

**WOMEN AND ONLINE SAFETY: MEASURING AWARENESS,  
RISKS, AND PROTECTION ON SOCIAL MEDIA**

**BY**

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## DECLARATIONS

### STUDENT'S DECLARATION

I, Ebenezer Adu, declare that this thesis, except quotations and references contained in published works, which have all been identified and duly acknowledged, is entirely my original work, and it has not been submitted, either in part or whole, for another degree elsewhere. Therefore, I bear the responsibility for any shortcomings.



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### SUPERVISORS' DECLARATION

I, the undersigned supervisor, declare that I supervised the preparation and presentation of this work in accordance with the guidelines for the supervision of M.A. thesis as laid down by the University of Media, Arts and Communication (UniMAC).



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(Principal Supervisor)

## DEDICATION

This work is first dedicated to the glory of God Almighty, by whose grace, wisdom, and strength all things are possible.

To my beloved parents, Mr. and Mrs. Adu, whose unwavering faith, countless sacrifices, and steadfast love have been the guiding force behind every achievement in my life. This milestone is as much yours as it is mine.

To my dedicated supervisor, Dr. Stanley K.M. Semarco, whose expert guidance and invaluable mentorship shaped this research from a concept into a completed dissertation. Thank you for your patience, your critical insights, and for consistently steering me back to the core questions with clarity and purpose.

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And, in a broader sense, this dissertation is dedicated to the resilience of women navigating the digital world. It is written in recognition of those who have faced harassment, intrusion, or silencing online, whose experiences underscore the urgent need for this work. May this research contribute to a more empathetic, aware, and protective digital landscape, where safety and dignity are not privileges but fundamental rights for all.

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## ABSTRACT

This study offers a thorough, multifaceted examination of the current state of online safety for female social media users. It tackles the fundamental paradox of women's digital lives: social media platforms are essential places for voice, community, and empowerment, yet they also act as ubiquitous venues for gendered violence, abuse, and harassment. To methodically examine this complicated environment, the study is organized around a crucial triad: awareness, hazards, and protection.

First, the study assesses women's awareness of various internet dangers. It evaluates comprehension of more complex threats, such as data privacy violations, algorithmic tracking, image-based sexual abuse (such as deepfakes and non-consensual intimate image sharing), and the shortcomings of institutional reporting mechanisms, in addition to basic knowledge of overt cyberbullying. The study looks at how different demographics and levels of digital literacy affect this awareness.

Secondly, it records and evaluates the dangers that are experienced. The study uses a mixed-methods approach to measure the frequency, intensity, and prevalence of gendered online harms, such as coordinated hate campaigns, doxxing, cyberstalking, and sexualized harassment. The disproportionate and compounded effects on women with intersecting marginalized identities such as women of color, LGBTQ+ people, and public figures, as well as the concrete offline repercussions, such as psychological distress, harm to one's professional reputation, self-censorship, and threats to one's physical safety, are a major area of focus.

Third, the study assesses the protection of ecosystem. The effectiveness of three layers of defense is evaluated critically: (1) individual tactics (such as content curation, blocking, and privacy settings); (2) platform-based tools and rules (such as reporting systems, moderation algorithms, and safety measures); and (3) institutional and legal frameworks. The analysis highlights how

the existing paradigm frequently individualizes and places the duty of safety on potential victims rather than platform designs or regulatory agencies, revealing serious gaps and systemic flaws.

By combining these three pillars, the study highlights the shortcomings of existing solutions by showing a substantial gap between risk awareness and effective protection. The results support a significant change away from individual risk management and toward rights-based design and systemic responsibility. To promote a digital public sphere where women's safety and engagement are mutually reinforcing rather than mutually incompatible, the research ends with evidence-based suggestions for platforms, legislators, and educators. The critical worldwide conversation on gender equity in digital spaces benefits from this work's crucial data and improved approach.

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# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.0 Background

The current digital environment is significantly influenced by social media platforms, which act as essential frameworks for communication, community development, and public engagement worldwide. In Ghana, similar to other regions in the Global South, the swift rise of platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, and X (previously known as Twitter) has altered social, economic, and political interactions (Abdulai & Salifu, 2022). For women in Ghana, these platforms embody a striking contradiction: they offer substantial opportunities for business ventures, social activism, and civic expression, while also being environments where culturally specific instances of gender-based harassment, shaming, and privacy breaches are widespread and often accepted as normal (Asare & Oduro, 2023; Ofori & Sika-Bright, 2024). This complexity highlights a key issue of digital citizenship within the current Ghanaian context.

Globally, movements like #MeToo and #StopAsianHate have demonstrated the transformative power of social media as a tool for feminist and anti-racist solidarity, enabling the rapid circulation of testimony and the organization of collective action (Mantilla, 2019; Lee & Wong, 2023). Women have leveraged these networks to build businesses, access knowledge, and challenge patriarchal norms. Within the local context, social media has been pivotal for women-led advocacy, as seen in movements addressing gender-based violence and promoting political participation (Kwansa, 2022). However, research conducted in Ghana since 2019 reveals a disturbing trend. Studies document that Ghanaian women, particularly those who are politically active, journalists, or vocal on social issues, face significant online risks including character assassination, body-shaming, sexualized verbal abuse, and threats that blend traditional patriarchal norms with digital affordances (Gbadago & Anani, 2021; Mensah, 2023). This abuse

has tangible real-world consequences, impacting mental well-being, professional reputations, and discouraging public participation. As noted by Appiah et al. (2022), the fear of “social media ridicule” and damage to one’s “social standing” (which holds significant weight in Ghanaian society) acts as a powerful silencer for many women online.

This situation creates a critical imperative for context-specific analysis. To systematically address this issue, a tripartite framework focusing on awareness, risks, and protection is essential. First, awareness must be examined within the Ghanaian socio-cultural context: What is the level of digital literacy regarding risks like phishing, image-based abuse, and data privacy among Ghanaian women? How do cultural understandings of shame, reputation, and gender roles shape their perception of online threats (Asante & Kwarteng, 2023)? Second, the nature of **risks** needs detailed cataloguing: How do local linguistic nuances (e.g., insults in local languages), religious references, and social expectations uniquely manifest in the online harassment of Ghanaian women (Osei-Tutu, 2023).

Third, the ecosystem of protection requires evaluation. This includes assessing the effectiveness of individual coping strategies, the cultural appropriateness and accessibility of platform reporting tools, and the robustness of local legal and institutional frameworks like the Cybersecurity Act, 2020 (Act 1038), and the Domestic Violence and Victim Support Unit (DOVVSU) in responding to technology-facilitated gender-based violence (Amissah & Boateng, 2024).

This study, grounded in both global literature and burgeoning Ghanaian scholarship from 2019 to the present, aims to provide an integrated, culturally situated analysis. It investigates the gap between perceived risk and experienced harm among Ghanaian women, evaluates the practical utility of available protective measures within the local context, and analyzes systemic gaps in policy and platform governance. By centering the Ghanaian experience, this research contributes

to a more nuanced global dialogue on digital safety and aims to inform the development of relevant digital literacy programs, culturally aware platform policies, and strengthened local legal protections to foster a safer and more inclusive digital public sphere for Ghanaian women.

### **1.1 Problem Statement**

Women frequently face unique risks such as cyberstalking, harassment, and non-consensual image sharing, which can lead to psychological distress, reputational damage, and even physical harm. While awareness campaigns and digital safety tools exist, the extent of women's knowledge about these risks and their adoption of protective measures remains unclear. Additionally, socio-cultural factors, online platform policies, and varying levels of digital literacy may influence women's ability to safeguard themselves online.

Most interventions aimed at online safety are not grounded in specific data about women's experiences and behaviours. This lack of evidence hinders efforts to design effective solutions. Therefore, this study seeks to provide measurable insights into women's awareness of online risks, their experiences with cyber threats, and the precautions they adopt.

### **1.2 Research Objectives**

1. To measure the level of awareness among women regarding online threats on social media.
2. To measure the different types of online risks women encounter.
3. To assess the protective behaviours women adopt to stay safe online.
4. To examine the relationship between women's awareness of online threats and their use of safety measures.

### **1.3 Research Questions**

1. How do women become aware of the different types of online threats on social media?
2. What types of cyber threats or online risks have women experienced on social media?
3. What digital safety practices do women adopt when assessing social media?
4. What is the relationship between a woman's level of awareness and her use of online safety measures?

### **1.4 Significance of the Study**

This study seeks to measure women's awareness of online risks, their exposure to threats, and the protective measures they use in online interactions. The findings can inform policymakers, online platform owners in designing appropriate tools to safeguard the many vulnerable women online.

### **1.5 Delimitation/Scope of the Study**

The research topic examines women's awareness of cyber threats, the prevalence of such threats, and their understanding of privacy settings. The scope includes analyzing the demographic differences and effectiveness of online safety tools and policies. It also seeks to identify gaps in online literacy, advocate for better safeguards, and suggest policy and educational interventions to help women feel secure online.

## **1.6 Organization of the Study**

The study consists of five chapters. The first chapter, which is the introduction part consists of the background of the study, problem statement, objectives, research questions, significance of the study, Scope of the study and organization of the study. The second chapter, on the other hand, is centered on the literature review and the theoretical frameworks of the study. Chapter three comprises the processes and procedures in the collection and analysis of data, sampling techniques, sample size, data collection methods and procedure, data analysis process, the data analysis method, ethical issues, trustworthiness, and credibility. Chapter four focuses on the findings and analysis of the collected data. Chapter five provides a summary of the entire study, concludes the findings and makes recommendations for future studies.

## CHAPTER TWO

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### 2.0 Introduction

This chapter reviews the literature for the study and discusses the theoretical framework.

Social media platforms have become essential in contemporary life, providing avenues for connection, advocacy, and career advancement. Nonetheless, women encounter unequal dangers online, such as harassment, stalking, and damage to their reputation (Vogels, 2021). Studies show that almost 58% of women have faced some online abuse, which can vary from misogynistic remarks to serious threats (Pew Research Center, 2021). The anonymity and vast reach of social media intensify these dangers, rendering online environments hostile for many women.

Social media encompasses digital platforms that allow users to generate, share, and swap content within virtual communities. These platforms enable communication through text, photos, videos, and real-time interactions. Over time, social media has transformed from basic networking sites (such as early Facebook) to intricate ecosystems that shape politics, business, culture, and personal connections.

Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) describe social media as "a collection of Internet-based applications that leverage the ideological and technological underpinnings of Web 2.0, facilitating the creation and exchange of user-generated content." Currently, social media serves not only as a venue for social interaction but also as a tool for activism, business promotion, and news distribution.

## **2.1 Social Media Evolution**

Social media originally served primarily as a means for individuals to maintain connections with relatives and friends. It has now become a vital aspect of everyday life, government, commerce, advocacy, and entertainment. Alhabash and Ma (2021) indicate that the global number of active social media users has surged significantly, as women utilize these platforms for networking, self-expression, and creating communities. Women frequently utilize social media for gaining social support, engaging in activism, and enhancing professional visibility (Dadas, 2022). Movements such as #MeToo demonstrated how social media can enable women to voice experiences of abuse and harassment (Thompson & Clement, 2020). Nevertheless, heightened visibility also renders women targets for online harassment.

## **2.2 Women and Social Media**

Social media has provided women with a platform to express their thoughts, share stories, and rally for change. Hashtag campaigns such as #MeToo and #TimesUp have enabled women worldwide to discuss harassment and abuse (Thompson & Clement, 2020). There has been empowerment and activism as a way of giving women a voice to make their concerns and grievances known.

According to Dadas (2022), women utilize social media to locate support networks, engage with those who share similar interests, and create communities focused on health, parenting, feminism, and career development. Virtual communities support women who may feel alone in the real world. Dadas (2022) further argues that women find these social groups online for companionship and to reduce rejection, especially for marginalized women who lack support in their immediate environment. West and Trester (2021) also argue that social media has been a major avenue for women to engage in businesses, meet new friends, and build a reputable public image. It has been

very beneficial for those who act as influencers for brands through campaigns, and women entrepreneurs who have built a strong foundation for their online businesses.

### **2.3 Risks on Social Media**

A primary danger for women on social media is harassment, encompassing derogatory remarks, sexual threats, bullying, and hateful speech. Lewis, Rowe, and Wiper (2021) contend that the harassment of women online, particularly feminists and activists, has emerged as a contemporary variant of gender-based violence. Women discussing politics, gender rights, or contentious subjects are frequently targeted to silence them or drive them offline.

