“YOU’RE MY BITCH”:

WOMEN’S EXPERIENCES OF GENDER-BASED CYBER-HARASSMENT ON THE INTERNET IN SOUTH AFRICA, FLAMING AND TROLLING

By Savannah van den Heever

vhvsav001

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I hereby declare that I have read and understood the regulations governing the submission of an MPhil in Criminology, Law, and Society, including those relating to length and plagiarism, as contained in the rules of this University, and that this research task conforms to those regulations.

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Abstract

This research paper examines how women experience gender-based cyber-harassment in South Africa. It focuses on two forms of cyber-harassment: flaming and trolling. It further discusses how women change their online and offline behaviours due to their experiences and what they recommend to other women and social networking sites to manage and combat it. Using individual interviews and following a standardised questionnaire, nine women were interviewed, and their responses were thematically analysed to better learn and understand their lived experiences. As a result, this research demonstrates that cyber-harassment has detrimental effects on women's psychological states and behaviours. It argues that cyber-harassment mirrors traditional gender-based violence in its causes and manifestations and that women have valid recommendations about how to manage cyber-harassment. Such recommendations are aimed towards social networking sites and other women who navigate them. It emphasises that even with these recommendations, women are left disillusioned at the lack of support for gender-based cyber-harassment, just as they are for traditional gender-based violence.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

This paper examines the experiences of women in South Africa who have been cyber-harassed through flaming and trolling by interviewing them about their experiences. It seeks to understand how these women have changed their behaviours online and offline, in the real world, due to their experiences of cyber-harassment. Existing literature focuses, for the most part, on these forms of cyber-harassment in developed countries, such as America and the United Kingdom and elsewhere in Europe. Such literature gives information on what flaming and trolling consist of, the effects of such online behaviours and the differences between who is committing those behaviours and who is victimised by them. However, the direct experiences of women on the internet in Southern settings, such as in South Africa, are largely absent.

Cyber-harassment is also often termed cyber-bullying, with both terms falling under cyber-violence, which also covers the concepts of flaming and trolling (Hassan et al., 2020). While these terms are interchangeable, *cyber-harassment* or *online harassment* will be used in this research.

The Internet and its Impact on Harassment

The internet is an endless space involving virtual socialising, communication, and other forms of interaction. However, it is still a space where people engage with one another, like in the offline world. Thus, the creation of the internet also brings about various crimes against women online (Halder and Karuppannan, 2009). One of these crimes is cyber-harassment, which encapsulates several online interactions. Cyber-harassment has no definition but can include cyber-bullying, hate speech, threatening, harassing, or causing psychological harm to individuals through online communication (Van Royen et al., 2017; Wick et al., 2017). Research has indicated that women are more likely to be victims of cyber-harassment than men, and gender-based cyber-harassment and online misogyny have been on the rise since 2011 (Febro-Naga and Tinam-isan, 2022; Moloney and Love, 2018). Gender-based cyber-harassment is a growing problem compounded by the influx of social networking sites. Some researchers find that social media platforms are the most common platforms where one would be exposed to cyber-harassment (Hassan et al., 2020). Such victimisation can lead to the individual experiencing detrimental feelings of anxiety, distrust, helplessness and fear for themselves and their family, as well as suffering from symptoms of insomnia, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder. Victims also change their online behaviours and suffer economic impacts (Febro-Naga and Tinam-isan, 2022; Ging and Siapera, 2018;

Hassan et al., 2020). One or many anonymous cyber-harassers may also commit cyber-harassment, worsening the panic women feel when experiencing cyber-harassment (Halder and Karuppannan, 2009). In severe cases, it may even lead to the victims committing suicide (Choja and Nelson, 2016). Thus, it has highly damaging effects on the victim in both their offline and online lives.

