SOUTH AFRICAN STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES OF AND REACTIONS TO ONLINE VICTIMISATION: A GENDER ANALYSIS*

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ABSTRACT

Technological advances continually shape the world, and technology has become an integral part of everyday life. University students rely on the internet for their academic and social lives, making them vulnerable to online harassment and victimisation. Although there has been a growing interest in cybercrime and online victimisation, there is a lack of knowledge regarding the phenomenon among South African university students. The present study set out to describe undergraduate students' access to and use of social media and other electronic platforms, their experiences of online victimisation, and how students respond to such events. A total of 1,001 students participated in a correlational survey, using a group-administered questionnaire developed from existing instruments and literature. Since a non-probability sampling strategy was followed, the gender analysis relied on non-parametric procedures, and effect sizes were calculated where significant differences were found. Meaningful differences ($p < 0.05$) were noted in students' sources of the internet and their reasons for its use. Female students were significantly more likely to experience online harassment from strangers and to receive unwanted sexual images or messages. Male students, on the other hand, were more likely to fall victim to electronic viruses or malicious software. Not surprisingly, the total online victimisation scores showed meaningful differences between male and female respondents. Gender differences further emerged in how students responded to online victimisation, particularly in reporting incidents to authorities and confronting the harasser.

Keywords: *Students; cybercrime; online victimisation; gender analysis; reactions to crime.*

INTRODUCTION

South Africa has a population of 62 million people, and approximately 72 percent of the country's inhabitants use the internet (World Bank, 2024). This figure is slightly higher than the global average of 67 percent (Petrosyan, 2024). The internet has revolutionised how people communicate worldwide, and it has become an essential part of everyday life (Akhter, 2020: 2). The internet and social media platforms offer several benefits to society by providing opportunities for social, economic, and communication activities, as well as promoting globalisation (Harris & Steyn, 2018: 15). Among young people, particularly university students, the internet provides critical academic tools, enabling them to access more information through online library websites and databases containing scholarly journals. Additionally, social media has become the primary means of communication between university students and their family, friends, classmates, and lecturers (Sehlule, 2018: 37). However, alongside these advantages and the various opportunities the internet offers, the

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digital environment has also given rise to new dimensions and types of crime and victimisation, commonly referred to as online victimisation.

Online victimisation is an umbrella term that encompasses various deviant behaviours, such as cyberbullying, cyberstalking, online harassment, the receipt of unwanted (sexual) texts or images, identity and financial fraud, hacking, the distribution of malicious software, and impersonation (Marret & Choo, 2017: 2). Although the literature often distinguishes between online bullying and online harassment, common features of these definitions include the unwanted, intentional, and sometimes repetitive direct targeting of an individual through online mechanisms to humiliate, threaten, or inflict harm (Harris & Steyn, 2018: 17; Jones & Mitchell, 2016: 571; Lindsay, Booth, Messing & Thaller, 2016: 3176). Online victimisation differs from traditional and offline victimisation in several ways. Firstly, cyberspace is an unregulated environment that provides perpetrators with numerous opportunities to behave in ways that are often uncharacteristic of their offline behaviour. Unlike in real-life interactions, offenders in online spaces do not always have to deal with the immediate consequences of their actions (Akhter, 2020: 4). Furthermore, repetition in online victimisation does not necessarily refer to a single individual repeatedly targeting a victim; instead, it refers to multiple users posting harmful messages directed at one person or one message being viewed by various users at the same time. In addition, online victimisation represents a distinct crime typology due to the perceptions of anonymity it offers (Kokkinos, Baltzidis & Xynogala, 2016: 840). Anonymity can diminish the offender's sense of empathy and embolden them to engage in deviant behaviour, as the ability to hide their identity often creates a false sense of invincibility (Carter, 2013: 1230). The internet is also easily accessible at any time of the day and night, therefore providing a large pool of victims to target (Akhter, 2020: 4).

