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Original Research

THE CONTRIBUTION OF DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY IN EXACERBATING GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE AGAINST FEMALE STUDENTS IN HIGHER LEARNING INSTITUTIONS IN TANZANIA.

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ABSTRACT

Studies indicate that gender-based violence has been practised and sometimes normalised at higher learning institution campuses in Tanzania. Despite various efforts to curb the GBV, at Mwalimu Nyerere Memorial Academy, studies indicate that violent incidences directed at female students persist, and cases are increasing. Inspired by the objectification school of thought, the study aimed to collect information from female students' awareness of offline and online gender-based violence as well as their knowledge of the contribution of digital technology to the aggravation of cyber harassment. The study was undertaken at Mwalimu Nyerere Memorial Academy. It involved 343 female students who filled in the online survey questionnaire. Thirty-four (34) of those who were harassed online were interviewed and participated in an FGD while 10 Key informants were interviewed. The results indicate that MNMA female students are aware of gender-based violence but are shallowly knowledgeable on the root causes of online gender-based violence. The study has found that digital technology supports aggravation by concealing the perpetrator; increasing accessibility of victims; multiplying violent incidences; extending aggression in space and time and providing a platform for female students' self-objectification. It is concluded that still the struggle against gender inequality persists and that digitisation complicates the phenomenon. The study recommends that higher learning institutions should continue their efforts to challenge the prevailing gender inequality gaps and increase awareness to enable students of both sexes.

Keywords: Digital technology, Gender-Based Violence, Female students, Higher Learning Institutions, Gender Awareness.

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Achieving gender equality and ending violence, especially gender-based violence, constitutes a permanent and essential agenda for all humankind (Hall, 2015). According to WHO (2002, p. 1), violence is an "intentional use of force or power that may result in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation". In contrast, gender-based violence (GBV) is "violence that

is committed against someone based on his or her gender identity, gender expression or perceived gender" (Cotter & Savage, 2019, p. 1). Literature underscores that gender-based violence is anchored on gender inequality and the patriarchal system in society (Maliganya & Kalinga, 2023; Mutayoba, 2018). In many societies, gender inequality manifests in positioning women in inferior positions, silencing their voice and discriminating against them in decision-making processes, including decisions on sex matters (Abeid, M., Muganyizi, P., Olsson, P., Darj, E., & Axemo 2014). According to Rennison (2014, p. 1620), "Violence against women is more than an act of violence; it is a manifestation of social domination". Studies undertaken in Tanzanian higher learning institutions indicate the prevalence, and sometimes normalisation, of GBV in the form of misogyny, stalking, sexual harassment and the so-called 'rape jokes, which are linked with asymmetrical power relations (Tano & Kitula, 2022; Kavishe & Naidu, 2023).

Similarly, contemporary literature on higher learning institutions reports an increase in incidents of violent acts committed to women, which are connected to the use of computers, their accessories and associated gadgets, including smartphones (Elhai, Rozgonjuk, Yildirim, Alghraibeh, & Alafnan, 2019). It is a well-known fact that the world is experiencing an increased use of digital instruments. These tools bring numerous positive changes to society, namely improving social connectivity, opening access to information, accelerating assured financial transactions, and facilitating knowledge sharing (Suryani, 2010). In the education system, information technology facilitates students in administration bureaucracies, accessing and saving reading material, chatting as well as enjoyment. However, the emergence of this technology appears to create an avenue for digital addiction, and increased emotional problems (Elhai et al., 2019), low creativity among youth and children (Elhai et al., 2019, a vehicle for threats, coercion and other violent acts).

Studies indicate that innovations in technology and the public use of ICT have brought important changes to human relations. According to the OECD (2019), digital technology contributes to improved work content and performance, consolidates social interaction, facilitates community building, and enables access to services globally (OECD, 2019). Meanwhile, scholarly works indicate that virtual technologies mediate aggressive acts such as sextortion, cyberbullying, and cyberstalking (Onditi, 2017). Cases of gender-based violence related to gender-social inequality have been reported in Tanzania and institutions of higher learning. Among others, Maliganya and Kalinga (2023), affirm that gender-based violence in Tanzania directed at women is rooted in patriarchal culture. Similarly, Mutayoba (2018) asserts that it is unquestionable that the patriarchal system is responsible for domestic violence, violence, means of transport and sextortion in institutions of higher learning.