Harassment and the Law in South Africa

Two laws address abusive behaviour – one focuses on abuse between domestic partners, and the other on acquaintances. These laws are important as they exist to protect individuals against violence from known and unknown people and to hold abusers accountable for their actions. The Domestic Violence Act 116 (1998) (DVA) was implemented to provide legal protections for victims of domestic violence. It also allows them to apply for protection orders, which aim to prevent further domestic violence. These orders stipulate what kinds of conduct the abuser may engage in concerning the victim. The DVA clearly states that 'harassment' falls under the act of domestic violence in section (1) (viii) (f). The problem with the DVA is that while it is progressive and beneficial on paper, it fails domestic abuse victims in practice (Artz, 2006; Bartlett and Rehse, 2013). Research has shown a lack of available resources for victims, the lack of faith victims have in law enforcement, as well as the lack of effective support they receive from law enforcement and the courts of law (Artz, 2006; Parenzee et al., 2001). As a result, many women feel that it is futile to seek help because their needs are not met, and their abusers are not held accountable.

The Protection from Harassment Act 17 (2011) (PHA) clearly defines 'harm' as, any mental, psychological, physical, or economic harm". According to this Act section (a) sub-sections (i) and (iii) and (iv), 'harassment',

> "means directly or indirectly engaging in conduct that the respondent knows or ought to know –
>
> (i) causes harm or inspires the reasonable belief that harm may be caused to the complainant or a related person by unreasonably –
> (ii) engaging in verbal, electronic or any other communication aimed at the complainant or a related person by any means, whether or not conversation ensues; or sending, delivering or
> (iii) causing the delivery of letters, telegrams, packages, facsimiles, electronic mail or other objects to the complainant or a related

> person or leaving them where they will be found by, given to or brought to the attention of, the complainant or a related person"

Thus, flaming and trolling are considered harassment if they occur over electronic communications or via electronic mail because it can cause mental and psychological harm. As can be seen from this discussion, both the DVA and the PHA provide for a victim to apply for a protection order to prevent the continuation and possible escalation of the harassment. The victim will rely on law enforcement to serve the protection order to the perpetrator (Fredericks and Sanger, 2014).

When the Cybercrimes Act 19 (2020) was finalised, it criminalised many different cyber-crimes. This is a step forward from the PHA as it focuses specifically on cyber-crimes. From December 1st, 2021, Chapters 1, 2 (parts I-V only), 3, 4, 7, 8 and 9 commenced, with the remaining chapters on hold. Chapter 2, Sections 14, 15, and 16, pertain to malicious communications. Section 15, which relates to cyber-harassment and cyber-bullying, stipulates that,

> "(1) A person commits an offence if they, by means of an electronic communications service, unlawfully and intentionally discloses a data message, which—
>
> (a) threatens a person with—
>
> (i) damage to property belonging to that person or a related person; or
>
> (ii) violence against that person or a related person; or
>
> (b) threatens a group of persons or any person forming part of, or associated with, that group of persons with—
>
> (i) damage to property belonging to that group of persons or any person forming part of, or associated with, that group of persons; or
>
> (ii) violence against the group of persons or any person forming part of, or associated with, that group of persons,
>
> and a reasonable person in possession of the same information, with due regard to all the circumstances, would perceive the data message, either by itself or in conjunction with any other data message or information, as a threat of damage to property

> or violence to a person or category of persons contemplated in paragraph (a) or (b), respectively."

This means that if a person engages in flaming and trolling, falling within the bounds of cyber-harassment as provided in these Acts, they are engaging in a cyber-crime. If a person is charged with contravening Section 15 of the Cybercrimes Act (2020), the Act provides that a convicted perpetrator is liable to a fine or imprisonment of no more than three years, or both. These penalties also apply to the contravening of Sections 14 and 16.

Building on the DVA and the PHA, the Cybercrimes Act (2020) states that if a person lays a charge with the police for such a cyber-crime, they can apply for a protection order. The Cybercrimes Act (2020) stipulates that if the court is satisfied that an offence has occurred, a protection order can be granted to a victim if the cyber-harasser's identity is known of the cyber-harasser's identity is unknown the protection order will be given to the social communications site to implement. The Cybercrimes Act (2020) also provides that social networking sites may remove online messages or comments posted by the cyber-harasser and disable their access to the site. This blocks the perpetrator and prevents them from engaging in any further contact. Unfortunately, there is limited research available on the effectiveness of these provisions of the Cybercrimes Act, as they were only put into effect in 2021. However, Moyo (2022) argues that they are difficult to implement because South African law enforcement lacks the necessary skills to investigate and prosecute individuals for cyber-crimes effectively (Moyo, 2022). This ongoing problem stems from the lack of effective legal enforcement of the DVA and PHA.

