) they are repetitive in nature and continuous." (Online Abuse 101 - Women's Media Center, n.d.).

Online abuse includes a wide range of techniques and malicious behavior, including sharing humiliating or violent and cruel content about another person, impersonating; doxing; stalking; monitoring and surveilling, the nonconsensual sexual use of photos, as well as violent threats. "The online harassment of women, sometimes called Cybersexism or cybermisogyny, is specifically gendered abuse targeted at women and girls online." (Online Abuse 101 - Women's Media Center, n.d.). It involves sexism, racism, castism, religious prejudice, traditional prejudice, and gender enmity.

According to feminist perspectives on violence against women, understanding violence requires an imperative assessment of gender and power; the origins of violence against women from patriarchal societal norms and systems; structural subjugation; and the psychopathological sickness of the abuser. Almost every day, we learn of women and girls who have fallen victims to non-consensual sharing of images or videos, harassment and threats via social media platforms or email, which include rape and death threats, online sexual harassment, stalking, which includes using tracking apps or devices, impersonation, and financial loss through digital means.

A study conducted by K. Jaishankar and Megha Desai on 72 women, titled "Cyber Stalking-Victimization of Girl Students: An Empirical Study," showed that 12.5% of the respondents were intimately involved with their cyber stalker before the stalking began.The study also found that 62.5 percent of harassment incidents began with emails and/or online chats. (Sood, 2020).
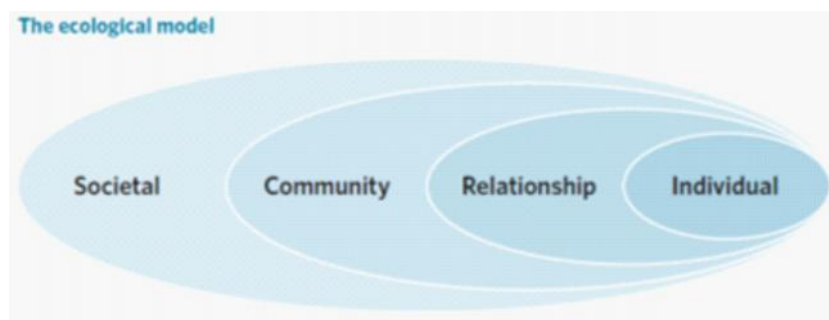
"100,000 women shared their stories as victims of sexual abuse using the hashtag #MyFirstHarassment (#MiPrimerAcoso in Spanish). In the United States of America, a similar movement took place in October 2017" (Montiel, 2018). Due to a lack of efficient and complete data collection in this area, information is fragmented and incomplete, but what we do know is enough to conclude that the size and severity of digital violence against women and girls is definitely increasing, and the resulting unaccountability, remains colossal, having a huge impact on society as a whole.

A description of the social-ecological framework

Many diverse theoretical models, including those based on biological, psychological, social, cultural, and gender based equality principles, seek to identify the risk and protective mechanisms for sexual violence against women. Each of these models allows us to understand the various risk factors that raise the possibility of someone becoming a perpetrator and/or victim.

A frequently used framework for conceptualizing violence against women, the social-ecological model, identifies how risk factors arise at the individual, relationship, community, and societal levels, individually and all together (HEISE, 1998).

Ecological interpretations of violence against women indeed are important because they recognise the interconnectedness of multiple and diverse risk factors for violence against women and allow us all to integrate both individual-level theories (e.g., social learning theory) and societal-level theories like the feminist perspectives. Diagram 1 below summarises this approach, which includes individual, relationship, community, and societal-level elements.

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The ecological model

Societal   Community   Relationship   Individual

This diagram enables the incorporation of risk and protective factors from several domains of influence. Thus, evidence from psychological models on individual-risk factors and evidence from gender models on societal-risk factors can be included into the similar ecological model.

The model classifies risk factors into four levels of influence, and explores the connection between individual and societal risk factors, and defines violence as the result of multiple kinds of influence on behaviour.

Individual

This comprises biological and personal history elements that may raise an individual's probability of becoming a victim or perpetrator of violence.

Diagram 2 : Levels (ecologies) of violence against women (VAW).

Level	Includes	Examples
Individual	Biological and personal history factors that may increase the likelihood that an individual will become a victim or perpetrator of violence.	Gender; age; attitudes and beliefs supportive of VAW.
Relationship	Factors that increase risk as a result of relationships with peers, intimate partners and family members.	Sexually aggressive peers; family environment characterized by violence; privileging patriarchal values above women's safety.
Community	Community contexts in which social relationships are embedded such as schools, workplaces and neighborhoods.	Norms tolerant of VAW; weak community sanctions for perpetrators; lack of support from police and courts.
Societal	Larger, macro-level factors that influence sexual and intimate partner violence such as gender inequality, belief systems, societal norms and economic or social policies.	Norms supportive of VAW; male superiority and sexual entitlement; weak laws and policies related to sexual violence and gender equality.