In academic domains, technological-facilitated violence directed at women is interpreted from different perspectives. Some authors see it as a technological failure (Burmester et al., 2005) that needs much sophistication (King-Ries, 2011); others attribute the phenomenon to porosity in legal systems (De Tardo Bora & Bora, 2016); hence, the need for new laws that capture the cyber world. Another section of the authors ascribes gender-based cyber harassment to perpetrators' psychological problems emanating from personality traits, mental disorders, antisocial behaviours,

and substance abuse (Maran & Begotti, 2019). A few publications (Pittaro, 2017,) establish a link between online harassment and prevailing gender inequality in society. The present study was undertaken to substantiate the inequality and specifically patriarchal attitudes towards the woman's body.

According to Henry and Powell (2015), ICT is oppressive to women in its design and use. In design, the ICT technology ignores, misunderstands, or omits women's realities, hence reinforcing the gender discrimination gap (Shariff & Gouin, 2006). The social power imbalance of a smartphone seems to be embedded in features and apps like a camera and a recorder that enable a perpetrator to exercise powers and control over victims' online and offline activities. As a theoretical underpinning, the study on the role played by digital technology in devastating gender-based violence among female students in university settings was inspired by the Objectification theory. Theoretically, all forms of violence against women are centred on the body, including female genital mutilation, rape, early marriage, and the use of the body for advertisement (Fisher & Dolezal, 2018). Feminists argue that the woman's body has been a major site of control (Sutherland et al., 2014). While social norms depict a woman to be "open, empathetic and willing to disclose information about themselves more readily than men" (Bond, 2009, p. 30), the patriarchal system transforms the woman's body into an object to be watched and abused (Woodlock, 2017). According to Bartky (1990), sexual objectification occurs when a "woman's body or body parts are singled out and separated from her as a person, and she is viewed primarily as a physical object of male sexual desire". This view is based on feminists' thought that technologies facilitate watching, exploiting, and contemplating the woman's body. Thus, digital technology gives men an added opportunity to exploit women's bodies, facilitates anonymity and restricts women who want to enter these technological domains by giving up features of their feminine identity (Wajcman, 2010). Therefore, the objectification theory appeared to be convenient for analysing the interface between sociocultural context and digital instruments in objectifying the female students' body which is a form of exercising violent acts.

To the best of our knowledge, there are few studies on online harassment in Tanzania (Onditi, 2017; Kavishe, 2021) and only Kavishe (ibid) seem to relate gender-based violence and digitisation. Her study, however, provides numerical data to affirm the prevalence of cyberstalking, the worst form of cyber harassment. She does not pinpoint the different ways in which digital technology exacerbates gender-based violence. The study contributes to the cover the prevailing gap in the literature. The present study had two objectives. The first is to examine female students' awareness of gender-based violence and online violence and the second is to demonstrate how digital tools reinforce the negative effect of gender-based violence among female students.

MATERIALS AND METHODOLOGY

The study used an exploratory design to get a deeper insight into the problem. It was undertaken at Mwalimu Nyerere Memorial Academy (MNMA) a higher learning institution in Tanzania. The rationale for selecting a higher learning institution was the fact that worldwide these institutions

have been recorded to be the epicentre for online harassment perpetrations than any other social gathering (Maran & Begotti, 2019). MNMA was pinpointed because it admits a wide range of ages. Students' ages range between 16 years and above. Given that in secondary schools, students are strictly forbidden from owning mobile telephones, the majority of fresh entrants possessed personal handsets for the first time and hence were not experienced in managing online life (Kavishe, 2021). Besides, evidence from studies indicates that harassers target young firstly because these are considered less aware of sexual harassment and secondly social pursuit for sexual relationship may not be suspected, rather considered a form of courtship (Merkin, 2012; WHOA 2013). The study focused on female students because globally, cyber harassment records indicate that women are more affected than men. Quantitatively the statistics of victimisation of women are three times that of men while the number of men online harassers reaches 80% (Bocij, 2003; Arafa et al. 2017; Ndubueze et al. 2017); qualitatively the main motive for cyber violence is associated with sex pursuit (Pittaro, 2011).

