

A Framework for Reducing Gender-based Violence among Female Tertiary Students through Social Media

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Abstract

This study addresses the critical issue of gender-based violence (GBV) among female students at the Zimbabwe Ezekiel Guti University, Zimbabwe (ZEGU), focusing on the influence of social media. The absence of a comprehensive framework to mitigate GBV in university settings has left many female students vulnerable to online harassment and abuse. This research aims to develop a structured framework that utilises social media as a tool for awareness, support, and prevention of GBV. A mixed-methods approach is employed, combining qualitative and quantitative research methodologies. The sample consists of 200 female students selected through stratified random sampling to ensure diversity in representation. Data collection for the study involves surveys, focus group discussions, and interviews to capture a wide range of experiences and perceptions related to GBV and social media usage. The findings inform the creation of a tailored intervention framework, fostering safer online environments and empowering female students. This framework aims not only to reduce incidents of GBV, but also to promote a culture of respect and safety within the university community.

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INTRODUCTION

The rise of social media has significantly transformed communication among university students, fostering new opportunities for connection (Paper and Matter, 2022; Roy *et al.*, 2022). However, it has also introduced serious challenges, particularly concerning gender-based violence (GBV) (Nannim, 2023). Recent studies indicate that between 16% and 58% of women and girls worldwide have experienced online violence (Pol *et al.*, 2022; Qin *et al.*, 2022). Oparinde and Matsha (2021) define this online violence as "cyberviolence", which encompasses a range of harmful behaviours that exploit the anonymity and reach of digital platforms (Byrne, 2021; Lantos *et al.*, 2021; Im *et al.*, 2022). This issue is not confined to one region with universities in the United Kingdom, China, the United States, and Australia reporting alarming rates of online harassment and cyberbullying, disproportionately affecting female students (Daalen *et al.*, 2022; Im *et al.*, 2022; Roy *et al.*, 2022).

In the United Kingdom, a recent study found that approximately 50% of female students experienced some form of harassment during their university years (Galpin, 2022; Roy *et al.*, 2022). This finding is echoed by Pol *et al.* (2022), who assert that social media platforms often serve as venues for such harassment, with incidents of cyberbullying and online stalking becoming increasingly prevalent. The consequences of these experiences can lead to serious mental health issues, including anxiety (Huang *et al.*, 2021), depression, and even suicidal thoughts (Willem and Tortajada, 2021; Zhang *et al.*, 2023). Despite the urgent need for intervention, universities have been slow to implement comprehensive strategies, leaving many female students feeling

vulnerable and unsupported (Muluneh *et al.*, 2021; Oparinde and Matsha, 2021).

In China, social media presents a duality, facilitating both connection and harassment (Zhang *et al.*, 2023). Hourani *et al.* (2021) state that nearly 40% of female university students reported experiencing online harassment, often through unsolicited messages or explicit content. This gender-based online violence has detrimental effects on the emotional, physical, and mental well-being of affected students, leading to decreased academic performance and social isolation. Zhang (2022) note that while some universities have initiated awareness campaigns, a prevailing cultural stigma surrounding harassment reporting continues to persist. These challenges underscore the need for a more effective framework that addresses the unique cultural context of Chinese universities.

In the United States, recent studies indicate that two out of 10 young women aged 18-29 have experienced online sexual harassment, with one in two reporting that they received unwarranted explicit images (Zhang *et al.*, 2023). In France, 15% of women reported experiencing some form of cyber harassment (Nannim, 2023). Social media serves as both a tool for empowerment and a platform for violence (Roy *et al.*, 2022). The Association of American Universities (2020) reports that 30% of female students experienced sexual harassment during their college years, with many incidents occurring online. This data highlights the dangerous environment that students face on university campuses.

Although universities have implemented policies aimed at creating safer online environments and providing resources for victims, many obstacles remain, leaving students exposed (Willem and Tortajada, 2021). Inadequate reporting mechanisms and a lack of awareness

regarding available support services illustrate the gap between policy and practice (Galpin, 2022).