Adapted from Jordan Faibairn (Fairbairn, 2020)

Relationship

This covers risk factors resulting from relationships with peers, intimate relationships, and family members. These are a person's closest social circle, and they have the ability to impact their behaviour and variety of experiences.

Community

This refers to the community settings in which social connections are embedded, such as schools, workplaces, and neighbourhoods, and aims to discover the features of these settings that are related with persons being victims or perpetrators of intimate partner and sexual violence.

Societal

Gender inequality as well as religious or cultural belief systems, societal standards, and economic or social regulations and policies that create or maintain gaps and tensions amongst groups of people

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are all examples of bigger, macro-level factors that affect sexual and intimate partner violent acts. It also investigates the bigger societal risk factors that influence violence rates.

Factors that establish an acceptable environment for violence, diminish inhibitions against violence, and generate and sustain gaps across different sectors of society or conflicts between different groups or countries are all included.

Larger societal risk factors include

a. Societal norms that encourage violence as a legitimate means of resolving disputes;

b. Mindsets that view suicide as a personal decision rather than a violent act that can be stopped;

c. Norms that place parental rights above child welfare;

d. Social customs that promote men's dominance above women and children;

e. Standards that sanction the excessive use of force by law enforcement like police against individuals;

f. Customs that encourage political unrest.

Health, educational, economic, and social policies that uphold high levels of economic or social inequality across different groups in society are also examples of larger societal causes.

The negative effects

Societies with existing high levels of inequality that see the gap between wealthy and poor deepen as a result of globalisation are likely to see a rise in interpersonal violence. Rapid Economic and social changes in a country in reaction to strong global influences can overwhelm existing societal controls over behaviour, thus creating the conditions for something like a high level of violence. Furthermore, the reduction of market regulations and increasing economic incentives as a result of globalisation can lead to considerably easier access for alcohol, drugs, even firearms, despite attempts to reduce their usage in violent occurrences (Krug et al., 2002).

Facebook continuing hate and violence against women from the traditional media

Specifically, the problematized patterns observed in mass media portrayals of violence against women illustrate how traditional mass media are used to highlight the most politically correct language to normalize and organize vignettes of sex-based hate, specifically in relation to the gender differences that cause violence against women. Framing rape or sexual violence as "sexist" or "misogynistic" also becomes a means for the mainstream media to suppress the anger felt by many women and girls, which it may not have the courage to express directly. Findings show that media content perpetuates sexist stereotypes which connect male identity with violence, dominance, independence, aggressiveness, and power, whereas women are associated with emotions, fragility, dependency, and sensitivity (Montiel, 2018).

Some patterns are as follows

(1) Relying on rape myths

a. Women provoke rapists by the way they dress

The myth attempts to excuse rape by 'blaming the victim' and assumes that a woman who draws attention is looking for sex or "deserves what she gets." However, dressing attractively and even flirting is not an invitation to rape. The notion that clothing has something to do with rape is widespread and pervasive. Amnesty International questioned Britons in 2005 and discovered that one-third of respondents agreed that women were partly to blame for being assaulted due to their clothing and behaviour.

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b.   Rape occurs only in dark alleys amongst strangers

The myth says that rape may be avoided by avoiding particular locations and that home is safer. It also institutionalises commonly held racial and socioeconomic stereotypes, such as rape and sexual violence, which seem to be frequent in slums or shadows. The vast majority of rapes, however, are committed by people the victim knows. Victims are frequently raped in their families or subjected to incestuous rapes.

c.   Rape is a crime of passion

To the extent that discussions of rape can be reduced to those of lust, there are some significant differences in how victims and men are portrayed. This myth says that rape is frequently impulsive and unplanned; it assumes that rape is motivated by overwhelming lust; and it aims to absolve the rapist of guilt for the rape. Most rapes, on the other hand, are intentional and planned. Rapists frequently engage in sexual acts for reasons other than sexual pleasure. Psychologists have discovered that the motivation for sexual assault is generally a desire to control, overpower, and dominate, rather than just an inability to regulate sexual urges.

d.   If the victim did not immediately report the rape, it was not a rape

A late complaint often does not indicate a bogus complaint. Rape trauma can produce feelings of shame, fear, and guilt, which may prevent a victim from filing a report. In our modern, seemingly safe society, many victims feel pressured to keep quiet about sexual violence, fearing judgment from their peers or the threat of harm.

e.   Women Enjoy rape and sexual assault

This is one of those ridiculous beliefs that stems from a severe lack of knowledge about how the body operates. Blinking and breathing constitute two examples of autonomic processes in a human body. Even though it is completely unwelcome, a woman's body might lubricate during assault even though her body system is on automation. Actually, this is a major source deal of guilt. No one enjoys or requests rape, but the neurological system reacts to this heinous event.