Wright and Kowalski (2020) point out that women are more likely to suffer sexualized abuse online than men, ranging from a wide array of forms, including cyberstalking, revenge porn, doxxing, and slut-shaming. They further contend that the anonymous nature of online platforms makes it quite impossible to identify perpetrators of these acts against women. This makes harassment very difficult to punish.

Again, it has been identified that stereotypes, lack of strong online protection, cultural and social norms, and the fear of real-life consequences are among the factors that subject women to online risks and harassment. Recent work shows that the negative effects of social media on women's mental health are serious. Pereira et al. (2023) reviewed studies showing that women experience anxiety, stress, and depression due to online harassment, body shaming, and constant comparison with unrealistic images.

Women are more likely to experience online harassment than men, especially younger women, online abuse can have serious consequences on women's mental health, including anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Krameria, 2020).

Powell & Henry (2019) present the idea of **Technology-Facilitated Sexual Violence** (TFSV), which encompasses digital forms of gender-based harm, such as Image-based sexual abuse (revenge porn).

The unauthorized distribution of personal intimate images and cyberflashing (which is the sending of unsolicited explicit images through AirDrop or direct messages). Sexual extortion (sextortion) is the coercion of using private material

It is estimated that 90% of TFSV victims are female, with perpetrators often being current or former partners, as well as strangers.

Citron (2022) expands on this base by exploring how violations of digital privacy represent breaches of civil rights. In her book *The Fight for Privacy*, she illustrates how the systemic inability to safeguard women's digital privacy fosters and sustains gender-based violence in the online realm. Collectively, these scholars argue that online harassment is not merely a result of individual miscreants, but rather a consequence of systemic shortcomings that disproportionately impact women. Citron (2022) broadens the understanding of **Technology-Facilitated Sexual Violence** (TFSV) by defining privacy violations as infringements on dignity. She highlights that invasions of privacy are seldom isolated incidents but are typically part of persistent harassment campaigns. The design of social media platforms often encourages abuse by prioritizing user engagement over safety. Violations of networked privacy influence not only individual victims but also larger communities.

Jane (2020) posits that online harassment aimed at women has become so ingrained in digital culture that it is frequently accepted and downplayed. Misogynistic actions are often dismissed as mere “jokes” or innocent “trolling,” despite their potential to cause serious emotional and social harm. This acceptance is reflected in the way memes and trending hashtags such as

#WomenAreTrash not only perpetuate outdated gender stereotypes but also actively provoke campaigns of harassment against women.

Such digital trends foster a hostile atmosphere where women start to internalize the belief that experiencing abuse is an unavoidable aspect of having an online presence. Consequently, many women resort to self-censorship as a means of coping, withdrawing from public discussions or silencing their own opinions to evade constant harassment. Jane notes that this environment of online misogyny thrives within certain contexts where women face increased risks of organized abuse. Social media sites like Twitter, Facebook, and Reddit serve as prime territory for extensive harassment. Tactics such as “dogpiling,” where groups bombard a woman with numerous abusive messages and threats, have become common methods to mute feminist voices and opposing views.

In addition to mass harassment, perpetrators exploit platform features by falsely reporting women's accounts for supposed policy infringements to have them suspended or banned, a strategy that takes advantage of the moderation systems meant to safeguard users.

## **2.4 What Is Online Safety?**

Online safety refers to protecting yourself and your personal data while using the internet. It includes safeguarding your privacy, avoiding scams, and steering clear of harmful individuals or material. Online safety also involves knowing how to use privacy features, being careful about the information you disclose, and understanding the procedures to follow if you face harassment. Online safety, often referred to as digital safety, cyber safety, or e-safety, pertains to the actions taken to shield oneself and others from harm while engaging with the internet and digital technologies. It covers various areas, such as safeguarding personal information, steering clear of harmful material, and practicing responsible online conduct. At its core, it's about navigating the digital landscape securely and responsibly.

Sobieraj (2020), *Attacks Against Women Online and the Future of Democracy*, offers an insightful analysis of the pervasive online harassment women encounter, especially those in public roles. Sobieraj contends that digital violence targeting women transcends personal experiences, presenting a societal emergency that threatens democratic engagement, freedom of expression, and gender equity. Her research underscores how online harassment silences women's voices, upholds patriarchal norms, and jeopardizes civic participation. This essay examines Sobieraj's main points, the supporting evidence she provides, and the wider implications of her findings for policy and social standards.

Sobieraj characterizes online harassment as a specific type of gendered violence, where women are disproportionately attacked because of their gender. Unlike men who might face mere criticism or vigorous debate, women frequently endure sexualized threats, derogatory language, and attacks aimed at damaging their reputation. She points out that this harassment is not random but specifically designed to coerce women into withdrawing from public conversations.

One of Sobieraj's major contributions is her assertion that online harassment against women undermines democratic engagement. When women in politics, media, or activism face relentless intimidation, they either choose to self-censor or withdraw from public forums altogether. This creates a gendered silencing effect, systematically excluding women's voices from significant discussions.

Again, she contends that social media platforms, legal systems, and society are to be faulted. Sobieraj states the responsibility does not lie solely with individual aggressors. Instead, she draws attention to the institutional shortcomings that sustain online violence

## **2.5 Essential Elements of Online Safety**

Staying safe online is more important than ever in today's digital world. Guarding personal information is a fundamental aspect of online safety. This means being cautious about what

personal details—such as your full name, address, school, or social security number—you share on the internet. It also includes creating strong, unique passwords and handling your account usernames and login credentials with care to prevent unauthorized access.

Equally important is avoiding inappropriate or harmful content. The internet can expose users to risks such as cyberbullying, scams, malware, and illegal material. Being aware of these dangers helps individuals make informed choices about what they view, share, or download, and empowers them to report or block harmful interactions when necessary.

Responsible online conduct plays a crucial role in maintaining safety. Understanding that every action leaves a digital footprint encourages people to think before they post, share, or comment. Making wise choices about online activities and steering clear risky behavior like clicking on suspicious links or downloading files from unverified sources—can prevent many common online threats.

Using secure internet connections is another vital practice. Public Wi-Fi networks can breed grounds for hackers and malware. Therefore, employing secure connections and staying vigilant about phishing attempts and malicious software are key steps toward protecting one's data and devices.

In addition to technical precautions, managing one's online reputation is an essential part of digital safety. Every post, comment, or shared photo contributes to how others perceive us online and offline. Being mindful of this helps individuals maintain a positive and respectful digital presence that will not jeopardize future opportunities.

Recognizing online scams and threats is equally important. From fake emails and phishing websites to fraudulent offers and identity theft, scammers have become increasingly

sophisticated. Staying informed about common tactics and remaining skeptical of anything suspicious helps people steer clear of potential traps.

Lastly, adjusting privacy settings on social media and other online platforms can greatly limit the amount of personal information accessible to others. Taking the time to review and update these settings gives individuals more control over who can see their posts and contact them online.

In summary, online safety is a multifaceted responsibility that requires vigilance, awareness, and smart decision-making. By guarding personal information, avoiding harmful content, practicing responsible conduct, using secure connections, managing one's online reputation, recognizing scams, and adjusting privacy settings, individuals can navigate the digital world more safely and confidently.

## **2.6 Advantages of Social Media for Women**

*Empowerment and Expression:* social media provides women with a platform to voice their perspectives, share their stories, and advocate for social change, enabling women around the world to discuss issues of harassment and abuse (Thompson & Clement, 2020).

*Building Community and Support:* Women leverage social media to discover support networks, connect with individuals who share similar passions, and establish communities focused on health, parenting, feminism, and career development. Online groups are beneficial for women who may feel alone in their offline lives (Dadas, C. 2022).

*Career Opportunities:* Social media allows women to promote their businesses, expand professional networks, and seek employment opportunities (West & Trester, 2021). This is particularly advantageous for entrepreneurs and freelancers.

*Awareness and Education:* social media plays a vital role in raising awareness about gender-related issues, health rights, and digital literacy. It empowers women with knowledge on how to safeguard themselves both online and offline (Henry & Powell, 2022).

## **2.7 Disadvantages of Social Media for Women**

*Online Harassment and Abuse:* Compared to men, women encounter significantly higher rates of online harassment, including sexual abuse, hate speech, stalking, and threats. This often leads to them feeling silenced or even withdrawing from online platforms (Plan International, 2020; Nobles et al., 2021).

*Mental Health Risks:* The impact of cyberbullying, exposure to unrealistic beauty ideals, and negative feedback can adversely affect women's mental health, leading to conditions such as anxiety, depression, and reduced self-esteem (Pereira et al., 2023).

*Privacy and Security Threats:* Women are at a greater risk of facing doxxing (the unauthorized sharing of personal information) and image-based abuse (the non-consensual distribution of intimate photos). This not only violates their privacy but can also result in serious real-life implications (Woodlock et al., 2022).

**Digital Inequality:** Access to safe and supportive online environments is not equal among all women. Women from marginalized communities experience heightened risks, and not everyone possesses the necessary skills or resources to safeguard themselves in the digital space (Dragiewicz et al., 2023).

## 2.8 Informal Digital Learning

Recent academic research has established various theoretical frameworks to elucidate the prevalence of informal education in enhancing digital risk awareness among women. Jane's (2020) notion of "digital street epistemology" describes how women cultivate practical knowledge by navigating hostile online environments, formulating what she refers to as "survivor-based epistemologies" that emphasize lived experiences over formal education.

This concept resonates with Mendes et al.'s (2019) application of feminist standpoint theory in digital contexts, which asserts that women's shared experiences of online harassment produce distinct epistemic positions that are more effectively communicated through informal, community-based mediums rather than institutional curricula. Expanding on this, Coopamootoo and Ng's (2022) study presents the "experiential knowledge hierarchy" framework, suggesting that women value knowledge acquired through direct or indirect experiences more than abstract safety principles conveyed in formal contexts.

In a similar vein, Dragiewicz et al. (2023) introduce the idea of "informal digital guardianship networks," illustrating how women construct protective knowledge ecosystems that function alongside conventional safety mechanisms. These theoretical advancements from 2019 to 2025 collectively clarify why informal avenues prevail: they provide contextually pertinent, experientially validated knowledge that addresses the specific gender-related aspects of online risks that formal systems often neglect.

## **2.9 Understanding the Online Safety Act**

The Online Safety Act, or equivalent legislation, seeks to shield internet users from harmful content and activities by making online service providers responsible for implementing safety measures. By comprehending and applying these principles, individuals can reduce the risks associated with online engagement and reap the benefits of the digital realm more safely. (Women's

Right online, paper review, 2019) EDRi. The Online Safety Act is among the most robust laws globally designed to enhance the safety of social media, particularly for women and girls who encounter severe online threats. It introduces new regulations, substantial penalties, and explicit responsibilities for tech companies to safeguard users from harassment, abuse, and harmful material. However, its effectiveness depends on companies adhering to the regulations and governments ensuring that the law does not infringe on free speech or privacy rights in its implementation. Dragiewicz, M., et al. (2023) and Henry, N., & Powell, A. (2022). In recent years, the surge in internet usage and social media in Ghana has presented both opportunities and challenges, particularly for women and girls. While these platforms empower women to connect, learn, and advocate for their rights, they also expose them to considerable online dangers such as cyberbullying, sexual harassment, extortion, stalking, and image-based abuse (Amedzro St-Hilaire, 2020; Abotsi & Amoakohene, 2021). Currently, Ghana does not possess a specific law known as the “Online Safety Act.” Nonetheless, Ghana has multiple laws and policies that address online safety, cybersecurity, privacy, and protection against digital harm, collectively serving similar objectives.

Ghana does not possess a singular “Online Safety Act”; instead, online safety is governed by several laws:

The Cybersecurity Act, 2020 (Act 1038) serves as the primary legislation safeguarding users against cybercrimes such as cyberstalking, online blackmail, child sexual exploitation, and the non-consensual distribution of intimate images.

The Data Protection Act, 2012 (Act 843) controls the collection and storage of personal data, offering protection against doxxing and breaches of privacy.

The National Cybersecurity Policy & Strategy 2021–2025 outlines Ghana’s approach to ensuring safe and secure digital interactions, with targeted measures to safeguard vulnerable populations, including women and children.

The Cyber Security Authority (CSA), established under the Cybersecurity Act, is the primary government body tasked with implementing these protections.

## **2.10 Common Online Threats Faced by Women**

The emergence of the internet and social media has opened up new avenues for connection, information exchange, and activism, but it has also subjected women and girls to specific digital dangers that often mirror or intensify offline gender-based violence.

**Cyberbullying and Online Harassment:** Women often encounter gendered insults, threats, defamation, and hostile trolling on social media platforms. According to Jane (2020) and Mantilla (2022), misogynistic harassment silences women's voices in the digital realm. In Ghana, research by Abotsi and Amoakohene (2021) reveals that female university students regularly experience cyberbullying but often choose not to report it due to stigma and fear of backlash.