Women and Cyber-Harassment

According to a report published by UN Women in 2020, 1 in 5 women living in Canada experienced cyber-harassment in 2018, and 15% of women in France have said they experienced some form of cyber-harassment. Women are twice as likely (when compared to men) to be targeted due to their gender, and an internet study done in Pakistan revealed that 40% of women have experienced cyber-harassment on the internet. Women experience feelings of extreme distress when they experience cyber-harassment and implement changes in both their online and offline worlds, fearing for their online and offline safety (Jane, 2015). This indicates that online cyber-harassment against women is simply another form of gender-based violence. In a time where women are at risk of cyber-harassment and where internet use has risen due to the COVID-19 pandemic, it is essential to look at the direct and lived

experiences of these women to understand and assist in what they are experiencing (Choja and Nelson, 2016; UN Women, 2020).

How victims of such cyber-harassment in South Africa have changed their online and offline lives is not touched on in existing literature. Thus, it is also unknown how comparable those behaviours are to other research outside of the South African sphere. The dangers of flaming are often not taken seriously, and it severely impacts the victims (Jane, 2015). Thus, correctly understanding this form of cyber-harassment (and others), especially when gender-based, is necessary. Furthermore, as South Africa has such high rates of gender-based violence, it is odd that information about how women are treated online in a technological age is sparse (Yesufu, 2022). This study will allow women to speak on the gender-based flaming and trolling they have experienced and what they think could be done to combat it from the perspective of individuals victimised by it.

Feminist research on the topics of gender-based flaming and trolling may shed light on whether there are features of misogynistic behaviours in the flaming and trolling of women in South Africa. Additionally, current research primarily focuses on secondary research case studies and quantitative survey research. This means a qualitative gap exists when looking at women's lived experiences. Many research studies, such as Jane's (2012), include quotes from victims and written excerpts of what they endured on other platforms, such as emails. Many others, such as Choja and Nelson (2016), involve quantitative analysis and look at the statistics of how many people are cyber-harassed from what population, in what form and in what place. While statistical research shows numbers and rates, qualitative research can explain a phenomenon when trying to understand it, especially from a human being’s perspective.

This research question seeks to (1) give insight into and understanding of the experiences of gender-based cyber-harassment towards women from the victim’s perspective, (2) determine if and how their behaviour may have changed in their online and offline worlds as a result of these experiences, (3) to understand what kind of responses were taken about seeking help if help was sought, and finally, (4) to determine what kind of recommendations the victims may have in terms of the help they sought in the combatting of gender-based flaming and trolling. Thus, this paper focuses on giving a voice to women in South Africa who are experiencing or have experienced online gender-based flaming and trolling and to speak on what they have decided to do and how they feel about it. This can then contribute to what is known about gender-based cyber-harassment in South Africa.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Trolling and Flaming as Cyber-Harassment

Cyber-harassment can be broken up into many different forms, ranging from cyber-stalking to sexual cyber-harassment to flaming and trolling, often categorised as falling under the term ‘cyber-bullying’ (Lowry et al., 2016). This paper will focus on the latter two concepts. ‘Flaming’ is not concretely defined but can occur when one intends to ‘roast’ another in an online space by directing an expression of intense and hostile language and emotion towards that person. Flaming is an intentional negative verbal expression of hostile behaviour ranging from mildly rude to highly offensive comments intended to inflict psychological harm (Petit et al., 2021; Cho and Kwon, 2015). Research has offered various reasons why people may engage in flaming, such as targeting people because of demographic factors, such as gender or age, because they want to exert control over their victims. Another reason is feeling the need to defend important and personal interests that the person enacting the flaming feels are about to be violated (Alonzo and Aiken, 2004). According to Lowry et al. (2016), people are more likely to harass online than in person, and cyber-harassment has more negative effects on people than traditional harassment due to the volume, scope, and amount of witnesses being so much more significant.