Globally, millions of people are victims of various forms of online victimisations every year. In South Africa, there are officially 21 crime categories that are covered and presented by the South African Police Service and Victims of Crime statistics (Statistics South Africa, 2020: 2). However, online victimisation is not one of them. Overall, due to the little knowledge available and lack of understanding regarding online victimisation among South African undergraduate students, there is a clear need for further investigation, thus highlighting the necessity for the present study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Prevalence and patterns of online victimisation

With the constant advancement of economic development across the globe, there has been a noticeable increase in internet use, particularly among young people (Du, Liu, Zhang & Yin, 2024: 1). For example, a study in Canada involving 2,883 participants aged 12 to 18 years revealed that they spent an average of 19.7 hours per week on the internet (Lavoie, Dufour, Berbiche, Therriault & Lane, 2023: 4). Additionally, Aizenkot (2020: 4) studied 5,581 Israeli students in grades three to twelve and found that 33.1 percent spent between two and five hours per day online, followed closely by 32.1 percent who spent between one and two hours on the internet. A study conducted in Saudi Arabia revealed that, of 462 adolescents, the majority (82%) used the internet for social networking and almost entirely utilised smartphones as their primary method of accessing the internet (Ismail, 2024: 113). In their study of 3,694 Chinese rural adolescents, Ma and Sheng (2023: 22) found that 55.7 percent spent less than an hour on the internet, and specifically so for online learning (44.4%) and online shopping (28.9%). Furthermore, 59.1 percent of the respondents used the internet for socialising, and 62.2 percent used it for online entertainment. Another study of 859 learners aged 11 to 18 years revealed that 45.6 percent spent, on average, between one and ten hours online per week, with male students reporting higher levels of weekly online activity (Mo, Chan, Wang & Lau, 2020: 4).

While the existing literature illustrates that adolescents regularly use the internet, online activity is also prevalent among young adults. Silveira, Morais, and Petrella (2022) studied 407 young Portuguese adults and found that at least 39 percent spent between five and eight hours per day on the internet, with 74.7 percent specifically using smartphones. Another study of 285 university students revealed that the majority who posted text-based information predominantly used Line® (47.7%) and Facebook® (46.7%) (Hong & Cheng, 2018: 400). Furthermore, Şan, Orhan Karsak, İzci, and Öncül (2024: 5) studied 1,137 Turkish university students, and 49.7 percent spent between one and three hours per day on the internet. These studies consistently demonstrate that both adolescents and university students spend a significant amount of time online, often using smartphones for social engagement and entertainment purposes. High levels of online engagement and presence increase the visibility and accessibility of adolescents and young adults, thereby making them more vulnerable to various forms of online victimisation and harassment.

Cyberbullying and online trolling

One of the most prevalent forms of online harassment is cyberbullying, which refers to an aggressive, intentional act that is carried out repeatedly against a target through digital platforms (Aizenkot, 2020: 1; Calvete, Orue, Echezarraga, Cortazar & Fernandez-Gonzalez, 2022: 1; Ševčíková, Šmahel & Otavová, 2012: 320). Aizenkot's study (2020: 3–6) of 5,581 adolescents found that both the use of social networking sites and online self-disclosure significantly predicted cyberbullying victimisation. Similarly, Kee, Anwar, and Vranjes (2024) found that cyberbullying among 534 Malaysian youth predominantly occurred on messaging platforms, with no significant differences based on gender or age. The study also revealed a correlation between exposure to cyberbullying and mental health challenges such as depression and suicidal ideation (Kee et al., 2024: 6). In Montenegro, Draganić, Grbović, and Adžić Zečević (2024: 11) reported that 24.9 percent of 202 high-school students experienced cyberbullying and 27.7 percent admitted to perpetrating it. Furthermore, Alsawalqa (2021) noted meaningful cyberbullying among East and Southeast Asian students in Jordan during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, which was significantly associated with lower self-esteem. Another form of online harassment is trolling, which is broadly defined as provoking other internet users to act aggressively against another user, often under the veil of anonymity (Hong & Cheng, 2018: 397). In their study, Hong and Cheng (2018) reported that 70 percent of their participants had experienced online trolling at least once a week. Additionally, Mao and Hu (2024: 10) found that males reported higher rates of both trolling victimisation and reactive trolling (engaging in trolling after being trolled). While these studies demonstrate the psychological harms of cyberbullying and trolling, few engage deeply with how gender intersects with and shapes experiences of online victimisation. Additionally, there is a lack of studies conducted in Africa, resulting in a deficiency of local research exploring students' experiences and responses to online victimisation.