Violence perpetrated online can be classified into several categories. A report by the United Nations Regional Information Centre for Europe (UNRICE, 2025) identifies eight distinct forms of cyberviolence:

1. **Online Harassment:** This includes verbal abuse, trolling, and targeted threats designed to intimidate or silence women.
2. **Image-based Abuse (Revenge Porn):** This involves the non-consensual sharing of private images, often intended to humiliate or exert control over the victim.
3. **Doxxing:** This refers to the public disclosure of personal information, such as home addresses or phone numbers, which can expose victims to real-world risks.
4. **Sextortion:** This is the act of coercing victims into sharing intimate images or engaging in sexual favours under the threat of exposure.
5. **Cyberstalking:** This entails persistent surveillance or communication that instills fear and anxiety in the victim.
6. **Deepfake Pornography:** This involves the use of artificial intelligence to create fabricated explicit content featuring someone's likeness, often for the purposes of exploitation or blackmail.
7. **Gender-based Hate Speech:** This consists of the dissemination of misogynistic or discriminatory messages aimed at belittling women.
8. **Cyberflashing:** This is the act of sending unsolicited explicit images through messaging applications or social media.

A study in Australia highlights similar challenges, as social media has become a channel for harassment among university students (Roy *et al.*, 2022). The Australian Human Rights Commission (2022) reports that one in five university students has experienced sexual harassment,

with social media playing a significant role. Initiatives such as the “Respect. Now. Always” Campaign, aim to tackle these issues. However, obstacles remain in ensuring that all students feel safe when reporting their experiences (AHRC, 2017). The disconnect between awareness and action emphasizes the urgent need for effective frameworks that help female students navigate social media safely (Huang *et al.*, 2021).

In African universities, studies indicate that at least one in five women experiences sexual violence or assault during their college years, particularly in South Africa (Im *et al.*, 2022). This prevalence is attributed to a lack of effective policies and support for victims. In Tunisia, however, there is limited research exploring the experiences of women online (Håkansson and Josefsson, 2021). In Nigeria, social media usage among students has led to issues such as addiction to digital devices, poor writing skills, inadequate mastery of communication languages, classroom inattentiveness, distractions, and internet fraud, as well as excessive time spent on pornography and entertainment (Khan *et al.*, 2022; Muthelo *et al.*, 2023; Oluokun *et al.*, 2024).

The challenges posed by social media extend beyond individual experiences and have broader implications for the academic environment (Huang *et al.*, 2021). Molnar (2022) and Zhang *et al.* (2023) argue that female students who experience online harassment often face decreased academic performance, increased absenteeism, and reluctance to engage in campus life. If left unaddressed, these issues can perpetuate a cycle of victimisation that undermines the integrity of educational institutions.

Despite the growing recognition of these issues, significant gaps remain in the literature regarding strategies to mitigate online threats specifically targeting female students (Byrne, 2021; Pertek, 2022;

Zhang, 2022). Current interventions often lack a holistic approach that considers the unique experiences of female students across different cultural contexts (Galpin, 2022; Im *et al.*, 2022). The absence of a targeted framework to address GBV through social media at institutions like the Zimbabwe Ezekiel Guti University (ZEGU) underscores the need for comprehensive strategies tailored to the specific challenges faced by female students. This research aims to develop such a framework, contributing to safer educational environments and empowering female students in their digital interactions.