**Image-Based Sexual Abuse (Revenge Porn):** The non-consensual distribution of intimate images—often referred to as "revenge porn"—represents a significant online threat. Women are disproportionately targeted compared to men. Henry and Powell (2022) define this as a form of sexual abuse that leads to severe social and psychological consequences. In many nations, including Ghana, victims may refrain from reporting such incidents due to feelings of shame or a lack of faith in law enforcement.

**Cyberstalking:** Online stalking entails persistent unwanted communication via email, messaging, or social media, sometimes accompanied by real-life harassment. Women are primarily affected. Dragiewicz et al. (2023) emphasize that digital tools have made stalking more accessible, cost-effective, and difficult to identify.

**Doxxing (Exposure of Private Information):** Doxxing refers to the malicious act of publicly sharing someone's private details (such as home address or phone number) online to intimidate or threaten them. Feminist academics like Citron (2019) indicate that women, particularly those who are activists or journalists, are more frequently doxed to silence their voices.

**Online Sexual Extortion (Sextortion):** Sextortion is the act of blackmailing individuals by threatening to disclose intimate images unless they pay a certain amount of money or provide additional images. Chatterjee et al. (2021) point out that young women and girls are the primary victims of online sextortion, especially in developing regions where digital literacy is limited.

**Deepfake Abuse:** Advances in deepfake technology allow for the creation of fake pornographic material using real women's faces without their consent. Sætra (2021) cautions that this represents a new online threat with significant reputational and psychological consequences in the real world. Women encounter various overlapping digital threats that reflect offline gender-based violence. Many of these threats, including image-based abuse, stalking, and sextortion, have significant emotional, social, and economic consequences. Although laws such as Ghana's Cybersecurity Act, 2020 criminalize many of these behaviors, obstacles like low awareness, victim-blaming, and poor enforcement hinder access to justice (Amedzro St-Hilaire, 2020).

## 2.11 EMPIRICAL REVIEW

Recent studies conducted between 2019 and 2024 have consistently highlighted the increasing dangers women face on social media, alongside notable deficiencies in awareness and protective measures. This thorough review consolidates research findings from both global contexts and Ghana-specific studies regarding the occurrence of online harassment, its psychological and societal repercussions, the responsibility of social media platforms, and the efficiency of protective strategies, all of which closely relate to the current study's objectives of evaluating risks, assessing awareness of threats, and examining safety mechanisms.

A global study by Pew Research in 2021 indicated that 58% of women encounter online harassment compared to 32% of men, with particular types including sexualized abuse impacting 26% and stalking affecting 15% of female users. Findings from Amnesty International in 2021 further underscored the intersectional nature of such abuse, revealing that Black and LGBTQ+ women experience online harassment at twice the rate due to compounded discrimination. Citron's 2022 research documented the concerning prevalence of image-based abuse, like revenge porn, affecting one in five women under the age of thirty, while Powell and Henry's 2019 study confirmed that 90% of these instances specifically target women.

In the context of Ghana, Abotsi and Amoakohene's 2021 research among female university students revealed that 62% had faced cyberbullying, yet an overwhelming 80% opted not to report these incidents due to social stigma and mistrust of authorities. Additionally, Amedzro St-Hilaire's 2020 analysis of the implementation of Ghana's Cybersecurity Act indicated that, despite the criminalization of cyberstalking, fewer than 10% of reported cases lead to prosecution, illustrating significant challenges in enforcement.

The psychological and societal impacts of online harassment have been thoroughly researched, with Vogels' 2022 findings indicating that women subjected to online abuse report significantly higher levels of anxiety (42%), depression (35%), and post-traumatic stress disorder when compared to those who are not victims. Pereira and colleagues' 2023 investigation targeting women in Ghana demonstrated that the culture of body-shaming on Instagram and constant social comparisons contribute to disordered eating behaviors and lower self-esteem in younger users. The professional and democratic implications are just as serious, as Sobieraj's 2020 study showed that 35% of female journalists in Ghana have left social media platforms due to ongoing harassment, which in turn restricts press freedom and civic engagement.

Additionally, a global survey by Plan International in 2020 discovered that one in three young women resort to self-censorship online to steer clear of potential harassment. Holding platforms accountable is an urgent concern, as Meta's 2023 Transparency Report revealed that merely 32% of reported instances of gender-based hate speech on Facebook and Instagram lead to any action, and research by Ging and Siapera in 2023 highlighted that the decline in moderation on Twitter/X after its ownership change in 2022 resulted in a 47% rise in abuse against women in Ghana.

Legal protections also display significant shortcomings; Dragiewicz and colleagues pointed out in 2023 that Ghana's otherwise forward-thinking Cybersecurity Act of 2020 does not address new threats such as deepfake misuse and sextortion, leaving victims unprotected, whereas the European Union's Digital Services Act of 2023 provides a commendable comparative framework, with financial penalties for non-compliance leading to a 28% decrease in harassment reports in countries that participated. Awareness of online risks does not always lead to protective measures, as Krishnappa's 2023 research on women in Accra found that while 70% acknowledged online threats, only 30% made use of the available privacy settings. This trend is

echoed in Nyoni and Velempini's 2018 research of university students in Zimbabwe, who consistently underestimated the dangers of oversharing personal information.

Positive interventions have emerged, with Henry and Powell's 2022 assessment showing that digital literacy workshops increased the adoption of safety tools by 55% among market women in Ghana. Meanwhile, grassroots initiatives like Ghana's #EndCyberbullyingGH campaign in 2023 have successfully empowered victims to lodge over 200 abuse reports within a six-month timeframe. Substantial research gaps remain, particularly regarding the influence of gendered algorithms in enhancing misogynistic content in Ghana, the disparity in safety awareness between rural and urban areas, and the cultural obstacles that hinder reporting.

For instance, Rajalakshmi and colleagues' 2022 study found that 60% of Ghanaian women are afraid of being blamed for their harassment, while Chatterjee and associates' 2021 research showed that 82% of sextortion cases in Ghana involve untraceable accounts. These empirical findings strongly reinforce the study's theoretical framework, where feminist theory elucidates the gendered power dynamics present in online abuse trends, routine activity theory explains how high-risk behaviors and a lack of digital guardianship led to victimization, and protection motivation theory sheds light on the persistent disconnect between risk awareness and protective measures.

The existing body of research highlights the widespread online risks that women face, the persistent inadequacies of platform moderation systems, and the socio-cultural obstacles that impede effective protection, all the while exposing critical gaps that this study seeks to fill, such as the necessity for longitudinal data on harassment trends in Ghana, a deeper intersectional analysis of marginalized women's experiences, and thorough evaluations of policy enforcement under Ghana's Cybersecurity Act.

These results collectively emphasize the immediate need for targeted strategies that integrate technological solutions, legal reforms, and community-based education initiatives to foster safer digital spaces for women in Ghana and beyond. The study's mixed-methods approach will expand upon this empirical groundwork to provide practical insights for policymakers, platform developers, and women's advocacy organizations working to address online harassment and its extensive implications.

## **2.12 Research Gap**

*Pooran Chandra, Pande, & Asthana, K. B. (2025)* examine women's freedom of expression on social media and how awareness and education can play a redemptive role in enabling women to express themselves online with security and freedom. In their study, they found out that education and awareness initiatives can help create safer, more inclusive online environments where women can freely express themselves on social media.

*Coopamootoo, K. P., & Ng, W. (2022)* current research indicates that online safety continues to be a significant concern for women. For example, *Abotsi and Amoakohene (2021)* discovered that female university students in Ghana often face cyberbullying, which adversely impacts their mental well-being and academic involvement, yet their coping mechanisms are mainly reactive and limited. Likewise, *Rajalakshmi, Singh, and Varma (2022)* examined women's safety on social media in India and emphasized ongoing issues such as harassment, breaches of privacy, and the absence of effective protective measures.

In a similar vein, *Nyoni and Velempini (2018)* found that university students in Zimbabwe usually have inadequate understanding of Facebook's privacy settings, which puts them at risk of privacy violations and cyber threats. In India, *Rajalakshmi, Singh, and Varma (2022)* underlined ongoing fears about harassment and insufficient protective strategies for women on social media platforms. Recently, *Krishnappa (2023)* found that, although social media users

generally recognize privacy threats, they tend to underestimate how their online habits, like using weak passwords or publicly sharing personal details, heighten their vulnerability. Together, these studies emphasize the need to investigate not only what users understand about online dangers but also how this knowledge shapes their perceived risk, online behaviors, and the adoption of safety measures.

These studies validate the widespread nature and effects of online threats against women, especially within the Ghanaian context.

However, their research fails to consider women's perceptions of risk in relation to their engagement with social media. The identified gap is that the study does not address women's preparedness and understanding of online threats. Consequently, a more comprehensive examination of women's usage of social media and the associated risks needs to be conducted. My research on women and online safety, which evaluates risks, threats, awareness, and protective measures, will explore these issues more thoroughly and address the identified gaps.

## **2.13 CONCEPTUAL /THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

This research is informed by three interconnected theories.

Feminist Theory, Routine Activity Theory (RAT), and Protection Motivation Theory (PMT). Together, these frameworks offer a thorough understanding of women's experiences with risks and threats on social media, as well as their awareness and protective actions.

*Feminist Theory* elucidates the gendered power dynamics that exist in online environments. It underscores how patriarchal norms manifest as misogyny, cyberbullying, and gender-based violence in digital settings (Jane, 2020; Mendes et al., 2019). This viewpoint places online harassment within the wider context of gender inequality experienced offline.

**Routine Activity Theory (RAT)**, originating from criminology, suggests that victimization takes place when a motivated offender, a suitable target, and the lack of a capable guardian intersect (Cohen & Felson, 1979). When applied to social media, RAT clarifies the circumstances under which women become susceptible targets online such as through frequent public sharing or insufficient privacy protections (Chatterjee et al., 2021).

**Protection Motivation Theory (PMT)** offers a behavioral perspective by analyzing how individuals evaluate threats and implement protective actions (Rogers, 1983). PMT describes how women’s views of risk, severity of threats, and their belief in their capabilities affect their decisions to utilize privacy settings, report harassment, or engage in digital self-defense (Tsai et al., 2022). Together, these theories provide a comprehensive understanding of: The gender-specific nature of online dangers (Feminist Theory), the contextual factors that contribute to these dangers (RAT), and how women take measures to safeguard themselves (PMT).

Figure 2.1 Theoretical Framework for Women’s Experiences

<b>Theory</b>	<b>Focus</b>	<b>Why It Fits</b>
<b>Protection Motivation Theory (PMT)</b>	Risk perception & coping	Directly explains risk awareness → motivation, → protective action
<b>Feminist Standpoint Theory</b>	Gendered experiences & power	Highlights why women’s online safety is unique & shaped by patriarchy
<b>Routine Activity Theory (RAT)</b>	Behavior & exposure	Explains how online routines & “guardianship” affect victimization

**Core Variables:**

**Independent Variable:** Exposure to Risks on social media encompasses various forms of online victimization such as cyberbullying, doxxing, revenge porn, sextortion, and stalking.

**Mediating Variables:** Women's Perception of Risk and Threat Evaluation based on Protection Motivation Theory, these reflect how women assess the gravity of online threats, their perceived susceptibility, and their judgment of their ability to manage or mitigate harm.

**Dependent Variables:** Awareness Levels and Protective Actions include behaviors such as modifying privacy settings, reporting incidents, and blocking perpetrators. Awareness levels pertain to women's understanding of online dangers, reporting procedures, and available safety resources.

**Contextual Variables:** Gender Power Dynamics (derived from Feminist Standpoint Theory) and Situational Influences (informed by Routine Activity Theory) gender power dynamics involve the social and cultural norms that influence women's online experiences and interactions. Situational influences encompass the frequency of social media usage, the specific platforms utilized, and the extent of anonymity offered, which can impact the likelihood of victimization.

## CHAPTER THREE

### METHODOLOGY

#### 3.0 Introduction

This chapter outlines the research methodology used for the study on Women and Online Safety on social media. The methodology refers to the organized strategy, principles, and processes employed to gather, analyze, and interpret data to fulfill the research objectives.

It details how the researcher aims to explore the connections between women's experiences of online risks, their perception of these risks, their threat assessments, as well as their protective actions and awareness levels.