Romantic and online consumer fraud

Apart from cyberbullying and online trolling, another common type of online victimisation is romantic fraud, also known as dating and relationship fraud. Romance fraud occurs when an individual is deceived by someone they believe to be in a relationship with them (Cross & Layt, 2022: 956). There is an ongoing debate among scholars regarding the role of gender in online relationship scams. Lazarus, Button, and Kapend (2022: 5) posit that there are no gender differences in cybercrimes such as romantic fraud. In contrast, Cross, Dragiewicz, and Richards (2018: 6) found in a study of 21 Australian victims of romance fraud that females were more frequently targeted (57%) than their male counterparts (43%). Similarly, an American study by Soares and Lazarus (2024: 7) revealed that 70 percent of romance scammers targeted females,

suggesting a gendered pattern in victim selection. These contradictions point to a possible mismatch between theoretical assumptions and empirical realities. Victims of romantic fraud are often targeted due to their perceived psychological vulnerability (Drew & Webster, 2024: 7). Furthermore, as a result of their victimisation, they require more psychological, financial, and emotional support (Drew & Webster, 2024: 7). Beyond romantic fraud, individuals also engage in online consumer fraud to achieve financial gain. In a study with 1,710 participants from Portugal, Fonseca, Moreira, and Guedes (2022: 774) found that 13 percent of the sample experienced online consumer fraud. Their results did not show any significant differences among demographic groups, suggesting that offenders would target anyone (Fonseca et al., 2022: 774). Additionally, impulsivity and risky financial behaviour had a negative impact on online consumer fraud victimisation.

Gender differences in online sexual victimisation

Research has increasingly highlighted gender differences in online victimisation, including both general and sexual forms of victimisation (Donner, 2016: 558; Haslop, O'Rourke & Southern, 2021; Raselekoane, Mudau & Tsorai, 2019). Harris and Steyn (2018: 20) conducted a study involving 83 school learners to investigate gender differences in adolescent online victimisation and sexting. Their findings indicated that girls, who typically spent more time online, were more likely to be targeted than boys (Harris & Steyn, 2018: 24). Similarly, Kanwal and Jami (2018: 808) found in their study on the psychosocial impacts of cyberbullying among university students in Pakistan that female victims of cybercrimes experienced heightened fear, shame, and internalised psychological problems. Complementing these findings, Haslop et al. (2021) surveyed 795 students and identified a clear gender disparity in online harassment, with women reporting higher rates of victimisation.

Online sexual victimisation has become a growing concern, as highlighted by Longobardi, Fabris, Prino, and Settanni (2021: 39), who examined the prevalence and risk factors associated with online sexual victimisation among Italian early adolescents aged 12 to 14 years. Alarmingly, approximately 40 percent of adolescents reported being victims of at least one incident of online sexual victimisation (Longobardi et al., 2021: 42). A Spanish study by Pineda, Martínez-Martínez, Galán, Rico-Bordera, and Piqueras (2023: 2), which explored the links between online sexual victimisation and the dark triad personality traits (Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy), found that women were more likely to be victims, while men were more frequently the perpetrators (Pineda et al., 2023: 5). Notably, many victims reported knowing their perpetrators in real life (Pineda et al., 2023: 6). Schokkenbroek, Ponnet, and Hardyns (2023) also found a significant connection between dark triad traits and both online and offline sexual harassment in their study of 458 university students in Belgium (Schokkenbroek et al., 2023). The studies collectively underscore a consistent gender disparity in online victimisation, with females being more frequently targeted. This pattern appears across age groups, from early adolescents (Longobardi et al., 2021) to university students and young adults (Kanwal & Jami, 2018; Pineda et al., 2023). The findings suggest that gendered online experiences are deeply rooted in and reflect broader societal power imbalances that extend into digital spaces.

Reactions to online harassment

Despite the upsurge in online victimisation, empirical evidence on how students experience and respond to such victimisation remains limited. Existing studies suggest a range of reactions, including reporting the incident to the platform where it occurred, informing the police or parents, directly confronting the perpetrator, or even retaliating (Frisén, Berne & Marin, 2014: 578; Navarro, Larranaga & Yubero, 2016: 158). However, the most common reaction to online harassment is to ignore the perpetrator (Celuch, Savela, Oksa, Latikka & Oksanen, 2022: 8).