The research is guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the prevalent forms of gender-based violence experienced by female students on social media platforms?
2. How do female students perceive the role of social media in both perpetuating and mitigating gender-based violence within the university environment?
3. How can the challenges associated with gender-based violence on social media be effectively mitigated among female students?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This research is guided by the Social Ecological Model (SEM) was developed by Urie Bronfenbrenner in the 1970s. The SEM is chosen at it focuses on of four key components, which are the individual level, focusing on personal attributes and behaviours (Fleury and Lee, 2006); the relationship level focuses on interactions with peers and family; the community level, which considers the role of institutions and organisations; and the societal level, which addresses broader cultural norms, policies, and societal structures (Alghzawi and Ghanem, 2021). By exploring the influences at each level, the SEM can inform targeted

interventions that address the root causes of GBV, promote awareness, and empower female students within the digital landscape.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a quantitative research design to assess the perspectives and experiences of female students regarding (GBV and the role of social media in creating safe spaces at ZEGU. A stratified random sampling technique was utilised to recruit participants from four faculties at the university, resulting in 368 responses from female students based on year of study and specific programmes, ensuring a representative sample. Data were collected using a structured online questionnaire via Google Forms, which included close-ended and Likert-scale questions to measure awareness of GBV, experiences with online harassment, and perceptions of social media as a tool for empowerment and safety. Ethical considerations were rigorously observed, with informed consent obtained from all participants prior to data collection, and measures implemented to ensure confidentiality and anonymity, with no financial compensation offered. The collected data were analyzed using statistical software to identify patterns and correlations between social media usage and experiences of GBV, ultimately contributing to the development of effective strategies for creating safer online and campus environments.

DATA ANALYSIS AND PRESENTATION

WIDELY USED SOCIAL MEDIA

The data indicates that Facebook, YouTube, and WhatsApp are the most popular social media platforms among female students at the university, each being utilised by 100% of respondents. This suggests that these platforms serve as essential tools for communication, information sharing, and community building.

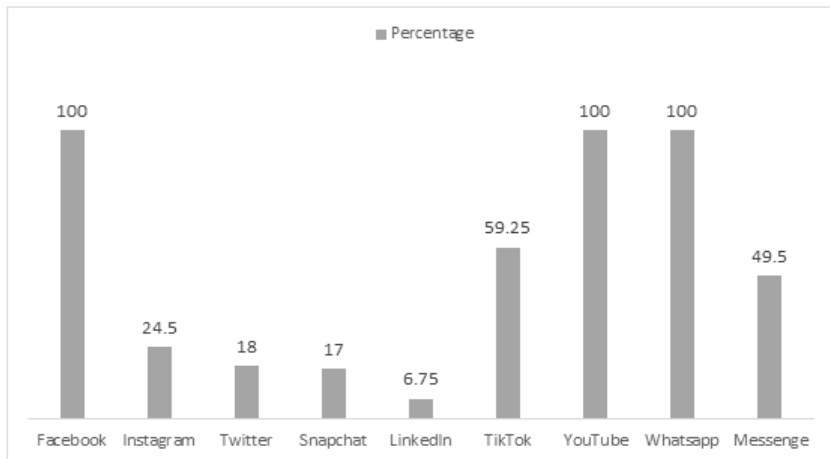


Figure 1: Type of social media used.

TikTok, used by 59.25% of students, reflects a growing trend in engaging with short-form video content, highlighting a shift in how students consume media. In contrast, platforms like LinkedIn (6.75%) show significantly lower engagement, indicating that professional networking may not be a primary focus for this demographic at this time. The lower usage rates for Instagram (24.5%), X (Twitter) (18%), and Snapchat (17%) suggest that while these platforms are still relevant, they may not hold the same level of importance for female students in this context. Overall, the data reveals valuable insights into the social media preferences of female students, emphasizing the need for platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp in fostering connections and support networks.

RISKS FORM THE USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

MENTAL HEALTH RISKS

Many girls reported significant mental health challenges stemming from social media use. Anxiety and depression were common themes,

with students expressing feelings of inadequacy when comparing themselves to others online. One student shared:

"I often feel like I'm not good enough when I see others' perfect pictures."

Additionally, the prevalence of cyberbullying emerged as a critical concern. A student noted:

"I've been bullied online, and it really affected my self-esteem."

These experiences highlight the emotional toll that social media can take on young girls.

SOCIAL MEDIA AS A PLATFORM FOR HARASSMENT

Conversely, female students also recognise that social media can perpetuate GBV by facilitating harassment and cyberbullying. Many respondents reported experiences of online abuse, highlighting how anonymity emboldens aggressors. One participant shared:

"I often receive unsolicited messages on social media. It makes me feel unsafe and objectified."