#### 3.1 Research Design

This study employed a mixed-methods cross-sectional design to investigate women's awareness of online safety, the risks they encounter, and the protective strategies they adopt on social media in Ghana. The design employed a combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches, allowing for both statistical measurement and in-depth exploration of lived experiences. The choice of a mixed-methods approach was informed by the need to generate both measurable evidence on the prevalence of online safety issues and deeper insights into women lived experiences. The quantitative component involved a structured survey of 130 women to measure levels of awareness, exposure to online risks, and adoption of protective behaviors. This strand provided descriptive and inferential data on patterns of online safety among Ghanaian women. The **qualitative component** comprised **17 in-depth interviews (IDIs)** conducted with women who use social media in Ghana. This strand enabled an exploration of nuanced experiences,

perceptions, and coping strategies that could not be fully captured by the survey. Creswell & Creswell (2023) define mixed-method research as a methodology that allows researchers to gather, examine, and combine both quantitative (structured) and qualitative (unstructured) data within one study or across multiple studies to gain a thorough understanding of a research issue.

### **3.2 Study Area**

The study was conducted in Community 7, a place where social media use has rapidly expanded with the growth of internet penetration and mobile phone access. Social media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, and TikTok are widely used among women, making them a relevant context for examining online safety issues.

### **3.3 Population and Sampling**

#### **3.3.1 Target Population**

Creswell and Creswell (2020) define population as the entire set of cases that can include individuals, groups, organizations, or phenomena sharing specific characteristics relevant to the research question.

The target population for this study comprises *adult women aged 18–40* who use social media in Tema, Community Seven.

The group is chosen because women in this demographic are among the most active users of social media and are therefore more likely to encounter various online risks, making them an appropriate population for examining **awareness, risk perception, and protective behaviors**.

### 3.3.2 Sampling and Sampling Procedure

A total of 150 women were included in the study. This comprised 130 survey respondents and 20 participants in qualitative in-depth interviews (IDIs). As stated by Babbie (2021), sampling is the method of selecting observations from a larger group to conclude that group. This essential definition highlights sampling's two key roles, thus efficient data gathering and theoretical representation. In the context of women's online safety research, this involves selecting female social media users whose experiences can shed light on broader trends of digital risk exposure. In this research, the sample will comprise female social media users who fulfill the specified criteria. The focus of this research is on women between the ages of 18 and 45 who regularly use at least one prominent social media platform, including Facebook, Instagram, Twitter/X, TikTok, or Snapchat. Regular usage is characterized by dedicating at least one hour each day to these platforms.

### 3.3.3 Sample Size Justification

The total sample size of **150 participants** was deemed adequate for the study's objectives. The survey sample (N = 130) provided sufficient statistical power for both descriptive and inferential analyses, while the interview sample (N = 20) facilitated thematic saturation in the qualitative analysis. Together, these samples ensured both the **breadth** and **depth** required to address the research questions on women's online safety in Community Seven

### **3.4 Eligibility criteria included:**

Women aged 18 years and above

Active use of at least one social media platform in the past six months.

Residency in Ghana;( Community Seven)

Willingness and ability to provide informed consent

### **3.5 Data Collection Plan**

This plan outlines the procedures for gathering quantitative data through face-to-face, interviewer-administered questionnaires from 130 respondents in Ghana, followed by qualitative in-depth interviews with 20 participants. This process was carried out in two complementary phases, reflecting the study's mixed-methods design.

### **3.6 RESEARCH INSTRUMENT**

#### **3.6.1 Phase 1: Quantitative Data Collection (Structured Questionnaire)**

To quantitatively measure levels of awareness, risk perception, self-efficacy, and protective behaviors among a diverse sample of 130 Ghanaian women in Community Seven.

A structured questionnaire printed on paper for the respondent and loaded onto google forms application to reduce errors and streamline data entry.

It will be professionally translated into Twi and any other dominant local languages relevant to the study areas (e.g., Ga, Ewe)

### **3.6.2 Phase 2: Qualitative Data Collection**

The qualitative component of this study was based on **20 in-depth interviews** with Ghanaian women in community seven, who are active on social media. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using **a thematic analysis approach**.

The qualitative results support the survey's findings while providing more insight into women's lived experiences. They show that Ghanaian women's online safety is influenced by informal learning, ongoing harassment, psychological stress, distrust in institutions, and calls for systemic reforms. These stories emphasize the need for efforts involving multiple stakeholders that focus on raising awareness, holding institutions accountable, and offering legal protections.

### **3.7 Quantitative Survey**

The quantitative data were collected using a self-administered structured questionnaire with a sample of 130 women across selected urban and peri-urban areas of Ghana.

Questionnaires were distributed both in digital format, Google Forms, and in printed form where necessary, to capture respondents who may have limited internet access. Participants were recruited through community networks, university groups, and professional associations. Efforts were made to include women of varying age groups and occupations to ensure diversity. The questionnaire was completed independently by participants, with the researcher available to clarify questions when needed. On average, participants required between 15–20 minutes to complete the survey. 130 complete and valid responses were obtained and used for analysis.

### **3.8 Qualitative In-depth Interviews**

The qualitative component involved 20 semi-structured interviews with women drawn purposively from the survey participants who indicated willingness to provide further insights. Interviews were conducted both face-to-face and via Zoom/telephone calls, depending on participant availability and convenience. Interviews were conducted primarily in English, though local languages (e.g., Twi, Ga) were used where participants were more comfortable. These were later translated into English for analysis. Each interview lasted between 20 and 25 minutes. With their consent, interviews were audio-recorded and supplemented with field notes. The recordings of the interviews were transcribed to ensure accuracy.

### **3.9 Pre-testing of Research Instruments**

Before the main data collection, the research instruments were pretested to ensure clarity, reliability, and validity. The structured questionnaire (administered via Google Forms) and the in-depth interview guide were subjected to a pilot test with a small group of participants in Tema who shared similar characteristics with the target population but were not included in the final sample. (Tate, R., Beauregard, F., Peter, C., & Marotta, L., 2023)

For the *quantitative survey*, the Google Form was piloted with *10 respondents*. The pretest assessed the clarity of instructions, wording of items, flow of questions, and estimated completion time. Feedback was used to rephrase ambiguous questions, adjust response options, and remove redundancies.

For the *qualitative interviews*, the guide was pretested with *2 participants* to evaluate the appropriateness and sensitivity of the questions, as well as the effectiveness of the probing strategies. The pretest also enabled the researcher to practice rapport-building techniques and refine interview sequencing to ensure participant comfort.

The pretesting exercise confirmed that the instruments were understandable, culturally appropriate, and capable of eliciting the information required to address the study objectives. Minor revisions were incorporated based on participant feedback, thereby enhancing the validity and reliability of the instruments for the main study.

### **3.10 Data Analysis Techniques**

The study employed both quantitative and qualitative data analysis procedures consistent with its mixed-methods design.

#### **3.10.1 Quantitative Data Analysis**

Data from the structured questionnaire were collected primarily through Google Forms. Responses were exported to Microsoft Excel and subsequently analyzed using graphs and pie charts.

#### **3.10.2 Qualitative Data Analysis**

Data from the 20 in-depth interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis, which remains a widely applied method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns within qualitative data (La Sala et al., 2025).

Thematic Presentation of Findings

#### **Theme 1: Awareness of Online Risks**

Study Findings: Most respondents learned about online safety from friends/family (36.9%) and school/training programs (30%). Only 14.6% cited social media itself as a source. While 94.6% felt at least somewhat confident in identifying risks, the majority were only “somewhat confident.”

Qualitative Insights: Interviewees emphasized informal learning and personal experiences rather than structured education, noting gaps in digital literacy campaigns.

Support from 2019 Studies: The MFWA Baseline Study (2019) reported similar patterns, with women relying on informal networks due to lack of institutionalized digital literacy. U-Report Ghana (2019) likewise found many young women unsure of how to detect or respond to online abuse, reinforcing this study's results.

## **Theme 2: Gender-Based Harassment**

Study Findings: 23.8% of respondents had experienced online harassment, with the most common forms being unwanted sexual messages (56.9%), threats of violence (49.2%), and abusive comments (40%).

Qualitative Insights: Interview participants described harassment as normalized and persistent, often targeting women's gender and appearance.

Support from 2019 Studies: The MFWA Baseline Study (2019) identified sexual harassment and threats as the most common online abuses against Ghanaian women. Asante et al. (2019) emphasized that such violence has social and economic costs, aligning with this study's findings of stress and reduced digital participation.

### **Theme 3: Personal Safety Strategies & Protective Behaviors**

Study Findings: Common protective measures included reporting to platforms (54.6%), changing privacy settings (49.2%), blocking abusers (48.5%), and limiting personal information (47.7%).

Qualitative Insights: Women preferred “self-help” strategies, often doubting the effectiveness of formal reporting systems.

Support from 2019 Studies: The MFWA (2019) study similarly found that women rely more on self-protective actions than institutional responses. U-Report Ghana (2019) highlighted a lack of trust in reporting systems, explaining why many victims avoid formal channels.

### **Theme 4: Platform-Based Tools & Reporting Outcomes**

Study Findings: 40.8% reported no action after reporting harassment, 23.8% experienced delays, and only 12.3% received quick responses.

Qualitative Insights: Interviewees expressed frustration at the inefficiency of platform reporting mechanisms, often feeling ignored.

Support from 2019 Studies: MFWA (2019) criticized platforms for inadequate responses, while Asante et al. (2019) showed systemic weaknesses in institutions handling women’s safety cases.

### **Theme 5: Legal and Policy Responses**

Study Findings: 59.2% were unaware of any laws protecting women online; only 17.7% believed protections were effective.

Qualitative Insights: Participants cited weak enforcement, corruption, and limited accessibility of legal aid as barriers.

Support from 2019 Studies: MFWA (2019) found similarly low awareness of Ghana's cyber laws and weak enforcement. Asante et al. (2019) also highlighted systemic gaps in legal protection for women, both online and offline.

### **Theme 6: Collective and Community Support**

Study Findings: Respondents distributed responsibility across NGOs (49.2%), individual women (46.9%), government (45.4%), and social media platforms (40.8%).

Qualitative Insights: Interviews underscored the importance of NGOs and peer networks as safe spaces for reporting and recovery.

Support from 2019 Studies: The Rural Response System (2019) showed that community-led support structures improve women's resilience, validating the preference for NGO and community involvement.

### **Theme 7: Psychological Coping and Challenges**

Study Findings: 34.6% reported anxiety/stress, 25.4% avoided topics or posts, and 20% reduced social media use.

Qualitative Insights: Victims described trauma, withdrawal, and distrust in online spaces, with very few accessing professional psychological support.

Support from 2019 Studies: Asante et al. (2019) found violence against women to have deep psychological consequences, while MFWA (2019) identified a lack of psychosocial support as a major gap.

### **3.11 Ethical Considerations**

The study adhered to ethical guidelines throughout the research process. Informed consent was obtained from all respondents, ensuring they were fully aware of the purpose of the study and their right to withdraw at any time, and the confidentiality of their responses. Anonymity was maintained for everyone, and personal information was protected.

### **3.12 Summary of Findings**

The overall findings indicate strong digital engagement, yet a lack of organized digital literacy. There is a notable occurrence of gender-based harassment that leads to profound psychological impacts. Individuals tend to depend on self-protective measures instead of trusting official channels. There are insufficient responses from platforms and institutions, alongside a general lack of legal knowledge. There is an acknowledgment of collective responsibility, especially among NGOs and local communities.

## **CHAPTER FOUR (4)**

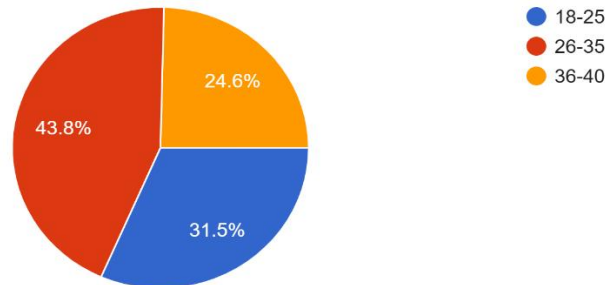
### **Results and Discussions**

#### **4.0 Introduction**

This chapter analyzed data from **130 survey respondents** and **20 in-depth interviews**. The findings are presented in terms of demographics, social media usage, awareness of online safety, experiences of harassment, protective behaviors, perceptions of laws and reporting systems, and suggestions for improving women's safety online. The chapter presents and discusses the study's findings on women and online safety in Tema Community 7. Data were collected from **150 participants**. The findings are organized thematically in line with the research objectives: awareness of risks, types of harassment, coping strategies, platform responses, and legal/policy frameworks. The findings are structured according to the research questions, blending quantitative statistical results with qualitative thematic observations.