While this passive approach may sometimes help prevent the escalation of cyberbullying, research indicates that active intervention by bystanders, particularly when they express empathy toward the victim, can be more effective in reducing negative online behaviour (Ferreira, Simão, Ferreira, Souza & Francisco, 2016: 302). In some instances, the victims of cyberbullying may become perpetrators themselves. In a study involving 626 participants, Mao and Hu (2024:12) found a positive correlation between being targeted by online trolling and responding by trolling others. Similarly, Erişti (2019: 428) examined 161 Turkish students and found that 115 males engaged in revenge-driven responses to cyberbullying, compared to 46 females, highlighting a gendered pattern in retaliatory behaviour. Bae (2021: 3) further supports this trend, revealing that prior experiences of cyberbullying significantly predicted future perpetration among a sample of 4,779 adolescents aged 11 to 19 years. Males, in particular, were more likely to transition from victims to offenders (Bae, 2021: 4). The range of responses to online victimisation reveals nuanced insights into the broader dynamics of online behavioural norms. Passive reactions to victimisation may reflect a lack of support systems or awareness of appropriate response mechanisms. It may leave victims feeling isolated or powerless, particularly when harassment persists. Additionally, the gendered patterns observed, in which males are more likely to retaliate or engage in cyberbullying, highlight the role of socialisation in shaping online behaviour. Cultural expectations surrounding masculinity, dominance, and emotional expression may contribute to the use of aggression as a response to online victimisation and harassment.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Routine activity theory

Routine activity theory (Cohen & Felson, 1979) explains criminal victimisation as the outcome of everyday routines that shape opportunities for crime. Its central assumption is that victimisation occurs when three elements converge: a motivated offender, a suitable target, and the absence of a capable guardian. The theory further posits that individuals' daily routines increase both the frequency and intensity of interactions between potential offenders and potential victims, with offenders often selecting targets based on perceived value and vulnerability (Cohen & Felson, 1979). Originally developed to explain crimes involving direct physical interaction, the routine activity theory has been widely applied in studies of property crime and personal victimisation, particularly in contexts where victims' lifestyles (such as socialising in high-crime areas, being homeless, or keeping late hours) made them more vulnerable (Puente Guerrero, 2023).

More recently, routine activity theory has been applied to cybercrime and online victimisation (Ilievski, 2016; Leukfeldt & Yar, 2016; Yar, 2005). Scholars have shown how digital behaviours can shape exposure to offenders (Reyns, Henson & Fisher, 2011). In the case of students, online habits such as frequent social media use, late-night internet activity, and interacting with unknown individuals create conditions that heighten their exposure to online offenders. In online spaces, the theory helps explain how digital users become attractive targets due to the symbolic value of personal data, photos, or perceived vulnerability, while weak guardianship (e.g., poor passwords, inadequate privacy settings, or lack of institutional monitoring) further increases risk. The theory is relevant for understanding students' online victimisation, as their frequent use of social media and digital platforms creates numerous opportunities for offenders to exploit. However, one weakness is that the theory does not fully account for the structural and social inequalities that may shape risk, nor does it explain why certain individuals, despite having similar routines, do not become victims. These gaps can be addressed by situating the theory within the broader social and institutional context of online victimisation and by integrating complementary perspectives that consider differential vulnerability.

Lifestyle-exposure theory

According to the lifestyle-exposure theory, the likelihood of becoming a victim depends on an individual's lifestyle as well as their routine activities (Hindelang, Gottfredson & Garofalo, 1978). The central proposition is that certain behaviours and habits increase visibility and accessibility to offenders, thereby heightening exposure to risk. The theory suggests that the amount of time spent in risky environments, whether physical or virtual, is directly correlated with the likelihood of victimisation (Hindelang et al., 1978). Similar to the routine activity theory, the lifestyle-exposure theory has been applied to online victimisation, demonstrating that digital behaviours can increase the potential for victimisation (Guerra & Ingram, 2022; Suh, Choe & Park, 2020). As much of student life currently unfolds virtually, this theory provides a lens through which to assess how patterns of online engagement lead to heightened exposure. A key weakness of the lifestyle-exposure theory is that it may inadvertently place responsibility on victims by heavily focusing on their choices and routines (Walklate, 2007). This limitation could be addressed by emphasising that online victimisation also results from broader systemic and technological factors, such as platform design, regulatory gaps, and offender strategies, rather than solely from students' lifestyle (online) patterns.

METHODS

Quantitative procedures were used to examine gender differences in students' experiences of and reactions to online victimisation and harassment. A descriptive survey systematically gathered information on the extent of online victimisation and students' responses to such harassment, while also allowing the researchers to assess measurable characteristics of students' internet access and usage. A non-random sampling strategy was employed to circumvent the challenges associated with low response and attrition rates. Specifically, availability sampling, which typically relates to the physical proximity of potential respondents and ease of accessibility (Waterfield, 2018: 403), was used to allow students who were present on the day of the survey the opportunity to voluntarily participate in the study. The study population consisted of full-time students who were registered in undergraduate Criminology modules. Of the 1,695 registered students, 1,001 participated in the survey.