(2)   Focusing on perpetrators' stress (financial or physical or mental health) as an explanation for gender violence.

a.   Financial stress

Everyone, including the traditional media, keeps blaming unemployment for anything from poverty to adolescent insecurity, but can they also blame it for rape and sexual assault as well? A BJP member, Premlata Singh, from Haryana, believes there is a link between the two. As a result, she stated, "One of the reasons for such instances (rapes) is indeed the frustration that now has entered into the minds and hearts of our youth." According to news channel, "young individuals who are frustrated, jobless, and unsure about their future do such horrible deeds," she said (BHALERAO, 2018).

b.   Mental/physical stress

If women do not offer sexual opportunities to males, their sexual energy can mount to dangerous heights, and once aroused, it really is impossible not to escalate to climax.

In India, one symptom of the culture-bound form of the disease of the "male sexual weakness" aka dhat syndrome can be, "... I am likely to become weaker if the "dhat" (semen) flows out in the open (premature ejaculation when molesting or sexually harassing a lady) and the woman does'nt offer oneself to me."

(3)   Using primarily social news sources such as police and other criminal justice socials without including advocates and researchers.

The news media focus on the seemingly random violence rather than on the instances and reports given by the researchers. The researchers and advocates working for the group described violent

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incidents, focusing on the individuals who must be included in the news. "We are begging Facebook to do more to protect women's ability to engage in democratic discourse and to build a safe and empowering space for women," Jackie Speier, a Democrat U.S. Representative who also co-chair of the Democratic Women's Caucus wrote to Facebook.

(4) Victim blaming

Thousands and thousands of men in India have been always indoctrinated to blame women for rape. As well as the code regarding women in our country pretty simple: dress modestly, avoid going out at night, avoid going to pubs and clubs, and avoid going out alone. If you violate this code, you will indeed be held accountable for the repercussions. People may accuse a victim in order to remove themselves from such an unpleasant event and therefore confirm their personal invulnerability towards the risk. Others may perceive the victim simply different from themselves when they label or accuse the victim. People console themselves by saying, "Because I'm not like her, and I don't do that, it would never happen with me." We must educate people on the fact that it is not a healthy reaction.

According to a research by an independent organisation called the Inter-Parliamentary Union, promoting democracy, that social media like Facebook has become the No. 1 centre where psychological violence is perpetrated against females in the specific form of misogynistic remarks, demeaning images, mobbing, blackmailing, abusing, intimidation, and threats.

When it comes to rape culture, we have a lot more work to do, and a lot of it includes discussing the attitudes that so many in our country have toward sexual assault. We use social media as a scapegoat for these attitudes and beliefs when we should be addressing them directly instead.

Conclusion

Facebook representations, like personal attitudes and beliefs, are also both reflective of and contribute to the reproduction of social norms. The students' online use of Facebook became a poignant example of the way social media enacts normative concepts like age, gender, and other group identities that shape their daily lives. Clearly, on the Internet, people can post anything they want. Infused with their day-to-day interactions, individual networks allow individuals to share their experiences and develop socially shared norms in particular domains.

However, unlike personal attitudes and beliefs, media coverage does have the authority to still be essentially objective as well as tell the real story of incidents; thus, these depictions may be easily and quickly accepted as fact, even after harmful representations (for example, victim-blaming, sensationalising violence), which function as just a "technology of violence" of meaning-making and material consequences. For example, misrepresentations can cause psychological and emotional suffering to survivors of sexual assault or violence and their families, as well as a missed chance to provide public education (for example, early risk variables and/or helpline information) or positively influence public opinion. As a result, the news depictions and public debates surrounding these events are critical areas for societal structural transformation. There will be a moment when we must admit that our inherent sexism is the clear perpetrator here.

Yes, dissatisfied and jobless men may engage in sexual harassment of women on Facebook when the sight of an independent woman who is smarter, stronger or more independent than men, in particular, makes them sense emasculated. They are upset because they are bored and have nothing to do, whereas the girls go to work. This aggravation may drive men to "teach" young females a lesson in any way their limited brains and huge egos know how. Sexual dominance remains the most important metric of supremacy for numerous men, employed or not. That is why current symptomatic treatment for rape culture in our India is so ineffective. People, like Singh, would not like to bear any of the blame. It is this mindset, which continues to portray males as poor, defenseless, and wronged.

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We must ask when and how these wronged or frustrated men came to have the right to exploit bodies of women as punch bags. Then we really would still rather beat about the bush and jeopardize the lives of women on a regular basis than admit that we have intentionally avoided answering this topic smartly.

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