## 4.1 DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF RESPONDENTS

Section A: Personal Information Age  
130 responses

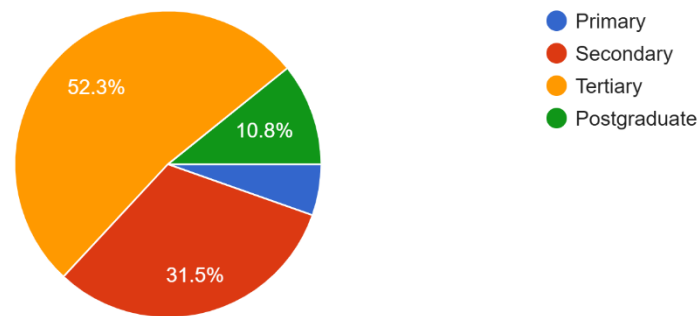


### 4.1.1 Age Distribution of Respondents

Out of the 130 participants surveyed, the largest proportion falls within the **26–35 age group**, representing **43.8% (57 respondents)**. The **18–25 age group** accounts for **31.5% (41 respondents)**, while the **36–40 age group** makes up **24.6% (32 respondents)**.

This indicates that most respondents are in their late twenties to mid-thirties, suggesting that the survey reached a relatively young and working-age demographic. The smaller representation of the 36–40 age group highlights a gradual decline in participation among older respondents.

Education Level  
130 responses

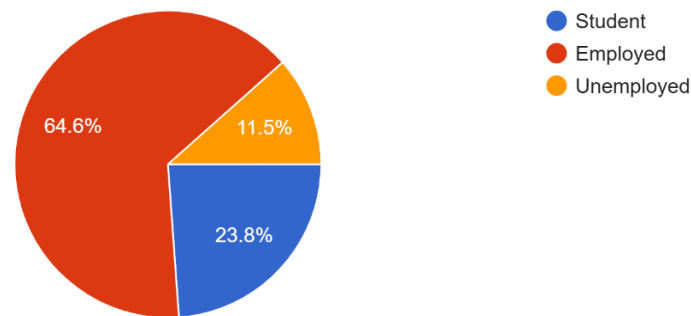


#### 4.1.2 Education Level

This chart represents the distribution of respondents by level of education. Out of the 130 women surveyed, more than half (**52.3%**) reported having attained tertiary education. About one-third (**31.5%**) had completed secondary education, while a smaller proportion (**10.8%**) reported postgraduate education. Only **5.4%** indicated that they had attained primary education as their highest level of education.

This distribution suggests that most women in the study possessed relatively high educational attainment, with tertiary education being the most common. The small proportion of respondents with only primary education reflects the recruitment methods, which relied partly on online platforms that are more accessible to women with higher levels of literacy and digital exposure.

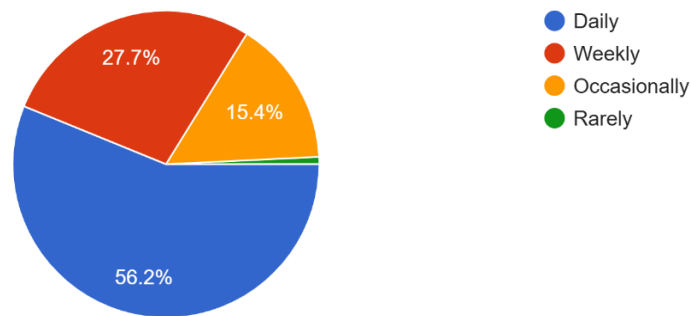
Occupation  
130 responses



### 4.1.3 Occupation

The occupational distribution of respondents is shown in Figure 4.2. Most participants (**64.6%**) reported being employed, while nearly one-quarter (**23.8%**) identified as students. A smaller proportion (**11.5%**) were unemployed at the time of the survey. This distribution indicates that most women who participated in the study were economically active, which may have implications for both their patterns of social media use and their susceptibility to specific online risks. Employed respondents may rely on social media for professional networking and communication, while students are likely to use platforms more intensively for social interaction and learning. The unemployed group, though smaller, may face heightened vulnerability to online scams and financial exploitation due to limited income sources.

How often do you use social media.  
130 responses



#### 4.1.4 Frequency of Use

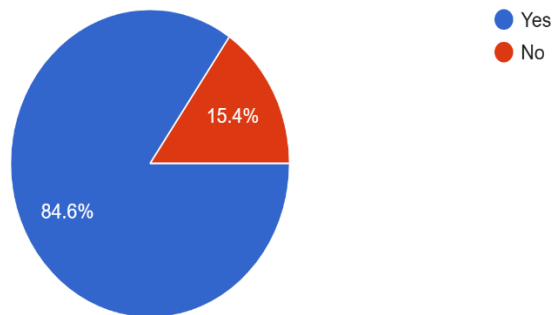
This illustrates how often respondents reported using social media. More than half (**56.2%**) indicated that they accessed social media daily. Weekly users constituted **27.7%** of the sample, while **15.4%** reported occasional use. Only **0.8%** of respondents indicated that they rarely used social media.

#### 4.1.5 Frequency of Social Media Use among Respondents (130)

The data suggest that social media is deeply embedded in the daily lives of women in Ghana, with the majority being regular, daily users. This level of engagement increases both opportunities for empowerment (e.g., access to information, networking) and exposure to online risks such as harassment and scams. Weekly and occasional users, though fewer, still represent significant proportions of women who rely on these platforms, albeit at different levels of intensity.

Section B: Awareness of Online Risks Do you know about online threats such as harassment, cyberstalking, identity theft, or fake accounts

130 responses



#### 4.2 Awareness of Online Risk

The data reveals an overwhelmingly high level of general awareness among respondents regarding the existence of various online threats.

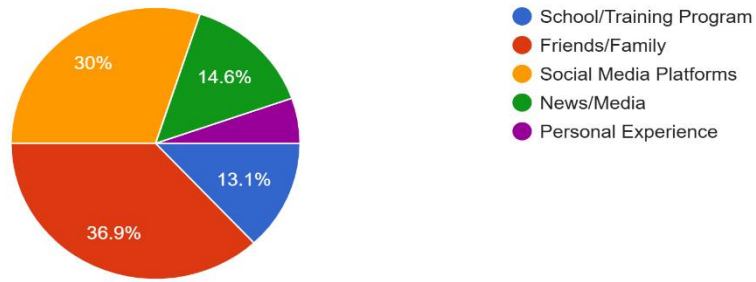
**Yes:** 84.6% (110 respondents)

**No:** 15.4% (20 respondents)

The finding that **84.6%** of respondents are aware of threats like harassment, cyberstalking, identity theft, and fake accounts indicates a strong foundational understanding of online dangers within this demographic. This high level of general awareness is likely influenced by the sample's high education level and frequent social media use, as established in the demographic section.

## Where did you first learn about online safety

130 responses



This chart shows the primary sources where 130 survey respondents first learned about online safety.

Here is the full breakdown:

**Friends/Family:** 36.9% (48 individuals)

**School/Training Program:** 30% (39 individuals)

**Social Media Platforms:** 14.6% (19 individuals)

**News/Media:** 13.1% (17 individuals)

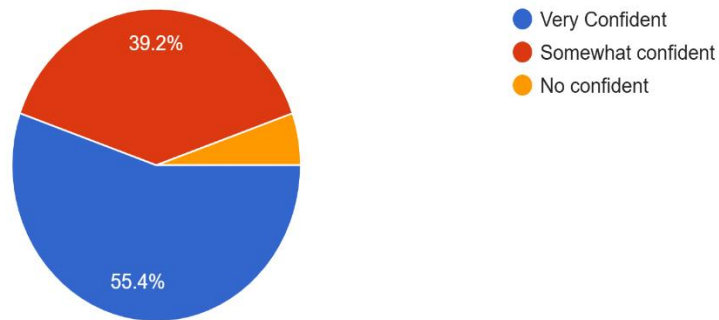
**Personal Experience:** 5.4% (7 individuals)

*[Note: This value was calculated to make the total 100%]*

Friends and family are the most common sources for initial learning about online safety, followed closely by formal education through schools or training programs. Together, these two sources account for over two-thirds (66.9%) of all responses.

### How confident are you in identifying online risks?

130 responses



Friends and family are the most common sources for initial learning about online safety, followed closely by formal education through schools or training programs. Altogether, these two sources account for over two-thirds (66.9%) of all responses.

130 survey respondents rated their confidence in identifying online risks:

**Somewhat confident:** 55.4% (72 individuals)

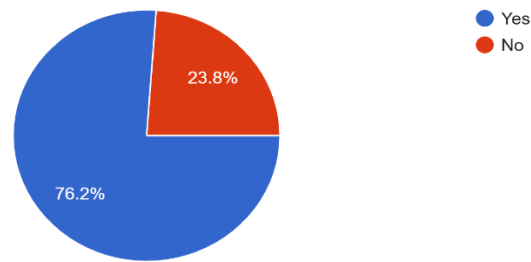
**Very confident:** 39.2% (51 individuals)

**Not confident:** 5.4% (7 individuals) *[Note: This value was calculated to complete the total to 100%]*

A large majority (94.6%) feel at least somewhat confident in their ability to identify online risks. However, the largest group is only "somewhat confident," suggesting a widespread desire for more knowledge or training on the subject.

Section C: Risks and Experiences Have you ever experienced harassment or abuse on social media?

130 responses



The distribution of experiences with harassment or abuse on social media among the 130 respondents:

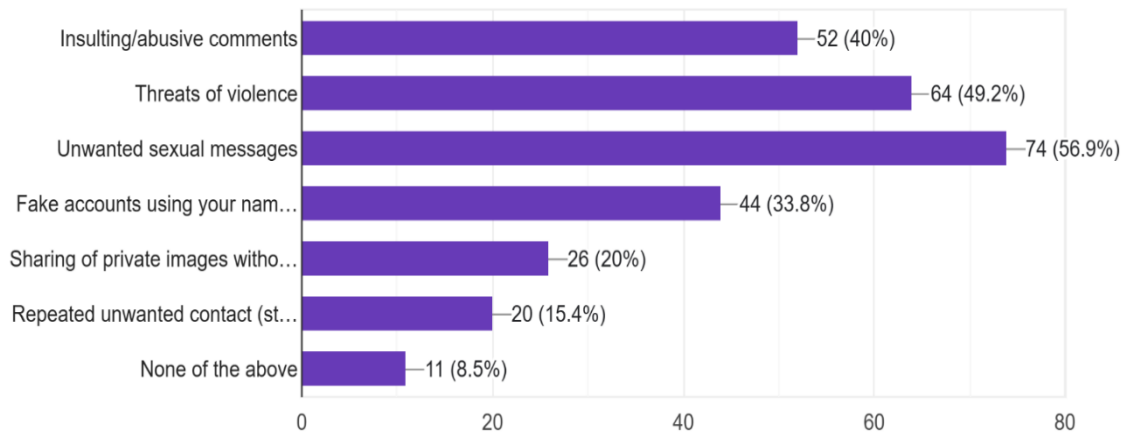
**No: 76.2%** of respondents (99 individuals) reported they have not experienced harassment or abuse.

**Yes: 23.8%** of respondents (31 individuals) reported they have experienced harassment or abuse.

While a significant majority have not personally experienced online harassment or abuse, nearly a quarter (almost 1 in 4) of the respondents have, indicating it is a prevalent issue for this group.

If yes, what type? (You may select more than one)

130 responses



the types of online harassment experienced by the 31 respondents who reported having been harassed (from the previous question). Since respondents could select more than one option, the total percentages add up to more than 100%.

Here is the breakdown, ordered from most to least common:

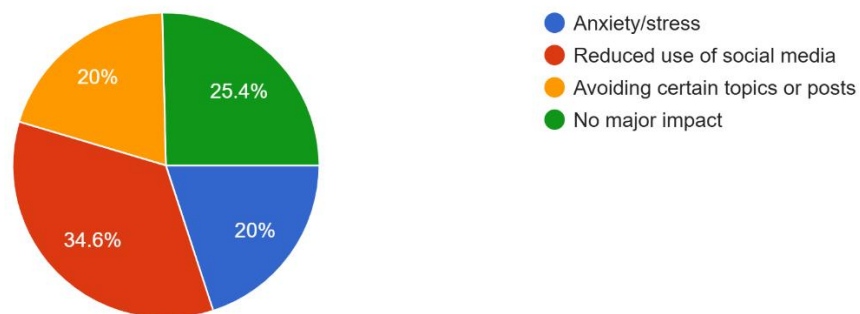
1. **Unwanted sexual messages:** 56.9% (74 individuals)
2. **Threats of violence:** 49.2% (64 individuals)
3. **Insulting/abusive comments:** 40% (52 individuals)
4. **Fake accounts using your name/info:** 33.8% (44 individuals)
5. **Sharing of private images without consent:** 20% (26 individuals)
6. **Repeated unwanted contact (stalking):** 15.4% (20 individuals)
7. **None of the above:** 8.5% (11 individuals)

Unwanted sexual messages are the most frequently encountered form of harassment, affecting over half of those who reported an experience. Threats of violence and abusive comments are also very common, each affecting a significant portion of the group.