Data gathering took place using a group-administered questionnaire, where hard copies of the research instrument were distributed in class, and students completed the questionnaires individually. Arrangements were made in advance with the lecturers to ensure minimal disruption to lecturing time. On average, it took five minutes to complete the questionnaire, excluding the explanation of the study, ethical considerations, and instructions on how to complete it. The two-page questionnaire contained items from the instruments developed by Finn (2004), Sticca, Machmutow, Stauber, Perren, Palladino, Nocentini, Menesini, Corcoran, and McGudin (2015), and Cetin, Yaman, and Peker (2011). The questions were posed as closed-ended and matrix-type items.

The completed questionnaires were coded, and the data were manually entered into MS Excel, which allowed for data analysis using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (IBM, 2025). The Cronbach's alpha coefficient was 0.726 for the victimisation scale (11 items) and 0.702 for the responses scale (5 items), respectively. In addition to the descriptive results for female and male respondents, the gender analysis employed non-parametric procedures (the Mann–Whitney U test) because the dataset violated the assumptions of the two-sample *t*-test (the outcomes for both the Kolmogorov–Smirnov and the Shapiro–Wilk tests were less than 0.05). Total scores for victimisation experiences and responses to harassment were calculated for female and male respondents, and these results were also compared for statistical differences. Where meaningful differences were present, effect sizes (*r*) were calculated (−0.1 = small; −0.3 = medium; −0.5 = large).

The standard ethical considerations that apply to the social sciences were adhered to throughout the study. Students were informed that participation in the study was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the survey without any negative consequences. The questionnaire did not pose any questions that could identify students, and, given the nature of group-administered data gathering, completed questionnaires could not be traced to individual respondents. Provision was made for debriefing in case students were negatively affected by the research topic or survey questions; however, no request for debriefing was received. Ethical approval was obtained from the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Pretoria (protocol number 17001596 [HUM010/0321]).

RESULTS

Background information

The average age of respondents was 20.5 years, with a standard deviation of 2.5 years. Table 1 summarises the background characteristics: the greater proportion of respondents were female, and two in five were in their first academic year. The majority came from middle-income backgrounds, and one in three lived with their families. There was no statistically significant difference in the background profiles of male and female respondents.

Table 1: Background information of respondents

Category	Subcategory	*n*	%
Gender	Female	822	82.4
	Male	175	17.6
Population group	White	456	46.0
	Black/African	432	43.5
	Indian/Asian	58	5.8
	Mixed race	46	4.6
Academic year	First year	407	40.9
	Second year	282	28.3
	Third year	307	30.8
Economic status	Low income	106	10.7
	Middle income	783	79.2
	High income	100	10.1
Living arrangements	With family	343	34.4
	University residence	265	26.6
	Private accommodation	261	26.2
	Student commune	127	12.8

Internet use

Most respondents used the internet daily, and more than one in three spent over four hours per day online (Table 2). Respondents predominantly accessed the internet using mobile devices such as cell phones and tablets.

Table 2: Frequency of use and source of the internet

Category	Subcategory	Female *n* (%)	Male *n* (%)	*p*	*r*
Frequency of use	Daily	764 (93.2)	167 (96.0)	0.168	–
	A few times per week	56 (6.8)	7 (4.0)	0.168	–
Hours per day	<1	41 (5.0)	8 (4.6)	0.111	–
	1–2	143 (17.4)	34 (19.4)	0.111	–
	2–3	186 (22.7)	49 (28.0)	0.111	–
	3–4	140 (17.1)	31 (17.7)	0.111	–
	>4	310 (37.8)	53 (30.3)	0.111	–
Source of internet	Mobile device	722 (91.6)	143 (84.6)	0.007	0.08
	Computer at home	40 (5.1)	20 (11.8)	0.007	0.08
	University library	26 (3.3)	6 (3.6)	0.007	0.08

Female respondents were significantly more likely to use the internet for social media purposes, while male respondents were more likely to use the internet for entertainment (Table 3).