From the institution database, during the 2023/24 academic year, MNMA there were 11,516 students; out of these 5,943 (51%) were female students at certificate, diploma, first degree and master's levels. The study used a qualitative approach to develop a comprehensive understanding of the connection between online and offline gender-based violence. For data collection, three instruments were used: survey questions, focus group discussion and interview. An online questionnaire was distributed randomly to all female students through class representatives and 343 (5.6%) female students from all levels filled the questionnaire. The questionnaire sought to collect data on knowledge about GBV and online gender-based violence (OGBV) and to explore female students' experience of this problem drawn from online interactions. Among them 218 (63,5%) respondents indicated that they had experienced online harassment. Based on this information, the researcher purposively selected a sample of 34 participants (10%) who had experienced the most serious harassment for interview and focus group discussions. According to Vasileiou et al (2018), for qualitative research any sample may be enough provided that the researcher reaches saturation point; a point where new insights and theme emerges. The participants were aged between 18 and 25. In addition, the researcher selected purposively 10 key informants who participated in interviews. Among them, 4 were males and 6 were females. Four were employees from the office of the Dean of students; two were leaders of MASO (a male and a female) and two were officials (both women) from the coordinator of the gender centre; one (man) Key informant was from the IT department and one woman was an administrative staff responsible for students' admission and orientation week organisation. Besides, the Google survey questionnaire who aim was to identify respondents, actual data were collected using interviews held with key informants and students as well as using focus group discussions with students and interviews with victimised female students and key respondents. The researcher held four sessions of FGD two with 9 each and two with 8 participants. Data were analysed thematical as per the objectives. All ethical procedures including research permit and participant consent were sought as required by research standards. The validity of the data was ensured by using instruments that were previously attested and used in larger research (Kavishe, 2021) while reliability was observed

through the triangulation method whereby responses from the questionnaire were cross-checked using the two interview schedules and responses from the two interviews were compared.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study succeeded in collecting enough information as required by the objectives. The presentation of the findings therefore follows the order of the two objectives. The first objective aimed at unpacking the MNMA female students' knowledge and awareness of the prevalence of online gender-based violence while the second was to explore the role played by digital technology in exacerbating the acts at the campus.

Awareness of online violence and the prevalence of online violence at the MNMA Campus

The study in the first place explored MNMA female students' awareness of online gender-based violence. The findings indicate majority of female students at the Mwalimu Nyerere Memorial Academy were aware of both physical and virtual violence. The responses from the questionnaire indicated that 218 (63.5%) of the respondents were aware of it and 190 (55%) had suffered a form of prolonged harassment. The participants indicated that the public campaigns on mass media, human rights and security campaigns as well as training in modules at the Academy, contributed to making them aware of gender-based violence and online GBV as highlighted by one of the interviewed students.

We know it [OGBV] through television and radio awareness campaigns, public campaigns at the campus and the seminars organised by the Dean, in collaboration with Mwalimu Nyerere Memorial Academy Students' Organisation (MASO). We hear from mass media. I've become aware of gender-based violence. [...]. Besides, hearing, I have myself experienced online harassment. These experiences have shown me how pervasive and harmful gender-based violence can be, even in digital spaces. I realize how much work still needs to be done to create safer environments for girls like me. (20 years Interviewed female student 13 (20 years old), 3rd January 2024)

The excerpt demonstrates the female student's awareness and experience of online harassment. She points out the contributions of the Dean of Students' office, students' organisation (MASO), NGO and civil societies to be eye-openers. A first-year diploma student reported that the office of Dean of Students normally reads bye laws which include among others the question of self-protection from offline and online sexual harassment which is a form of GBV to new students. The article being referred to by the respondent stipulates aspects considered as forms of sexual harassment. Section 22 articles (t) (I & ii). Part (i) reads

Sexual jokes, noises, lewd suggestions, foul language, obscene gestures, pressuring demands for dates, spreading rumours about a

person's sexual life to assassinate the character of the victim, pat, kissing, grabbing, and touching of sensitive body parts

Section (ii) of the articles specifies harassment by using electronic gadgets.