Trolling differs from flaming as its primary goal is not to bait and incite its victims but rather to lead them into meaningless and laborious arguments where the troll (the person committing the trolling) gains amusement or satisfaction from the argument and upsetting their victims (Herring et al., 2002; Mantilla, 2013). These forms of cyber-harassment are compounded by the ability to remain anonymous online, allowing the person committing the flaming to avoid accountability for their online behaviours (Cho and Kwon, 2015). It is also notable that the people experiencing these behaviours are often attacked unprovoked and for no apparent reason. Furthermore, gender-based trolling is often directed towards women and uses gender-based insults and vulgar language to insult and humiliate them as victims (Mantilla, 2013). An important distinction between generic and gender-based trolling is that gender-based trolling involves expressing dangerously toxic beliefs and ideas about women (Moloney and Love, 2018).

The Gendered Nature of Trolling and Flaming

Research has found that men are more likely to engage in flaming than women (Alonzo and Aiken, 2004). Thus, the behaviour may often be gender-based, focussing on

verbally attacking and humiliating women. Such attacks may include threats of violence, sexual assault or rape threats (sexual cyber-harassment), revealing the offline identities of the victims online (referred to as doxing), or using gender-based insults such as ‘cunt’ and ‘slut’ (Mantilla, 2013). This is all done to incite harm to the victim, often to the amusement of the person trolling or otherwise due to the aggressive reactions from the person flaming. However, the women who are cyber-harassed experience feelings of shock, violation, anxiety, sadness, loneliness, and vulnerability. Some women even change their online behaviours, commenting anonymously instead of publicly and censoring what they post online (Jane, 2015). Some of the offline behaviours of women affected by this cyber-harassment have also changed, such as withdrawing from public events. Examples of gender-based trolling against women go to the extreme include when a technology blogger, Kathy Sierra, feared so strongly for her safety that she moved houses after receiving death threats, having her address posted online and then being mailed packages to scare her (Mantilla, 2013). Australian academic Nina Funnel, who was a victim of sexual assault at knifepoint, became the butt of online jokes regarding her assault after she spoke out publicly about it (Jane, 2012). Jane (2014) references an Australian cheerleader who was verbally insulted based on her appearance. This is also one of the concepts Mantilla (2013) states is used against women in gender-based trolling – that of the women’s appearance and their weight. It can be seen from these examples that such forms of gender-based flaming and trolling often stem from nasty and unwarranted perceptions and have serious detrimental effects.

Some feminist research argues that online misogyny and its increase is a significant reason these forms of gender-based cyber-harassment have become ingrained and routine in women’s and girls’ online behaviours. So much so that they are well aware of how at risk they are should they engage in cyberspace activities (Moloney and Love, 2018; Jane, 2015). Gender-based vitriol is so prominent and accepted in cyberspace that threats are an everyday response to many online disagreements. This is especially true when the conflict is directed towards women (Jane, 2014). Therefore, there is a link between the flaming and trolling of women and how misogyny permeates the internet. This can be elaborated on when referring back to the origins of cyber-harassment forms such as trolling, with some arguing that women have never truly been seen as equal in online spaces (Graham, 2019; Lumsden and Morgan, 2017). This allows women (and other minority groups on the internet) to be seen as easy targets by those who engage in trolling behaviours. Furthermore, the gendered and violent nature of trolling women often removes the victim from online participation (Lumsden and

Morgan, 2017). This emphasises the argument of just how victimised women are on the internet.

According to Dunn et al. (2017), women are often shamed, threatened or policed when expressing themselves online in a way that transgresses against the stereotype of how women should behave. This type of cyber-harassment can include sexual cyber-harassment, evident in video game culture where male gamers may cyber-harass women through flaming and trolling (Dunn et al., 2017). Many online spheres are entrenched with misogynistic views and the sexist treatment of women, which silences them online as they are already vulnerable in the real world (Nadim and Fladmoe, 2019). Those experiencing gender-based cyber-harassment may also feel that online sites are not ensuring the safety of their users by taking the cyber-harassment seriously (Dunn et al., 2017). This leads to more cyber-harassment as the perpetrators are not held accountable.