Table 3: Purpose of using the internet

Category	Gender	Often *n* (%)	Sometimes *n* (%)	Seldom *n* (%)	Never *n* (%)	*p*	*r*
Social media	Female	771 (93.9)	44 (5.4)	5 (0.6)	1 (0.1)	0.001	0.13
	Male	148 (85.1)	15 (8.6)	8 (4.6)	3 (1.7)	0.001	0.13
Entertainment	Female	437 (53.5)	252 (30.8)	106 (13.0)	22 (2.7)	0.003	0.07
	Male	113 (65.7)	43 (25.0)	10 (5.8)	6 (3.5)	0.003	0.07

Experiences of harassment

Female respondents were significantly more likely than their male counterparts to receive insults or harassment from strangers (Table 4). They were also more likely to repeatedly receive messages despite telling the harasser to stop, as well as to receive unwanted sexual messages or images. Male respondents were significantly more likely to intentionally receive a virus or malicious software.

Table 4: Respondents' experiences of online harassment

Category	Female *n* (%)	Male *n* (%)	*p*	*r*
Someone spreading rumours about you on the internet/social media	257 (31.8)	47 (27.6)	0.283	–
Someone using the internet/social media as a slandering tool against you	188 (23.4)	43 (25.0)	0.657	–
Receiving insults or harassment from a stranger	332 (41.1)	54 (31.6)	0.020	0.07
Receiving insults or harassment from someone you know	367 (46.3)	75 (44.4)	0.653	–
Someone using your identity without your permission on the internet	120 (14.9)	21 (12.3)	0.375	–
Someone hacking your private accounts on the internet	205 (25.5)	42 (24.6)	0.798	–

Category	Female *n* (%)	Male *n* (%)	*p*	*r*
Someone repeatedly sending messages after you told them to stop	560 (69.0)	78 (45.9)	0.001	0.18
Someone sending you unwanted sexual messages or images	399 (49.3)	50 (29.6)	0.001	0.14
Someone sharing your personal photos/videos without your permission	272 (33.7)	64 (37.6)	0.326	–
Someone sent you a virus or malicious software on purpose	80 (9.9)	28 (16.4)	0.014	0.07
Someone pretending to be someone they are not	405 (50.0)	82 (48.2)	0.676	–

A significant difference ($p = 0.012$; $r = 0.08$) was observed when comparing the harassment scores of females (M = 18.15, SD = 2.53) and males (M = 18.23, SD = 2.56) respondents.

Reactions to harassment

Slightly more than half of the female respondents told the harasser to stop or ignored them in order to make them lose interest and discontinue the harassment (Table 5). One in five male respondents wrote mean or threatening messages to the harasser.

Table 5: Respondents' reactions to online harassment

Reaction	Female *n* (%)	Male *n* (%)	*p*	*r*
Asked the harasser why	203 (30.8)	41 (29.7)	0.808	–
Told the harasser to stop	369 (55.2)	60 (44.1)	0.019	0.08
Ignored them	376 (55.5)	47 (34.3)	0.001	0.15
Wrote mean/threatening things	67 (10.2)	28 (20.6)	0.001	0.12
Informed an authority	144 (22.0)	11 (8.2)	0.001	0.12

A significant difference ($p = 0.005$; $r = 0.10$) was observed when comparing the reactions to harassment scores of female (M = 8.30, SD = 1.50) and male (M = 8.37, SD = 1.48) respondents.

DISCUSSION

This study set out to explore South African university students' experiences of online victimisation through a gendered lens, examining both exposure to and responses to these experiences. Before delving into an analysis of the results, it is worthwhile to consider the background profile of the respondents and its potential implications for the findings. The sample was predominantly female, reflecting enrolment trends in humanities and social sciences faculties. The gender imbalance may influence overall prevalence rates of victimisation and reaction patterns, and the findings of high female victimisation must be interpreted with the understanding that female students were overrepresented. Nevertheless, within-group differences remain significant and therefore represent true gendered experiences. The distribution of the population group reflects the demographic makeup of the institution—a historically advantaged university with a relatively higher enrolment of White students compared to national averages. The digital experiences and risks reported may differ at historically disadvantaged universities, where racial and socio-economic compositions vary, thereby influencing digital access and exposure. Four in five students identified as coming from

middle-income backgrounds. Their access to smartphones, data, and multiple platforms potentially increases both academic and social online engagement, thereby exposing them to victimisation risks. In terms of the digital paradox, high-end devices offer better security but also expose students to broader online spaces, increasing opportunities for victimisation and harassment.

