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The Relationship Between Instagram Use and the Likelihood of Female University Students Experiencing Cyber Harassment

A Case Study at Universitas Islam Indonesia and Universitas Gadjah Mada**

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ABSTRACT

Instagram is one of the most widely used social media platforms among female university students. While the platform enables self-expression, social interaction, and information sharing, it simultaneously increases users' exposure to cyber harassment, particularly against women. This study examines the relationship between Instagram use and the likelihood of female university students experiencing cyber harassment. Guided by Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) theory, this research employs a quantitative approach. Data were collected through an online questionnaire distributed to 200 female students from two universities in the Special Region of Yogyakarta—Universitas Islam Indonesia (UII) and Universitas Gadjah Mada (UGM). The Spearman Rank correlation test was used to assess the strength of the relationship between Instagram use and cyber harassment, while the Mann–Whitney test examined differences between institutional groups. The findings reveal a very strong positive correlation between Instagram use and the likelihood of experiencing cyber harassment (Rs > 0.90). The Mann–Whitney test indicates a statistically significant difference between groups ($p = 0.016$); however, the small effect size suggests that institutional affiliation does not substantially mitigate the risk of cyber harassment. Instead, vulnerability is primarily shaped by usage patterns, exposure, and online behavior. These findings demonstrate that cyber harassment is a systemic issue affecting female university students regardless of institutional context. The study highlights the urgent need for digital literacy education, gender-sensitive university policies, and stronger institutional and platform-level interventions to protect women in online spaces.

Keywords: Instagram, cyber harassment, female university students, computer-mediated communication

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PENDAHULUAN

The rapid expansion of social media usage in Indonesia has fundamentally transformed patterns of communication and social interaction. According to DataReportal (2021), more than 61.8% of Indonesia's population actively uses social media, with approximately 99.1% accessing these platforms via mobile devices. The most active users fall within the 18–34 age range, a demographic in which women represent a substantial proportion. Among the various social media platforms, Instagram has emerged as one of the most popular, particularly among young adults and university students (Pew Research Center, 2021).

Instagram has become deeply embedded in students' daily lives, functioning as a space for identity expression, social networking, entertainment, and information exchange. However, alongside these benefits, Instagram also generates negative consequences. Visual-based platforms characterized by high levels of interaction and visibility are increasingly associated with cyber harassment, particularly gender-based harassment targeting women (Chadha et al., 2020; Longobardi et al., 2020).

In Indonesia, cyber harassment is recognized as a form of Online Gender-Based Violence (OGBV). Reports from digital rights organizations indicate a significant rise in OGBV cases over recent years (SAFEnet, 2019). Female university students constitute one of the most vulnerable groups due to their high levels of social media engagement, visibility, and openness, combined with insufficient institutional protection mechanisms (Beran & Li, 2005; Berdahl, 2007). Many incidents

remain underreported because of social stigma, fear of retaliation, and limited confidence in institutional responses.

Given the widespread use of Instagram among female university students and the increasing prevalence of cyber harassment, this study seeks to examine the relationship between Instagram usage patterns and the likelihood of female students experiencing cyber harassment. By focusing on two major universities in Yogyakarta—Universitas Islam Indonesia (UII) and Universitas Gadjah Mada (UGM)—this research contributes empirical evidence to discussions on gender, digital vulnerability, and online safety in higher education contexts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC)

Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) refers to communication processes conducted through digital technologies and networked platforms (December, 1997; Walther, 1996). Unlike face-to-face interaction, CMC is characterized by reduced nonverbal cues, often described as "cues filtered out," which can weaken social regulation and diminish users' awareness of empathy, politeness, and social norms (Culnan & Markus, 1987; Thurlow et al., 2004).

Contemporary CMC scholarship emphasizes communication visibility, anonymity, persistence, and scalability as structural conditions shaping online interaction (Carr, 2020; Treem et al., 2020). While these affordances enhance connectivity and self-presentation, they also create conditions conducive to antisocial behavior, including harassment and abuse.

Instagram as a Social Media Platform

Instagram is a visual-based social media platform that enables users to share photographs, videos, and short narratives while engaging through likes, comments, direct messages, and stories. These interactive features encourage continuous engagement and public visibility, making Instagram particularly influential in shaping online identity and social relationships.

In this study, Instagram use is operationalized through four indicators: online exposure, online proximity, online target attractiveness, and risky behavior. Prior research suggests that increased exposure and openness significantly heighten vulnerability to online victimization (Ryan et al., 2017; Longobardi et al., 2020).

Cyber Harassment

Cyber harassment refers to repeated and intentional acts of harassment conducted through digital platforms, including unwanted sexual messages, offensive comments, threats, humiliation, hate speech, and the dissemination of degrading or sexualized content (Beran & Li, 2005; Ritter, 2014). Cyber harassment disproportionately affects women due to gendered power relations reproduced within digital spaces (Berdahl, 2007; Chadha et al., 2020).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a positivist paradigm and employs a quantitative research design. Instagram use functions as the independent variable (X), while the likelihood of experiencing cyber harassment serves as the dependent variable (Y).

The sample consists of 200 female university students, evenly divided between Universitas Islam Indonesia and Universitas Gadjah Mada. Data were collected through an online questionnaire distributed via email and messaging applications.

Statistical analysis employed non-parametric techniques. The Spearman Rank correlation test assessed the strength of the relationship between Instagram use and cyber harassment, while the Mann–Whitney test examined inter-institutional differences.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that most respondents use Instagram intensively, accessing the platform more than four days per week and spending over three hours per day online. Many respondents maintain multiple accounts and disclose personal information, reflecting high online exposure and visibility (Ryan et al., 2017; Longobardi et al., 2020).

A substantial proportion reported experiencing cyber harassment, including sexual messages, offensive comments, objectification, and humiliation. These experiences align with prior research on gendered online harassment (Berdahl, 2007; Chadha et al., 2020) and with definitions of Online Gender-Based Violence (SAFEnet, 2019; Mukherjee et al., 2021).

The Spearman Rank correlation indicates a very strong positive relationship between Instagram use and cyber harassment ($Rs > 0.90$), supporting earlier findings on social media exposure and victimization (Beran & Li, 2005; Ritter, 2014). The Mann–Whitney test shows a statistically significant difference ($p = 0.016$), but the small effect size suggests that institutional affiliation does not meaningfully reduce risk (Yar, 2005; Yucedal, 2010).

These findings reinforce CMC theory, which highlights how reduced social cues, increased visibility, and weak accountability structures facilitate harassment in digital environments (Walther, 1996; Carr, 2020; Treem et al., 2020).

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates a very strong positive relationship between Instagram use and the likelihood of female university students experiencing cyber harassment. High exposure, openness, and risky online behaviors significantly increase vulnerability. Cyber harassment emerges as a systemic issue affecting female students regardless of institutional affiliation.

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Universities should strengthen digital literacy education, establish gender-sensitive reporting mechanisms, and provide accessible victim support services. Policymakers and platforms must collaborate to enhance regulatory and protective frameworks. Future research should explore qualitative perspectives and long-term psychological impacts.

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