Transmitting offensive written, telephone or electronic communications of a sexual nature, indecent exposure, and belittling comments on a person's anatomy. (MNMA, 2015: 22)

It is this second part which partially describes online harassment. Yet, despite these by-laws, most interviewed female students expressed related stories of harassment mainly in the forms of sexual harassment and sextortion. Sextortion, according to respondents, was exercised by employees in the Academy.

All the 34 female students involved in the study pointed out that they were subscribed to WhatsApp and Instagram accounts. In addition, a good number had also Facebook and Telegram accounts while relatively fewer in number had TikTok, YouTube, and others. The forms of violence varied from threatening calls, intimidation, and defamation through text on public social media, as well as posting private images and videos. According to them, violent acts were performed at any time, but intimidation calls and vocal threats were mostly made on nights when most 'romantic' chats were conducted.

I have been going through a really hard time because of my Instagram account. two male students doing a degree and a lecturer. The first started with a few ordinary comments, about my wear style, and my face they went to my chest. But later the comments turned to threatening messages and spreading of nasty rumours about me. I felt so ashamed as I was constantly being watched and judged. One of them took my photos while I was in sports uniform and while I was swimming and posted on public WhatsApp. It is a series of activities. I have decided to close some of my social media accounts I just want to feel safe again and not have to live in fear every time I go online. (21 years Interviewed Female students 6, 8th January 2024)

Despite several similar experiences that female students experience expressed on online gender-based violence, according to key informants, most cases were not reported to the administration. A male key informant attributed the violence to female students on reckless use of their smartphones.

Our girls, out of ignorance, deliberately use the media to advertise their beauty. Students post their private photographs, which results in viewers harassing the girls. (Interview, Key Informat 4, 29 December 2023)

The statement from this quote was affirmed by other interviewed key informants. In brief, the findings as illustrated by this quote indicate that female students at Mwalimu Nyerere Memorial Academy are knowledgeable about gender-based violence and online gender-based violence.

However, the majority of interviewed female students understood the violence as events. They did not consider the underlying causes of the harassment of women. That is why they did not report.

The ways digital technology tools mediate Gender-Based Violence (GBV)

During the fieldwork, especially the Focus Group Discussion the participants discussed several ways in which the internet especially smartphones contribute to aggravating gender-based violence. In responses, five themes emerged to be the most prominent ways in which electronic tools aggravate gender-based violence. The themes were concealing the perpetrator; increasing accessibility of victims; multiplying violent incidences; extending aggression in space and time and providing a platform for female students' self-objectification. These aspects are discussed in detail in the following paragraphs.

In the first place, the participants reported that digital technology conceals the perpetrator. Hence, it gives him or her security from being known and eventually sued. During the focus group discussion, one participant lamented saying:

You cannot exactly know with whom you are talking but he, knows you and he can do many things for you. Smartphones were supposed to be tools for communication with friends and family. But instead, it has become a weapon for harassment. For example, last month my former boyfriend succeeded in finding my phone number through a group. He started chatting with me and deceived me through a WhatsApp chat that he was one of his former secondary school teachers. I realised that it was not the teacher when I physically met him (FGD 1, Female student 20, 7 January 2024).

According to this informant, the mobile phone number exposed her to the perpetrator, but the same technology hid the harasser. Talking about the anonymity, a key informant reported that:

One of the most troubling aspects of this issue of cyber harassment is that the perpetrators often hide behind the anonymity of the internet, making it difficult to identify and hold them accountable. The harassers could continue with the cycle of abuse. We must work together to create a safer environment where students feel supported and empowered to come forward. (Interview, Key Informant 2, 31 December 2023)