Living arrangements may influence internet access points (private Wi-Fi versus campus networks), digital supervision, and privacy when experiencing or responding to online victimisation. The roughly one third of respondents who lived with family might have parental support when confronted with online victimisation and harassment, while those in student communes may have to rely more on peer advice and support. Two in five respondents were first-year students, which is common due to higher enrolment and lower attrition rates in early undergraduate studies. However, first-year students may be particularly vulnerable to online victimisation due to their unfamiliarity with university digital policies and lower levels of digital literacy. Additionally, they are in a developmental transition that could increase social media engagement for connecting with fellow students. No gender differences were featured in the background profiles of the respondents, which suggests that the observed victimisation and response differences are unlikely to be confounded by background variables, thus strengthening the validity of the gendered findings.

Nearly all respondents reported daily internet use, with more than half spending over three hours online each day. Such high exposure aligns with local studies of students' reliance on digital technologies for academic, social, and entertainment purposes (Harris & Steyn, 2018: 15; Sehlule, 2018: 37). Significant gender differences emerged in both the nature and frequency of online victimisation. Female students generally reported higher levels of victimisation across eight of the eleven typologies that were measured, particularly in relational and sexualised forms of harm. Male students, on the other hand, were more likely to experience technical victimisation, such as computer viruses and malicious software. Although the overall statistical differences were small in effect size, examining each victimisation and harassment experience reveals important patterns that deepen our understanding of how online victimisation is gendered in both typology and frequency. Receiving insults or harassment from a stranger was significantly more common among female students (41.1%) than among their male counterparts (31.6%). The finding reflects global patterns in which women are disproportionately targeted by strangers online, often in a sexualised or threatening manner (Haslop et al., 2021: 1431). This type of harassment is facilitated by social media platforms where anonymity and minimal gatekeeping allow perpetrators to approach female users with little risk of identification (Kokkinos et al., 2016: 840). Harassment by strangers may be linked to female students' higher social media use, which increases their visibility to unknown users. Receiving repeated unwanted messages further illustrates gendered vulnerability, with 69.0 percent of female respondents reporting such experiences compared to 45.9 percent of males, which presented one of the strongest effect sizes regarding the typologies of online victimisation. Persistent messaging after requests to cease reflects perpetrators' disregard for autonomy and boundaries, which further contributes to victims' psychological distress and fear (Kanwal & Jami, 2018: 808). Receiving unsolicited sexual messages or images was also much higher among female students (49.3% versus 29.6% for males). This form of victimisation is personally invasive and rooted in gendered power dynamics and sexual predation (Longobardi et al., 2021: 41; Pineda et al., 2023: 6). Such experiences may lead to anxiety, fear that the event will escalate, and subsequent self-isolation in digital spaces.

Male students were significantly more likely to report receiving malicious software or viruses (16.4% compared to 9.9% of females), a pattern that likely reflects differences in online behaviour, as male students' gaming and entertainment activities may expose them to higher risks of phishing, malware, and other technical scams. While this form of victimisation may

not have the direct emotional harms associated with sexual online harassment, it carries potential financial and security consequences. Other victimisation typologies, such as spreading rumours, slander, insults from known individuals, identity theft, hacking, and impersonation, did not show statistically significant gender differences. Nevertheless, female students still reported a higher prevalence across most typologies. For example, approximately half of both genders reported encountering someone pretending to be someone they are not (50.0% of females and 48.2% of males), highlighting impersonation as a common risk associated with romantic fraud, phishing, or identity misuse. Its comparable frequency across genders suggests that certain online threats are universal, although their impact may vary by context. The total victimisation and harassment scores showed a small but significant gender difference, with females reporting marginally higher cumulative experiences. The practical implications are substantial because the cumulative burden of multiple victimisation typologies can create an environment of persistent threat for female students, thereby reinforcing broader societal patterns of gender-based violence in digital spaces.