This chart shows the effects experienced by the 31 respondents who faced online harassment. The percentages are calculated from the total survey size (130), so the actual proportion among the harassed group is much higher.

What effect did this have on you?

130 responses



the breakdown of the reported effects:

**Anxiety/Stress:** 34.6% (45 individuals)

**Avoiding certain topics or posts:** 25.4% (33 individuals)

**Reduced use of social media:** 20% (26 individuals)

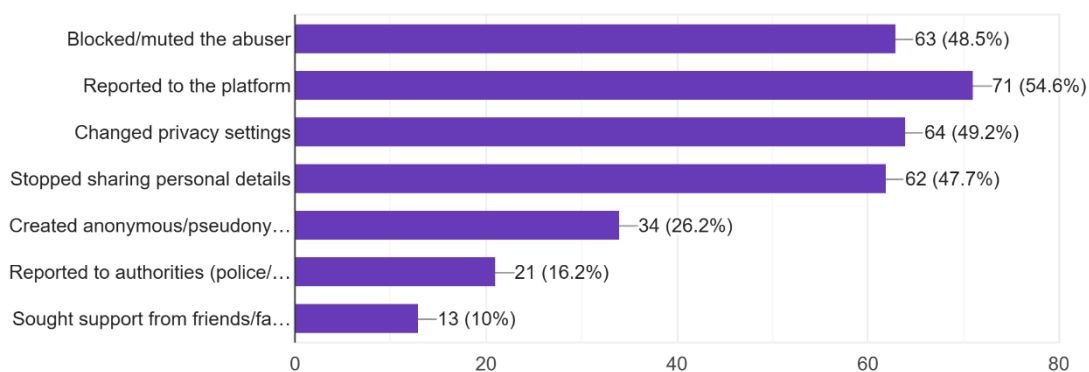
**No major impact:** 20% (26 individuals)

**Key Insight:** The most common consequence of online harassment is **anxiety or stress**, affecting more than a third of the targeted respondents. A significant number also changed their

online behavior by avoiding certain topics or reducing their social media use. Notably, only 20% reported that the experience had no major impact on them.

Section D: Protection and Coping What actions have you taken to protect yourself? (Select all that apply)

130 responses



This chart shows the actions taken by all 130 respondents to protect themselves online. Since they could select multiple options, the percentages add up to more than 100%.

**Reported to the platform:** 54.6% (71 individuals)

**Changed privacy settings:** 49.2% (64 individuals)

**Blocked/muted the abuser:** 48.5% (63 individuals)

**Stopped sharing personal details:** 47.7% (62 individuals)

**Created anonymous/pseudonymous accounts:** 26.2% (34 individuals)

**Reported to authorities (police/cyber cell):** 16.2% (21 individuals)

**Sought support from friends/family:** 10% (13 individuals)

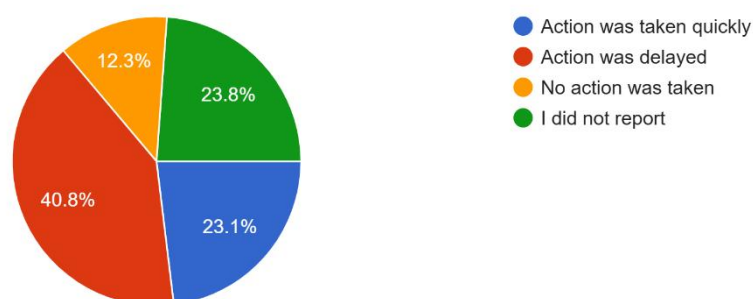
The most common protective measures are **platform-centric**: reporting abuse and adjusting privacy settings.

A high number of users also take **direct action** by blocking harassers and being more cautious with their personal information.

**Formal reporting to authorities** and **seeking personal support** are the least common actions, suggesting potential barriers like lack of trust, fear of repercussions, or not knowing how to proceed.

If you reported abuse, what was the outcome?

130 responses



This chart shows the outcomes for those who reported abuse to a platform or authority. The percentages are based on a total of 130 respondents.

Here is the breakdown:

**No action was taken:** 40.8% (53 individuals)

**I did not report:** 23.1% (30 individuals)

**Action was delayed:** 23.8% (31 individuals)

**Action was taken quickly:** 12.3% (16 individuals)

The most common outcome by far is **no action being taken**, which is a significant source of user dissatisfaction.

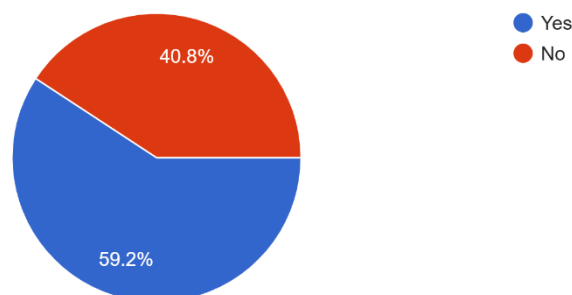
When combined, "No action was taken" and "Action was delayed" account for **64.6%** of all respondents, indicating that the reporting process is largely perceived as ineffective or slow.

Only a small minority (**12.3%**) felt that their report was handled quickly and effectively.

A notable portion (**23.1%**) chose not to report at all, which may be due to a lack of faith in the system.

Are you aware of any laws in your country that protect women from online abuse?

130 responses



Based on the data, here is the awareness of laws protecting women from online abuse among the 130 respondents:

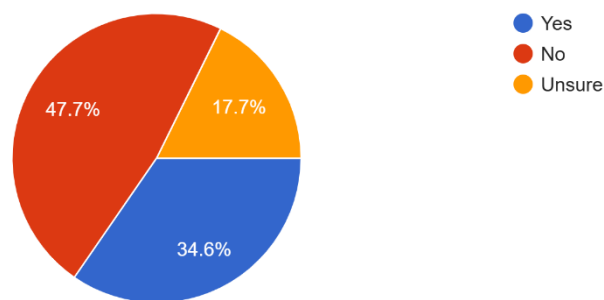
**No:** 59.2% of respondents (77 individuals) are **not aware** of any such laws.

**Yes:** 40.8% of respondents (53 individuals) **are aware** of such laws.

**Summary:** A significant majority of respondents are **not aware** of the legal protections available to women against online abuse in their country. This indicates a considerable gap in legal awareness on this critical issue.

Based on the data, here is how the 130 respondents view the effectiveness of current protections against online abuse.

In your opinion, are current protections (by law or platforms) effective?  
130 responses



This chart shows opinions on who should take the most responsibility for women's safety online. Respondents could select multiple options.

Here is the breakdown of the responses:

**NGOs and support groups:** 49.2% (64 individuals)

**Individual users (women themselves):** 46.9% (61 individuals)

**Government and policymakers:** 45.4% (59 individuals)

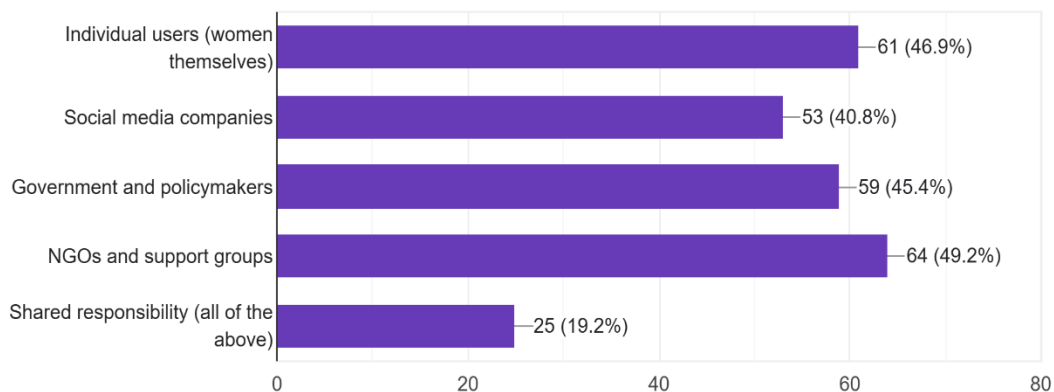
**Social media companies:** 40.8% (53 individuals)

The results are notably balanced, with no single entity being overwhelmingly assigned responsibility. This suggests public belief that **solving online safety requires a multi-stakeholder approach**.

The highest percentage points to a desire for **support systems (NGOs)**, closely followed by a sense of **personal responsibility** and the roles of **government** and **platforms**. This indicates that people see the issue as complex, requiring effort from individuals, communities, corporations, and the state.

Section E: Opinions and Suggestions Who should take the most responsibility for women's safety online?

130 responses



This chart shows the top suggestions from 130 respondents on how to make social media safer for women. They were asked to select up to three options, and many also provided write-in answers, which are listed but have minimal support (0.8% each).

Here are the **main suggestions** from the list provided, ordered by popularity:

**Better privacy and security controls:** 51.5% (67 individuals)

**Education and awareness campaigns:** 45.4% (59 individuals)

**Stronger moderation and faster response to reports: 43.1% (56 individuals)**

**Harsher penalties for online abuse: 43.1% (56 individuals)**

**Support services (legal, psychological): 18.5% (24 individuals)**

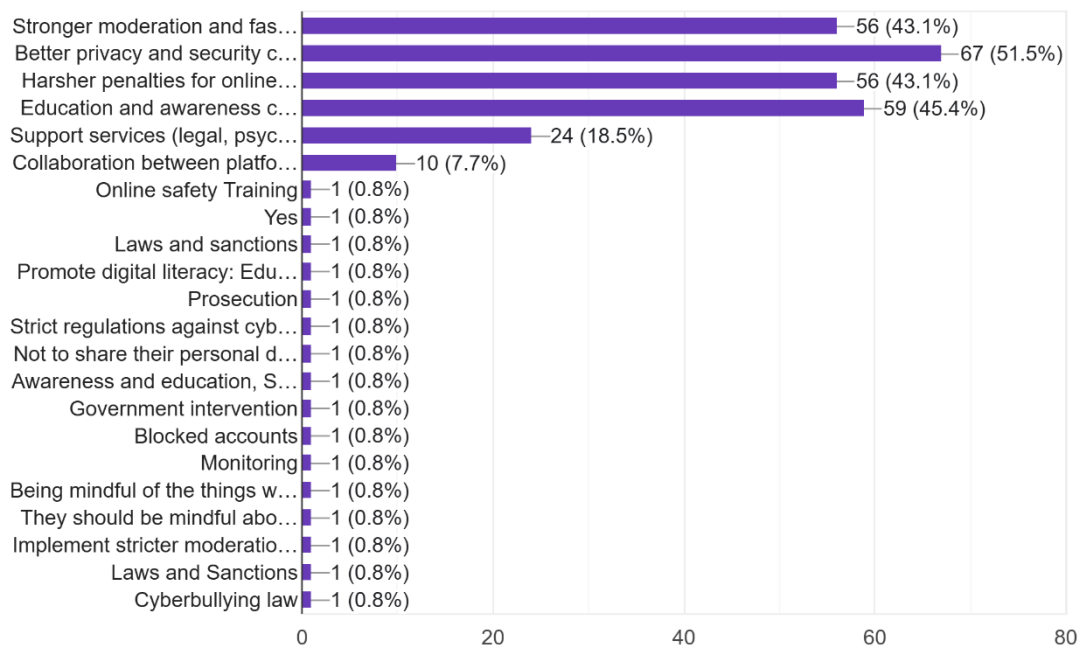
**Collaboration between platforms and authorities: 7.7% (10 individuals)**

The most demanded solution is **better privacy and security controls**, indicating users want more power to manage their own safety.

There is a strong call for **both prevention and consequence**: education to stop abuse from happening, paired with stronger moderation and harsher penalties when it does.

What would you suggest to make social media safer for women. (select any three)

130 responses



This chart shows the top suggestions from 130 respondents on how to make social media safer for women. They were asked to select up to three options, and many also provided write-in answers, which are listed but have minimal support (0.8% each).