Elsewhere, scholars underscore the fact that online harassment is complicated, varied, unpredictable, and challenging to recognise and investigate (Sukrut, 2013; Wei-Jung, 2020). Again, according to Sukrut (2013), the anonymity provided by the internet complicates the determination of the identity of the actor. Hence, from a legal perspective, Burmester et al (2005) postulate that it is difficult to prosecute online criminals because their whereabouts are not certain. In the second place, the participants reported that social media widens the scope of accessibility of the potential victim. According to FGD1 participants, unlike in face-to-face where the harassers are constrained by space, time and media; online actors are omnipresent. For instance, in this study,

one informant reported that phone calls were used to complement physical talks that were interrupted when a lecturer was soliciting sexual favours. Another discussant insisted that:

Once a person has your number, you are in for it. He can trace you everywhere and at any time. In normal life I am away, asleep or in the church, no one can contact me until I appear. But the mobile phone connects me to many other information savers like social media, bank details, examination results, registration number, my friends, location, etc. The number enables the harasser to contact you anytime and trace where you are. I cannot turn off my phone because I need it for everything: school, friends and life in general. (FGD, FS 5. 6 January 2024)

In this quote, according to the participant a mobile telephone number can assist perpetrators in finding WhatsApp groups, friends, and other social media subscribed to. Another informant reported that her telephone number was picked from a class Telegram group.

I am constantly harassed by a man who comments on my photographs on Facebook. One day, he waited for me along the road, but as I changed the path and switched off the phone, he reached me through my friends in the telegram groups. (22 years Interview, Female student 2, 6 January 2024).

In the extract, digital technology appears to provide alternative or complementary means of harassment to female students. Hence, the perpetrator can freely operate alternatively from one media to another.

In the third place, the media was reported to multiply the incidents of gender-based violence. Informants reported that the technology created possibilities of simultaneous harassment by the same harasser or numerous perpetrators. As illustrated below, in the following incident, the student was attacked by several people:

The man found me on my phone while we were together. He copied my private photos and posted one of them in several WhatsApp groups advertising that I was seeking a male sex partner. I cannot forget that day as I received tons of calls from multitudes of people asking for romantic relations. (19 years Interview, Female student 15; 7 January 2024)

In the extract, the victim faced violence from unknown people, all targeting her body for sexual purposes as the first perpetrator advertised it. The findings also indicate that virtual technology enables exposed victims to boundless harassment horizons. This is opposed to offline stalking which is limited to victimization confined to a geographic boundary. During one focus group discussion no 3, the discussants reported cases in which a female student was simultaneously harmed by several perpetrators one was at the institution, another in Ngara her homeland and the other was an Arab.

I was simultaneously cyberstalked by three people from different corners. One of the perpetrators was an instructor in MNMA. This person used their position to target me with inappropriate messages and unwanted sexual attention. I was upset and the harassment has left me feeling deeply uncomfortable, making it hard to concentrate on my studies. Another perpetrator was from Ngara, my homeland, and the third was an individual of Arab origin. The situation has led me not to continue feeling safe both online and offline. (21 years Interview, Female student 1; 8 January 2024)

One observes from the quote that the female student was at the centre of multiple harassment. A fact which disturbed her studies pace and life in general. According to Lowry et al.,(2013), unlike physical ones, publishing private information online has multiple effects because the information may be relayed to several platforms. Similarly, Trepte (2016, p. 16) warns that “Once relayed into cyberspace, confidential data cannot sometimes be erased as it may be copied and forwarded to an unknown destination.”

In the fourth place, according to respondents, electronic communication gadgets spread the effects of aggression across space and time. The informants had the view that physical violence happens once or at a repeated frequency and in a specific place. In contrast, with the aid of digital networks, harassing information can spread across media and reach a wide range of receivers, as the following quote testifies.

He modified my photography and posted it in his account, making me like a bride and him a groom. The image, which stayed on his account for more than a month, was seen by my father in Mwanza and my current boyfriend, who was studying in India. (22 years Interview Female student 26, 5th January 2024)

As the informant reports, contemporary media are used to scandalise private matters like posting nude photographs or caricaturing real images.