In terms of students' reactions to online victimisation, noteworthy gender differences emerged. Female students were significantly more likely to tell the harasser to stop (55.2% compared to 44.1% of males) and to ignore them (55.5% of females versus 34.3% of males). Ignoring perpetrators may help de-escalate online harassment, but it can also leave victims feeling powerless if the harassment persists (Celuch et al., 2022: 8). The high rates of ignoring harassers among female students may reflect concerns about potential offline repercussions or fear of escalation if they confront the harasser aggressively, especially in South Africa, where gender-based violence is a pervasive threat. Conversely, male students were significantly more likely to write mean or threatening messages to the harasser (20.6% versus 10.2% of females), which demonstrates a confrontational or retaliatory approach that aligns with masculine norms of assertiveness and dominance (Erişti, 2019: 428). While such responses may deter perpetrators in the short term, they carry risks of escalation and reciprocal victimisation (Bae, 2021: 3). Reporting behaviour further revealed meaningful gender differences, with female students being significantly more likely to inform an authority figure (22.0% compared to 8.2% of males), suggesting heightened thresholds for seeking help. Although reporting rates remain low for both genders, female students' greater likelihood of reporting indicates that they may experience increased fear for personal safety in the face of persistent or sexualised harassment. Male students' low reporting may stem from stigma, internalised norms of self-reliance, or fear of appearing vulnerable (Bae, 2021: 4). Nevertheless, the low overall reporting rate remains concerning and may reflect scepticism about institutional responses, the normalisation of online harassment as 'part of being online,' or fear of not being believed (Tennant, Demaray, Coyle & Malecki, 2015). Interestingly, no significant gender difference was found in the percentage of students asking the harasser why they were behaving that way (30.8% of females and 29.7% of males). This suggests an attempt to de-escalate the behaviour; however, engagement can encourage further harassment if perpetrators are seeking attention or power over their victims (Frisén et al., 2014: 582). The total reaction scores showed a small but significant effect size, with female students presenting slightly higher overall scores, which suggests that they use a broader range of strategies to cope with online victimisation and harassment. Male students seem to favour more direct retaliation strategies.

The results support the routine activity and lifestyle-exposure theories, which propose that victimisation results from the convergence of motivated offenders, suitable targets, and a lack of guardianship (Cohen & Felson, 1979; Hindelang et al., 1978). Female students' frequent use of social media and communication platforms increases their visibility and attractiveness as targets, while limited online guardianship (such as privacy settings) increases their risk of victimisation. The absence of capable guardians in digital spaces is notable, and protective technologies such as firewalls and anti-malware software have limited effectiveness against

relational or sexual harassment on social media, where unwanted messages bypass technical barriers (Carter, 2013: 1230). Furthermore, digital literacy gaps exist with male students' gaming-related technical skills potentially offering some cybersecurity advantages, while female students' social media use has distinct relational risks.

Despite modest statistical differences between male and female students, gendered patterns of online victimisation and responses hold practical and policy implications for institutions of higher education. Universities should integrate online harassment and sexual victimisation into broader gender-based violence frameworks and recognise digital harm as a continuum of offline violence. Training should address safe social media use, privacy management, recognising phishing and malware, and effective reporting mechanisms. The content of awareness and training initiatives should be tailored to gendered patterns of victimisation and online behaviour. The low reporting rates suggest the presence of barriers, such as the fear of not being believed and, potentially, a lack of knowledge about reporting procedures. What is worrying is that the low reporting rates may even indicate a normalisation of online harassment. Institutions should ensure accessible and confidential channels for reporting online victimisation, and they should provide gender-sensitive support and follow-up services for victims. Male students could benefit from training in non-aggressive yet assertive responses, while female students should be encouraged to move beyond passive avoidance to actively report their experiences of victimisation and harassment. In light of male students' higher risk for technical victimisation, institutional information and technology support should proactively educate them on malware risks, safe downloads, and online gaming security.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The study used a non-probability sampling strategy at a single South African university, which limits generalisation across institutions and contexts. The sample's composition, particularly the predominant female component from the humanities and social sciences, reflects discipline-specific enrolment patterns and may have influenced the results. Future research should include different faculties and institutions, particularly historically disadvantaged universities, to understand contextual variations. Further, qualitative research is needed to explore the emotional, psychological, and academic impacts of online victimisation in order to capture students' lived experiences and coping mechanisms. Similarly, longitudinal investigations are needed to determine the impact of online victimisation and harassment on students' mental health, academic performance, and future digital behaviours. Lastly, research should investigate intersectional influences such as race, sexuality, and socio-economic status on victimisation vulnerability and response strategies.

CONCLUSION

The study demonstrates that online victimisation is pervasive among South African university students, with distinct gender differences in both experiences and coping strategies. Female students remain disproportionately targeted for personal and sexual victimisation, while male students are more vulnerable to technical harms. Responses to victimisation are shaped by gendered social norms that influence choices between avoidance, confrontation, and formal reporting. Universities have an ethical responsibility to protect students in the digital environment by integrating online safety into institutional policies, offering targeted digital literacy training, and fostering supportive reporting and coping frameworks. As online learning and engagement continue to develop, proactive measures are crucial to ensure that technology enhances, rather than undermines, students' safety and equal participation in academic and social life.

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