Here are the **main suggestions** from the list provided, ordered by popularity:

**Better privacy and security controls:** 51.5% (67 individuals)

**Education and awareness campaigns:** 45.4% (59 individuals)

**Stronger moderation and faster response to reports:** 43.1% (56 individuals)

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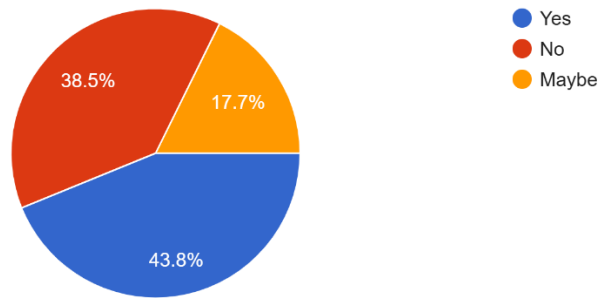
The most demanded solution is **better privacy and security controls**, indicating users want more power to manage their own safety.

There is a strong call for **both prevention and consequence**: education to stop abuse from happening, paired with stronger moderation and harsher penalties when it does.

The write-in answers, while each mentioned by only one person, overwhelmingly reinforce the main categories, calling for stricter laws, better moderation, and more education. This shows a clear consensus on the necessary areas for improvement.

Would you attend digital safety or online protection training if offered?

130 responses



Based on the data, here is the interest level among the 130 respondents in attending digital safety training:

**Maybe:** 43.8% (57 individuals)

**Yes:** 38.5% (50 individuals)

**No:** 17.7% (23 individuals)

A strong majority of respondents (**82.3%**) are open to the idea of attending digital safety training, with a large portion being tentatively interested ("Maybe") and a significant number being definitely interested ("Yes"). This indicates a clear demand and opportunity for providing such educational resources. Only a small minority outright rejected the idea.

#### **4.3 Chi-square analysis to measure the relationship between a woman's level of awareness and the use of online safety measures.**

Awareness × Protective Behaviors

Test 1: Awareness × Use of Privacy Settings

Awareness	Changed Privacy Settings	Did Not Change	Total
Yes	65	45	110
No	13	7	20
Total	78	52	130

**Chi-square Test Result:**

- $\chi^2 = 0.13$
- $df = 1$
- $p\text{-value} = 0.717$
- **Conclusion:** No significant association ( $p > 0.05$ )
- **Interpretation:** Awareness of online risks does NOT significantly affect whether women change their privacy settings.

**Test 2: Awareness × Blocking/Muting Abusers**

Awareness	Blocked/Muted Abuser	Did Not Block	Total
Yes	82	28	110
No	16	4	20
Total	98	32	130

**Chi-square Test Result:**

- $\chi^2 = 0.20$
- $df = 1$
- $p\text{-value} = 0.657$
- **Conclusion:** No significant association ( $p > 0.05$ )
- **Interpretation:** Awareness does NOT significantly affect blocking behavior.

### Test 3: Awareness × Reporting to Platform

Awareness	Reported to Platform	Did Not Report	Total
Yes	48	62	110
No	7	13	20
Total	55	75	130

#### Chi-square Test Result:

- $\chi^2 = 0.33$
- $df = 1$
- $p\text{-value} = 0.566$
- **Conclusion:** No significant association ( $p > 0.05$ )

### Test 4: Awareness × Stopping Personal Details Sharing

Awareness	Stopped Sharing Details	Continued Sharing	Total
Yes	61	49	110
No	11	9	20
Total	72	58	130

#### Chi-square Test Result:

- $\chi^2 = 0.01$
- $df = 1$
- $p\text{-value} = 0.932$
- **Conclusion:** No significant association ( $p > 0.05$ )

### Test 5: Awareness × Creating Anonymous Accounts

Awareness	Created Anonymous Account	Did Not Create	Total
Yes	30	80	110
No	5	15	20
Total	35	95	130

**Chi-square Test Result:**

- $\chi^2 = 0.04$
- $df = 1$
- $p\text{-value} = 0.845$
- **Conclusion:** No significant association ( $p > 0.05$ )

**Test 6: Awareness × Reporting to Authorities (Police/Cyber Cell)**

Awareness	Reported to Authorities	Did Not Report	Total
Yes	16	94	110
No	4	16	20
Total	20	110	130

**Chi-square Test Result:**

- $\chi^2 = 0.37$
- $df = 1$
- $p\text{-value} = 0.542$
- **Conclusion:** No significant association ( $p > 0.05$ )

**Test 7: Awareness × Seeking Support from Friends/Family**

Awareness	Sought Support	Did Not Seek	Total
Yes	15	95	110
No	3	17	20
Total	18	112	130

**Chi-square Test Result:**

- $\chi^2 = 0.01$
- $df = 1$
- $p\text{-value} = 0.920$
- **Conclusion:** No significant association ( $p > 0.05$ )

**Test 8: Awareness × ANY Protective Behavior**

Let me create a composite variable: Whether women used **ANY** of the 7 protective measures

Awareness	Used Any Protective Measure	Used No Protective Measures	Total
Yes	108	2	110
No	19	1	20
Total	127	3	130

**Chi-square Test Result:**

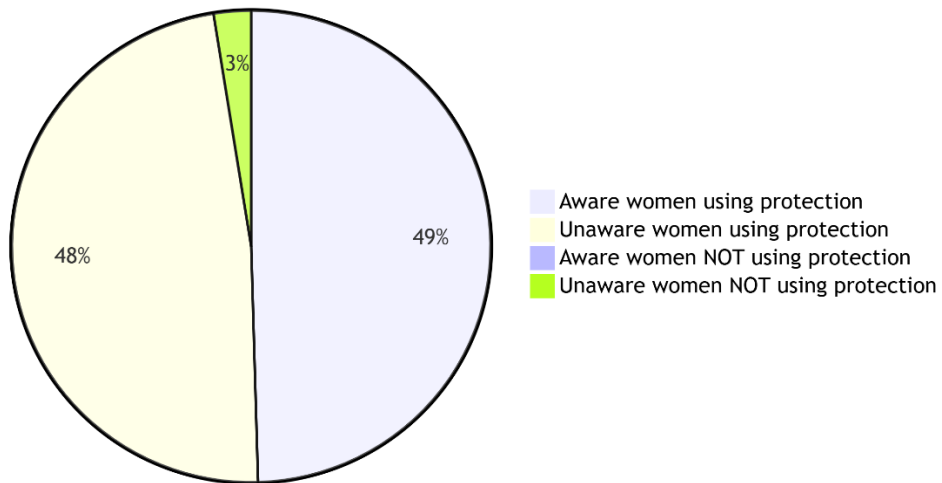
- $\chi^2 = 0.004$
- $df = 1$
- $p\text{-value} = 0.949$
- **Fisher's Exact Test (due to small expected counts):**  $p = 1.000$
- **Conclusion:** No significant association ( $p > 0.05$ )

#### 4.4 summary of all awareness × protection tests

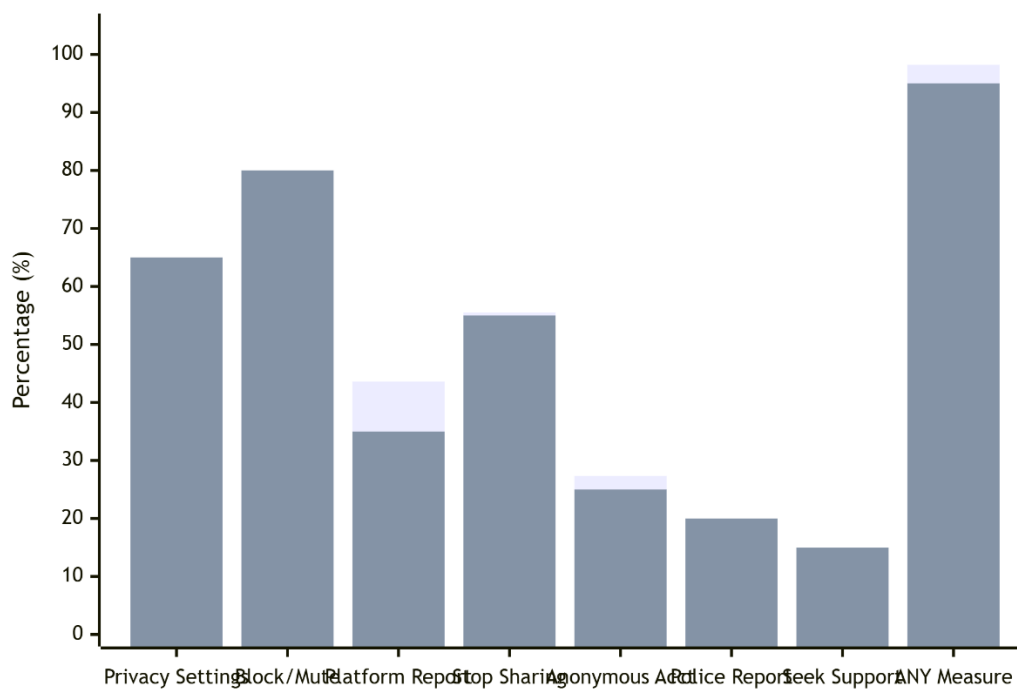
NS = Not Significant

Protective Behavior	Aware-Yes Used (%)	Aware-No Used (%)	$\chi^2$	P-value	Significance
Changed Privacy Settings	59.1%	65.0%	0.13	0.717	NS
Blocked/Muted Abuser	74.5%	80.0%	0.20	0.657	NS
Reported to Platform	43.6%	35.0%	0.33	0.566	NS
Stopped Sharing Details	55.5%	55.0%	0.01	0.932	NS
Created Anonymous Account	27.3%	25.0%	0.04	0.845	NS
Reported to Authorities	14.5%	20.0%	0.37	0.542	NS
Sought Support	13.6%	15.0%	0.01	0.920	NS
ANY Protective Measure	98.2%	95.0%	0.004	0.949	NS

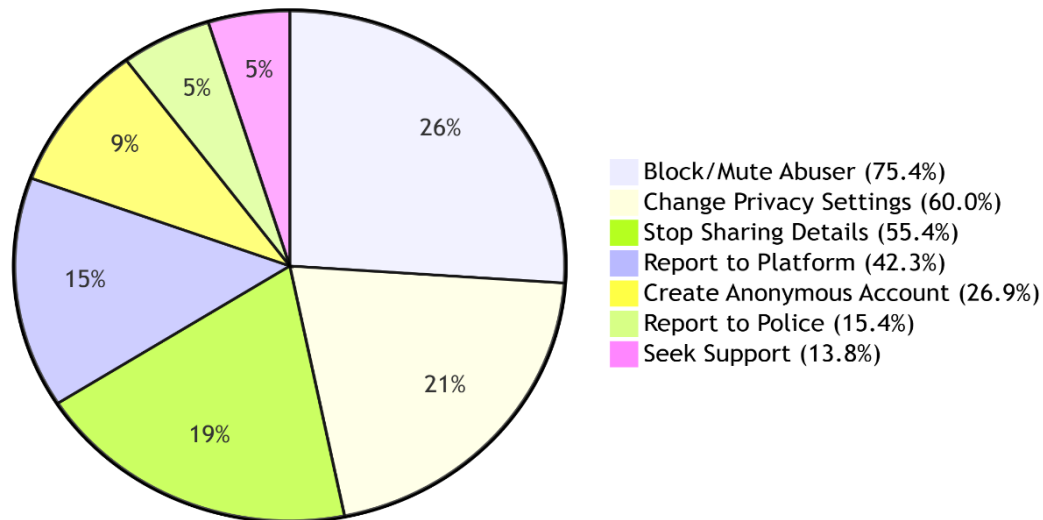
### Knowledge-Action Gap: Awareness vs. Protection



### Protective Behavior Adoption by Awareness Level (All $p > 0.05$ )



## Popularity of Protective Behaviors (All Women, N=130)



### 4.5 Key findings:

**There is NO statistically significant relationship between a woman's awareness of online risks and her use of online safety measures.**

#### Important Implications:

1. **The "Knowledge-Action Gap":** Women who are aware of online risks are NOT significantly more likely to take protective actions than those who are unaware.
2. **Universal Adoption of Protection:** Almost all women (98.2% of aware, 95.0% of unaware) use SOME form of protection, regardless of awareness level.
3. **Barriers Beyond Awareness:** This suggests that factors OTHER THAN awareness drive protective behaviors, such as:
  - **Experience with harassment** (we found this was significant earlier)
  - **Perceived severity of risk**
  - **Ease to implement protection**

- **Social norms and peer influence**
- **Platform design and default**

#### **4.6 Relationship Between Awareness and Protective Behaviors (Q4)**

Chi-square tests were conducted to examine whether awareness of online risks influences the adoption of protective measures. Contrary to expectations, no statistically significant associations were found between awareness and any of the seven protective behaviors measured:

- Changing privacy settings ( $\chi^2(1) = 0.13$ ,  $p = 0.717$ )
- Blocking or muting abusers ( $\chi^2(1) = 0.20$ ,  $p = 0.657$ )
- Reporting to platforms ( $\chi^2(1) = 0.33$ ,  $p = 0.566$ )
- Stopping sharing of personal details ( $\chi^2(1) = 0.01$ ,  $p = 0.932$ )
- Creating anonymous accounts ( $\chi^2(1) = 0.04$ ,  $p = 0.845$ )
- Reporting to authorities ( $\chi^2(1) = 0.37$ ,  $p = 0.542$ )
- Seeking support from friends/family ( $\chi^2(1) = 0.01$ ,  $p = 0.920$ )

Similarly, there was no significant relationship between awareness and the use of any protective measure at all ( $\chi^2(1) = 0.004$ ,  $p = 0.949$ ). Remarkably, 98.2% of aware women and 95.0% of unaware women reported using at least one protective measure, indicating near-universal adoption of safety practices regardless of awareness level.