In the last place, electronic media and smartphones were reported to create platforms for self-exposure which is a factor which implicitly increases the possibility of being followed. During the interview, all key informants reported that smartphones encourage female students to post images some of them indecent as a means of self-expression for different motives. The informants explained that as the institutional social environment restricts some wear styles, therefore female students use digitalized media as a platform for self-expression. It is worthwhile to mention poverty as one of the motives aired by the key informant below.

A good number of students do not have boom [students' stipends]; some are coming from poor families. For them, getting godfathers at the expense of all risks like diseases, including HIV/AIDS, and entering unnecessary conflicts. These sell their body on their YouTube, Instagram, or Facebook. This is very popular on Facebook. In the normal social setting, they cannot do it. It is

shameful. They end up being terrified, forced and sometimes physically raped. (Interview, Key Informant 9; 30 December 2023)

Concerning posting personal photographs as indicated in the quote, Calogero (2012) comments that the tendency to display ideal women as partially naked, lighter-skinned, slim and young, smiling posed in a sensual or sex context in social media is interpreted as a sexual invitation. The patriarchal cultural context according to Calogero (2012) has stipulated who is a beautiful woman and mechanisms have been created to remunerate the 'ideal body'. According to Fredrickson and Roberts (1997), women, to varying degrees, internalize this outsider view and begin to self-objectify by treating themselves as an object to be looked at and evaluated based on appearance. The author of the present article views that self-objectification reduces the value of a woman retaining her as insubordinate, inferior, and ashamed in front of millions of people. In this context, cyberspace is used as a natural place for harassment and a laboratory for observing and analysing specimens of nude women's bodies in preparation for harassment in the real world.

DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

The study sought to understand the female students' awareness on gender-based violence and in particular online gender-based violence (OGBV) and the female students' knowledge on how digital technology in the form of hardware like smartphones and software like social media contributes to aggravating the impact of the gender-based violence. The findings indicate that all participants who responded to the online questionnaire had knowledge about gender-based violence and its online version but did not understand exactly the in-depth information about the underlying theoretical background. Similar findings were reported at the University of Dar es Salaam (Kavishe, 2021) and the Federal University Dutse campus in Nigeria (Ndubueze, P. N., & Sarki, Z.; Mohamed M. (2018). In both institutions, respondents had experiences of aggression vehicle by electronic instruments but the majority of female students and staff could not identify gender inequality as the main root cause of online harassment. For instance, Ndubueze et al. (2017) report that a significant proportion of respondents (43.4%) did not take online aggression particularly cyberstalking as a severe problem. Elsewhere, Van der AA (2018) adds the fact that even in the European Union cyberviolence is part not to be a severe threat. However, Kavishe & Naidu (2023) found that a great number of universities in the developed world, demonstrate a heightened level of consciousness. Cyber harassment receives great attention through a substantial amount of published scholarly journals; whereas preventive measures are amply displayed and updated continuously on institutional websites against cyber violence.

In contrast, studies have indicated an intricate relationship between online harassment directed to women as a gender issue (Sutherland et al., 2014; Sheridan, & Grant, 2007; Bondestam & Lundqvist, 2020). The assertion is based on gender-indicative signs drawn from statistics data and the fact that sexual desire stands to be the main motive for online women hunting (Sheridan, & Grant, 2007; Bondestam & Lundqvist, 2020). The present study shows that sexual desire and the so-called romance dominate over other intentions for online violence and the pursuit of female students on campus. One finds that the situation is complicated and pitiable because the digital

instruments operate within the realm of social constructs that normalize harassment directed at women. In addition to challenges brought by normalisation and incorporation of online harassment into social-cultural practices, it seems online harassment creates hurdles even when legal measures are applied to track online perpetrators. Feminists purport that the woman's body is a central site of control and that technology has been described as an embodied experience (Sutherland et al. 2014). The situation is however encouraging given the growing awareness through public awareness-raising campaigns. These kinds of measures as reported by Kavishe & Naidu (2023) indicate that awareness raising is carried out also at the University of Dar es Salaam where efforts encompass fliers, seminars and workshops.