This perspective underscores the duality of social media in that while it can be a space for empowerment, it can also become a breeding ground for harmful behaviours that directly impact the mental well-being of female students.

ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

The impact of social media on academic performance is also noteworthy. Many girls described how social media serves as a significant distraction during study time. One student admitted:

"I spend hours scrolling instead of doing my homework, which impacts my grades."

Furthermore, late-night social media use often leads to sleep deprivation, which hinders concentration and focus in class. A student remarked:

"I often stay up late on social media, and it makes it hard to focus in class."

This connection between social media and academic struggles underscores the need for better time management.

SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS

While social media can foster connections, it can also lead to feelings of isolation from real-life friends. Several students expressed that despite having numerous online friends, they still felt lonely. One student stated:

"I have a lot of online friends, but I feel lonely in real life."

The pressure to maintain a particular online image can create unrealistic expectations, further complicating social interactions, as one girl pointed out:

"I feel like I have to constantly post something amazing to fit in."

These challenges indicate how social media can distort genuine relationships.

SAFETY AND PRIVACY CONCERNS

Safety and privacy are paramount concerns for many girls using social media. There are fears about encountering strangers with harmful intentions, leading to an atmosphere of distrust. One student shared:

"I'm always worried about who's watching my posts and if they're safe."

Additionally, the risk of exposing personal information is a prevalent issue. A girl noted:

"I regret posting personal things; it makes me feel vulnerable."

This apprehension underscores the importance of teaching safe online practices.

PERCEPTION OF USING SOCIAL MEDIA AGAINST GBV

PERPETUATING GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

Many female students perceive social media as a platform which can perpetuate GBV. They highlighted how negative behaviours, such as harassment and objectification, are amplified online. One student remarked:

"I often see posts that objectify women, which makes it seem normal to disrespect us."

This sentiment was echoed by numerous respondents, highlighting a widespread perception that objectification of women in online spaces contributes to a culture where disrespect is increasingly accepted. Another students noted:

"The anonymity of social media allows people to say things they wouldn't say in person, leading to more harassment."

These quotes illustrate a clear understanding of how social media can fuel harmful attitudes and behaviours towards university female students.

MITIGATING GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

Conversely, some students recognise the potential of social media to mitigate GBV by raising awareness and fostering community support. One student shared:

"Social media campaigns can educate people about consent and respect, which is a good step towards reducing violence."

Another added:

"I've seen groups on social media where survivors share their stories and support each other; that's really empowering."

These responses reflect a belief in social media as a tool for positive change and solidarity.

IGNORANCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA'S ROLE

Despite some awareness of the issues, several students expressed ignorance about the full extent of social media's role in both perpetuating and combating GBV. One of the students stated:

"I don't really think about how social media affects violence; I just use it to connect with friends."

Another mentioned:

"Sometimes I see things happening online, but I don't know how to respond or if it really matters."

These quotes suggest a lack of critical engagement with the complexities of social media's impact, highlighting the need for further education on this topic.

AMBIVALENCE TOWARDS SOCIAL MEDIA'S INFLUENCE

Some students expressed ambivalence regarding social media's effects, recognising its dual role but feeling unsure about how to navigate it. A student remarked:

"I see both sides; social media can help us unite but also tear us apart. It's confusing."

Another added:

"I think it can be both good and bad, but I'm not sure how to use it effectively to make a difference."

This ambivalence underscores the complexity of social media's influence in the context of GBV.

THE ROLE OF COMMUNITY SUPPORT

Students emphasized the importance of community support on social media in mitigating GBV. Many noted that supportive online communities can provide safe spaces for sharing experiences and seeking advice, as one student articulated:

"When I posted about my experience, many women reached out to me. It felt good to know there are people who understand and support me."

This collaborative environment fosters resilience among female students, enabling them to navigate challenges more effectively and reinforcing the notion that they are not alone in their struggles.