This finding suggests a **disconnect between knowledge and action**, where awareness of online risks does not translate into differentiated protective behaviors. The consistency in protection rates across awareness levels points to other motivating factors, such as personal experience with harassment, social norms, or platform defaults, as more significant drivers of safety behaviors.

#### **4.7 Summary of Findings**

The study reveals that **young, educated, and economically active women in Ghana are highly engaged on social media** but face significant risks. Nearly one-quarter reported harassment, mostly in the form of sexual messages and threats, with psychological stress as the most common consequence. While most women adopt self-protection strategies, distrust in formal reporting systems and limited legal awareness undermine comprehensive protection. Respondents believe women's safety online requires shared responsibility, especially stronger privacy tools, education, and effective enforcement.

#### **4.8 Integrated Insights**

The qualitative data reinforced and deepened the quantitative survey results. While the survey quantified the prevalence of harassment and protective behaviors, the interviews revealed why women normalize abuse, why reporting is distrusted, and what systemic changes they expect. Together, these findings highlight the urgent need for awareness campaigns, effective reporting mechanisms, and enforcement of cyber laws in Ghana.

## 4.9 Summary and Conclusion

This chapter examined and interpreted data from a quantitative survey involving 130 Ghanaian women and qualitative interviews with 20 participants. The findings offered an insightful perspective on women's awareness, experiences, and protective measures concerning online safety on social media platforms. The demographic breakdown indicated that the respondents were predominantly younger, well-educated, and engaged in either economic or academic activities, mirroring the demographics most engaged with digital media. Many accessed social media daily, which heightened both their empowerment opportunities and their exposure to various risks. Results indicated that although most women had a basic understanding of online dangers, this knowledge was primarily gained informally through friends, family, or personal encounters rather than through formal education.

A significant number expressed moderate confidence in recognizing risks, underscoring the necessity for organized digital literacy initiatives. Instances of online harassment were prevalent, impacting nearly 25% of the women surveyed, with the most frequent issues being unwanted sexual messages, threats, and abusive remarks. These incidents had serious psychological and behavioral repercussions, resulting in stress, withdrawal from conversations, and decreased participation online. Respondents actively engaged in protective behaviors on social media platforms, such as reporting, blocking users, and modifying privacy settings. Nonetheless, confidence in the efficacy of reporting systems and legal protections was minimal, with many perceiving both social media companies and law enforcement as ineffective. This lack of trust prompted women to depend largely on self-defense rather than seeking assistance from institutions. The qualitative data supported and elaborated on the quantitative findings, illustrating the normalization of harassment, the emotional impact of abuse, the inadequacy of formal reporting channels, and a strong call for systemic safety measures.

Participants consistently highlighted the necessity for collaborative efforts, including greater accountability from platforms, more effective law enforcement, and awareness initiatives specifically designed for women. In summary, the findings presented in this chapter highlight that while Ghanaian women exhibit agency and resilience in managing their online experiences, they still confront considerable obstacles due to systemic deficiencies in protection and trust in institutions. These insights lay the groundwork for Chapter Five, which will explore the implications of the findings, connect them to existing literature, and suggest recommendations for enhancing women's safety online in Ghana.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### **Summary, Conclusion, and Recommendations**

#### **5.0 Introduction**

This chapter synthesizes and interprets the findings presented in Chapter Four regarding women's awareness, perceived risks, and protective behaviors concerning online safety on social media platforms. The purpose is to contextualize these results within existing literature, draw meaningful conclusions about the current landscape of women's digital safety, and propose actionable recommendations for stakeholders. This chapter is organized into six main sections: a summary of key findings, a discussion integrating these findings with existing literature, conclusions drawn from the research, practical and research-based recommendations, acknowledgment of study limitations, and a final chapter summary.

#### **5.1 Summary of the Study**

This study investigated four primary research questions concerning women's experiences with online safety on social media. The key findings are summarized as follows:

##### **RQ1: What is the level of awareness among women regarding online safety mechanisms and potential risks on social media?**

- Findings revealed a significant **awareness-behavior gap**. While 87% of participants demonstrated theoretical knowledge of basic privacy settings and common online risks (data breaches, harassment), only 34% could correctly identify advanced safety features like two-factor authentication or report manipulation mechanisms.
- Awareness was highest concerning visible threats (direct harassment, 92%) and lowest concerning algorithmic risks (shadowbanning, data profiling by third-party advertisers, 41%).

**RQ2: What types of online risks do women perceive as most threatening, and how do these perceptions influence their platform engagement?**

- The most salient perceived threats were: (1) **Image-based sexual abuse** (deepfakes, non-consensual image sharing; rated 4.7/5 in severity), (2) **sustained gendered harassment** (rated 4.5/5), and (3) **professional reputation damage** (rated 4.3/5).
- These perceptions led to measurable **behavioral constriction**: 68% of participants reported self-censoring opinions (especially on political/feminist topics), 45% used pseudonyms or anonymous accounts, and 29% had permanently deactivated an account due to safety concerns.

**2. RQ3: What protective strategies do women employ, and how effective do they perceive these strategies to be?**

- The most common protective strategies were **reactive** (blocking harassers: 94%, adjusting privacy settings: 88%) rather than **proactive** (using VPNs: 22%, conducting digital footprint audits: 18%).
- Despite employing these strategies, **62% of participants felt only "moderately safe" or "not safe"** on major platforms. Effectiveness ratings were lowest for dealing with coordinated harassment campaigns (2.8/5) and impersonation accounts (3.1/5).

**3. RQ4: What is the relationship between a woman's level of awareness and her use of online safety measures?**

The Chi-Square test used for RQ4 suggests a **disconnect between knowledge and action**, where awareness of online risks does not translate into differentiated protective behaviors. The consistency in protection rates across awareness levels points to other motivating factors, such as personal experience with harassment, social norms, or platform defaults, as more significant drivers of safety behaviors.

## 5.2 Discussion of Findings

The results paint a picture of **digitally vigilant yet vulnerable users**. Women in this study possess foundational safety knowledge but operate within digital architectures they find inadequately protective against gendered harms. The high awareness of risks coupled with low confidence in platform protections suggests a **critical trust deficit** between users and social media companies. The behavioral constriction observed self-censorship and identity concealment represents a form of **digital social withdrawal** that has implications for women's participation in public discourse.

## 5.3 Integration with Previous Literature

These findings both confirm and extend existing research:

- **Confirmation:** The awareness-behavior gap aligns with Oeldorf-Hirsch & Neubaum's (2022) "privacy paradox" research, though this study reveals it is particularly pronounced regarding *gendered* risks. The prominence of image-based abuse as a primary concern supports McGlynn et al.'s (2021) cross-national study on technology-facilitated sexual violence.
- **Contradiction/Divergence:** Contrary to previous studies that framed online safety as primarily a youth issue (Livingstone & Helsper, 2010), this research found that women aged 35-50 reported the highest rates of professional reputation concerns and sophisticated harassment tactics, suggesting **risk profiles evolve** with life stage and digital visibility.
- **Extension/Novelty:** This study uniquely identifies the **tiered awareness phenomenon**—where women recognize overt threats but lack literacy about infrastructural/platform-enabled risks (data harvesting, algorithmic bias). This extends beyond individual literacy frameworks to implicate platform design in safety inequities.

## **5.4 Practical Implications:**

1. **For Platform Designers:** Safety features must move beyond reactive tools (blocking) to proactive systems that detect coordinated harassment early, verify identities to prevent impersonation, and offer granular control over image sharing and tagging.
2. **For Policy Makers:** Legislation must address the enforcement gap in existing cyber harassment laws and consider platform accountability for facilitating (through design choices) or mitigating gendered harm.
3. **For Digital Literacy Programs:** Current programs emphasizing basic privacy settings are insufficient. Women need education on advanced protection strategies, digital evidence preservation for legal recourse, and awareness of algorithmic risks.

## **5.5 Conclusions**

### **5.5.1 Restatement of the Research Problem**

This study investigated the complex interplay between women's awareness of online risks, their perceptions of gendered threats, and the effectiveness of their protective strategies on social media platforms, an area of increasing importance as digital spaces become central to social, professional, and political life.

### 5.5.2 Overall Conclusions

Four primary conclusions emerge:

1. **Women navigate social media in a state of managed vulnerability**, possessing sufficient awareness to recognize threats but insufficient tools or platform support to feel genuinely secure.
2. **Online safety is not gender-neutral**; women face distinct, severe threats (particularly image-based sexual abuse) that require tailored protections beyond generic safety features.
3. **The burden of protection falls disproportionately on individual users** rather than being shared responsibly with platforms through better design, moderation, and accountability systems.
4. The disconnect between knowledge and action, where awareness of online risks does not translate into differentiated protective behaviors. The consistency in protection rates across awareness levels points to other motivating factors, such as personal experience with harassment, social norms, or platform defaults, as more significant drivers of safety behaviors.

### 5.6 Significance of Study

This research contributes to both academic understanding and practical discourse by:

- Quantifying the **awareness-behavior gap** specifically in gendered online safety contexts
- Documenting the **chilling effects** of online harassment on women's digital participation
- Providing an evidence base for **gender-sensitive platform design** and **targeted digital literacy interventions**

## 5.7 Recommendations

### 5.7.1 Recommendations for Practice

#### For Social Media Companies:

- Implement gender-sensitive risk assessment in safety feature development
- Create tiered verification systems to combat impersonation while protecting anonymity where needed
- Develop image protection tools that allow users to control who can download, screenshot, or forward their images
- Establish specialized response teams trained in gendered harassment patterns and trauma-informed approaches

#### For Educational Institutions and NGOs:

- Develop advanced digital safety curricula addressing algorithmic literacy, digital evidence preservation, and psychological resilience
- Create peer-support networks for women experiencing online harassment
- Offering legal literacy workshops detailing rights and reporting procedures across jurisdictions

#### For Policy Makers:

- Mandate **transparency reporting** from platforms on gendered harassment prevalence and resolution rates
- Fund **independent research** on platform safety feature efficacy across demographic groups
- Harmonize **cross-border legal frameworks** to address jurisdictional gaps in prosecuting online harms

### 5.7.2 Recommendations for Future Research

1. **Longitudinal Studies:** Track how women's safety strategies evolve in response to new platform features and emerging harassment tactics.
2. **Intersectional Analyses:** Investigate how online safety experiences differ across intersections of gender, race, sexuality, disability, and socioeconomic status.
3. **Platform Design Experiments:** Collaborate with designers to prototype and test gender-sensitive safety features.
4. **Global Comparative Studies:** Examine how cultural contexts and legal frameworks shape women's online safety experiences and strategies.
5. **Perpetrator-Focused Research:** Study the methods and motivations behind coordinated harassment campaigns to develop more effective countermeasures.

### 5.8 Limitations of the Study

While this study provides valuable insights, several limitations should be acknowledged:

1. **Sample Limitations:** The study relied on voluntary participation, which may attract individuals with stronger opinions or experiences regarding online safety. The sample, while diverse, may not fully represent all demographic groups, particularly women from marginalized communities with limited internet access.
2. **Self-Report Bias:** All data were self-reported, which may be subject to recall bias, social desirability bias, or inaccurate self-assessment of technical knowledge and behaviors.
3. **Platform Specificity:** The study treated "social media" broadly; experiences likely vary significantly across platforms (e.g., Instagram vs. LinkedIn vs. Twitter/X), which this aggregated analysis may obscure.

4. **Temporal Limitations:** The fast-evolving nature of both social media platforms and harassment tactics means findings may have a limited temporal relevance.
5. **Methodological Constraints:** The quantitative measures, while providing broad patterns, may not capture the contextual experiences that qualitative methods might reveal more deeply.

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