In the second objective, gender-based violence in higher learning institutions is reported in Africa, Tanzania and at large MNMA (Dranzoa 2018; Maliganya & Kalinga, 2023; Mutayoba, 2018). According to Dranzoa (2018, p. 4) in institutions of higher learning, this kind of harassment targets first-year students because they are said to be more: "innocent, naïve and eager to explore their newly discovered freedom". Nowadays, in institutions of higher learning, as evidenced at Mwalimu Nyerere Memorial Academy, female students live an even more insecure life than before virtual technology. Social media groups replace platforms to simplify modes of dating, seducing, following, revenge and monitoring to become fast, easy, accurate and profound. The study has identified five ways in which electronic gadgets intensify aggression: concealing the perpetrator; increasing the victim's accessibility; multiplying incidences; spreading aggression across time and space; time as well as providing a platform for female students' self-objectification.

The findings from the present study, provide similar findings to those obtained elsewhere (Jerin & Dolinsky, 2007; Sheridan, & Grant, 2007; Apuke & Iyendo, 2018; Wei-Jung, 2020). The Internet seems to provide millions of opportunities, including promoting self-directed learning and enhancing global knowledge sharing (Apuke & Iyendo, 2018). Likewise, digital technology enhances creativity and the ability to test, acquire and operate new ideas, as well as forge new identities (Jerin & Dolinsky, 2007). The findings inform that the internet enables the multiplication of harassment incidences (Sheridan, & Grant, 2007). Besides, digital devices allow the simultaneous harassment of many people (Wei-Jung, 2020).

Elsewhere, scholarly discourses substantiate that online gender-related incidences appear to stem from sociocultural practices such as dating and courtship (Jerin & Dolinsky, 2007). According to Rennison (2014), the reason for the prevalence and continual persistence of the negative effects of virtual technology is that perpetrators harness existing societal power inequality and stereotype construction of women's passivity and reticence on obscenities to convey threats and intimidation to women. In other words, the internet reinforces existing social injustice based on race, sex, geographical location, income, age, and experience. Yet, one would ask how patriarchy can persist in cyberspace. According to Mackinnon (1997), cyberspace activities are merely an extension of inequalities in the physical space to the extent that all forms of violence, including rape, can be performed online; hence patriarchy prevails.

In this respect, cyberspace provides alternative or simultaneous means for perpetrators to transmit gender-based violence online (Jegade, 2016). That means there exists a mutual influence

between virtual and non-virtual social worlds, and the two influence each other in an intricate and intertwined manner while shaping and moulding individuals' lives and identities. According to Milford (2015, p. 60), "virtual citizens perform identity similarly to offline citizens, despite potentially feeling freer to experiment with identity online".

CONCLUSION

The study has found that digital technology in the form of smartphones, social media, and the internet in general has made harassment so much easier and more relentless. These platforms have turned into breeding grounds for violence, multiplying incidents and dragging them out indefinitely, making it impossible to escape. The platforms further encourage the self-objectification of female students, forcing them into roles that degrade and diminish them.

As a matter of fact, compared to men, women appear to be disadvantaged in various aspects in life including domestic and professional ones. It is unfortunate that the invention of digital technology, instead of relieving them from oppressive environments and giving them freedom of expression, the internet seems to aggravate the situation. The emergence of the internet and the incorporated social media communication exhibit countless challenges to the well-being of female students on campuses. The findings in this article indicate that ICT exacerbates gender-human relations, reinforces unequal gender relationships, and promotes gender-based violence. The relevance of the current research lies in the fact that digitisation enhances the discrimination of women, rendering them more vulnerable to both physical and virtual violence and sexual harassment in society. The study unveils sexual harassment, and gender-based violence operated unanimously or overtly at the expense of female students' vulnerability in physical and cyberspace. Conversely, despite evidence of the increase in victimisation rate and intensity, scant data has been collected to indicate how the advent of internet technology and accessories contributes to the increased victimisation of female students in tertiary education.

RECOMMENDATION

Since harassment is based on gender inequalities, the study recommends that higher learning institutions continue efforts to bridge gender inequality gaps and in particular increase awareness-raising efforts to enable students of both sexes. The efforts may include public campaigns but also mentorship and peer-to-peer programs.

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