NEED FOR INSTITUTIONAL POLICIES

Participants expressed a strong desire for universities to implement comprehensive policies addressing GBV on social media platforms. Many students highlighted that while social media can facilitate support, institutional backing is crucial for meaningful change. One student pointed out:

"The university needs to take a stand against online harassment. We need clear policies and consequences for offenders."

This call for action reflects a collective understanding that institutional frameworks are essential for reinforcing safe online environments and ensuring that students feel supported both online and offline.

EDUCATION AND DIGITAL LITERACY

The students advocated for enhanced education and digital literacy programmes focusing on safe social media use. Many respondents suggested that universities should offer workshops to educate students about recognising and reporting GBV online. One participant mentioned:

"If we had more training on how to protect ourselves online, it would make a huge difference."

This emphasis on education highlights the proactive measures that can be taken to empower female students, equipping them with the skills needed to navigate the complexities of social media responsibly.

PREVENTION OF ONLINE SOCIAL MEDIA CYBERCRIMES

EDUCATION AND DIGITAL LITERACY PROGRAMMES

One of the most effective ways to mitigate challenges associated with GBV on social media is to implement comprehensive education and digital literacy programmes for female students. Many students reported feeling ill-equipped to handle online harassment due to a lack of knowledge regarding safe online practices, as one student noted:

“I wish we had classes that teach us how to protect ourselves online.”

By providing workshops that cover topics such as recognising signs of cyberbullying, understanding privacy settings, and reporting mechanisms, universities can empower students to navigate social media safely and confidently.

UNIVERSITY SUPPORT AND RESOURCES

The absence of university-led initiatives to address online GBV leaves many female students vulnerable. Respondents emphasised the need for dedicated resources, such as counseling services and support groups specifically focused on online harassment. One participant stated:

“Having a support system at the university would make it easier to talk about these issues.”

Establishing a clear reporting system and creating a safe space for students to share their experiences can significantly enhance their sense of security and community.

AWARENESS CAMPAIGNS

Awareness campaigns that highlight the dangers of online harassment and promote respectful online behaviour are crucial. Students

indicated that they often encounter objectifying content, which normalises disrespect towards women. One student remarked:

“We need campaigns that challenge these harmful narratives.”

By launching initiatives that encourage bystander intervention and promote positive representations of women, universities can foster a culture of respect and accountability within the social media landscape.

COLLABORATION WITH SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS

Another effective strategy is for universities to collaborate with social media platforms to develop features that enhance user safety. Many students expressed frustration with the lack of response to harassment reports. One participant noted:

“It feels like nothing gets done when we report abuse.”

By advocating for stronger policies and tools on social media platforms, universities can help create a safer online environment for female students.

PEER SUPPORT NETWORKS

Establishing peer support networks can also play a vital role in mitigating the risks associated with online GBV. Many students indicated that discussing their experiences with peers could provide comfort and practical advice. As one student suggested,

“Creating groups where we can share our stories and strategies would be really helpful.”

Facilitating connections among students can empower them to support each other and build resilience against online threats.

PROPOSED FRAMEWORK

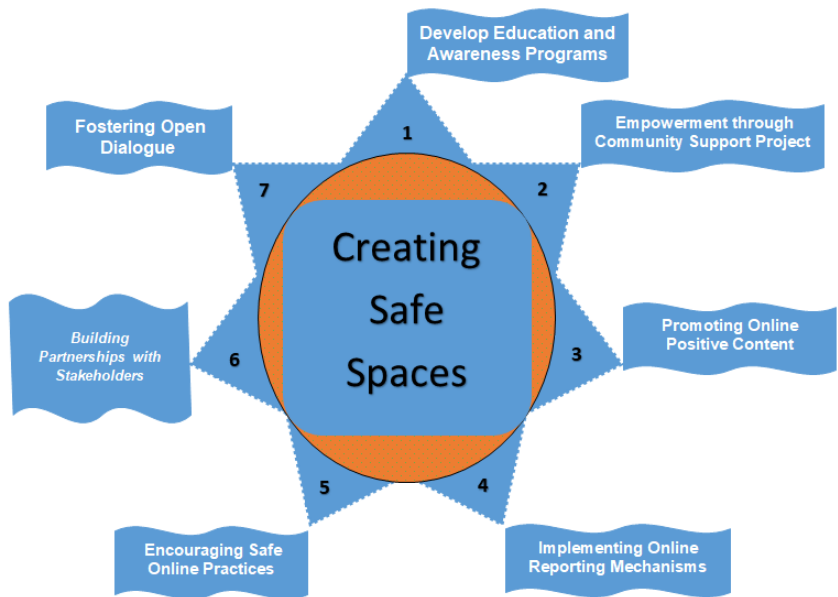


Figure 2: Framework for Reducing Gender-Based Violence among Female Students at the Ezekiel Guti University through Social Media.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In order for the above framework to be usable, the following steps must be followed:

To effectively implement this framework for promoting online safety and combating gender-based violence, the following activities are organised into seven distinct stages.

1. **Develop Education and Awareness Programmes.** The first step involves launching comprehensive education initiatives. This includes hosting workshops and seminars featuring guest speakers like mental health professionals and social media experts to conduct interactive sessions on identifying online harassment.

Concurrently, awareness campaigns on GBV should be created, featuring posters and digital content developed by female students, alongside organised awareness days such as campus walks or discussions to engage the entire community.

2. **Empowerment through Community Support.** The next phase focuses on building robust support systems. This is achieved by establishing moderated online support fora on university platforms and scheduling regular virtual meetings for students to share experiences safely. Furthermore, mentorship programmes should be implemented to pair younger students with senior mentors based on shared interests, organising monthly meetups to discuss challenges and successes.
3. **Promoting Positive Content.** This stage aims to shift the online narrative by launching content creation initiatives, such as hosting contests for students to create videos, art, or written pieces on themes of respect and empowerment, and then showcasing this work on university social media. Additionally, a dedicated section on the university website should be created to highlight success stories, featuring interviews with individuals who have overcome GBV.
4. **Implementing Reporting Mechanisms.** A critical step is to create accessible and trustworthy reporting channels. This requires developing a user-friendly, anonymous online reporting system with clear instructions and promoting it through campus-wide campaigns. It is equally important to establish clear response protocols by training staff to handle reports sensitively and publishing a guide that outlines the steps taken after a report is submitted.
5. **Encouraging Safe Online Practices.** This phase involves proactive training in digital literacy. Workshops on using privacy settings and recognising misinformation, supplemented with resources like handouts and online tutorials, must be organised. To promote

responsible behaviour, we will develop a digital booklet with tips on safe sharing and conduct seminars on the implications of oversharing on personal safety and privacy.

6. **Building Partnerships.** To ensure a coordinated effort, we will build partnerships by collaborating with local organisations. This includes hosting joint events with NGOs focused on gender rights and creating a referral system to connect students with local resources. We will also engage faculty and administration by organising training workshops for them on addressing GBV and establishing a joint committee to oversee the implementation of safety policies.
7. **Fostering Open Dialogue.** The final, ongoing stage is to foster a culture of open communication. This will be done by regularly scheduling facilitated discussions and open fora where students can voice concerns, often with expert guides. Finally, we will implement continuous feedback mechanisms, such as distributing end-of-semester surveys and placing anonymous suggestion boxes around campus to gather input on safety issues.

CONCLUSION

Creating safe spaces to reduce gender-based violence among female students at the Zimbabwe Ezekiel Guti University is crucial for fostering a supportive and secure academic environment. By implementing a comprehensive framework that includes education, community support, positive content promotion, effective reporting mechanisms, safe online practices, partnerships, and open dialogue, the university can empower students and enhance their safety. The outlined activities for each stage of the framework provide actionable steps that can be taken to address and mitigate the risks associated with gender-based violence.