The Link to Sexual Cyber-Harassment Towards Women

A survey conducted by the National Pew Research Centre in 2020 shows that women are twice as likely to be victimised online due to their gender (Abarna et al., 2022). Young women are often targets of sexual cyber-harassment and online sexual abuse (Abarna et al., 2022; Halder and Karuppannan, 2009). Research by Reed et al. (2020) shows that the most commonly reported forms of sexual cyber-harassment include unwanted sexual solicitation, being sent unwanted sexual messages and images, and having their sexual text and images shared without their permission. Feminist researcher Vera-Gray (2017) has documented the explicit sexual-based language used in these instances, such as ‘I won’t kiss a disabled womyn…handicap bitch’ with references to a disabled woman, and YouTube comments such as ‘your vagina must be the size of the grand canyon’ (Vera-Gray, 2017).

This gender-based language is not only sexually violent but also parallels offline forms of verbal sexual harassment (Megarry, 2014). Such as cat-calling, sexually objectifying comments towards women or unwanted remarks of a sexual nature. Experiences of cyber-harassment also cause negative feelings (Febro-Naga and Tinam-isan, 2022). Furthermore, the behavioural changes exhibited online to avoid more cyber-harassment may be very similar to those displayed offline, such as withdrawing from the situation and avoiding further problems (Megarry, 2014). Reed et al. (2020) build on this, suggesting that those cyber-harassing women feel that such behaviour, even when unwelcomed, is acceptable. Thus, cyber harassment is not that different from traditional forms of harassment.

Attempts to Combat Cyber-Harassment

People may employ different behavioural strategies to combat some types of online cyber-harassment behaviours. These strategies may include directly denouncing the cyber-harassment, withdrawing from the hostile situation, apologising for the situation, asking a third party who is not involved in mediating the situation, joking about the situation to relieve tension, showing solidarity with the person being flamed, bystanders ritualising the flaming, in that it becomes the poster's accepted kind of behaviour, or normalising the behaviour (Lee, 2005). This was mainly seen on internet forums where mechanisms needed to be developed to cope with such cyber-harassment for the group to continue existing. Feminist forums, where women communicate and discuss issues, seem particularly susceptible to disruption by the trolling form of cyber-harassment from men (Herring et al., 2002). In one case study of an incident of trolling in a predominantly female-populated feminist forum, the women in the group responded to the male trolling in varying ways, from calling for him to be banned from participating in the group, voluntarily ignoring him, refuting his claims, insulting him in return and finally, negotiating what kind of interaction is appropriate in the forum (Herring et al., 2002).

However, it is possible that none of those mentioned above strategies, whether behavioural or those implemented in the case study previously touched on, are not consistently successful in combating flaming and trolling. Herring et al. (2002) state that one reason for the low success rate is that trolls are inherently non-cooperative and do not want to resolve the issue. Thus, arguing with someone flaming or trolling you may be counter-productive and a waste of time and energy. Lumsden and Morgan (2017) argue that when women are advised on how to combat trolling by the media or in popular discourse, they are told to stop engaging with the troll and to remove themselves from the situation. This puts the onus on the victim when the trolls themselves should be held accountable. In an ideal world, holding trolls accountable would be possible and enforced. However, the online world is often anonymous, which makes doing so difficult and contributes to trolling behaviours (Lumsden and Morgan, 2017). In contrast, many victims of cyber-harassment remove themselves from the online world, deleting blogs and deactivating their social networking profiles or websites because remaining online only worsens their situations (Citron, 2014). This is another one of the ways that gender-based cyber-harassment is perpetuated on the internet with seemingly no successful way to combat it. What can make it more insidious is that one may not know the identity of their harasser due to the ability to remain anonymous on the internet. In trolling,

anonymity can give power to the individual perpetrating the cyber-harassment because anonymity makes it far more difficult to track and identify individuals to hold them accountable for their actions (Demsar et al., 2021).

Cyber-harassment has increased as more people have used the internet since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, with women remaining vulnerable to cyber-harassment (UNWomen, 2020). This indicates the importance of understanding women's experiences of cyber-harassment. An article by two African researchers also reported that women are often victims of cyber-harassment, which negatively impacts them psychologically and hinders many women's choice to disclose their identities online for fear of cyber-harassment (Choja and Nelson, 2016). They argue that the recommendations of better laws and policies against such violence against women are being implemented and for better education on awareness and protection from cyber-harassment to deter cyber-harassment (Choja and Nelson, 2016).

Various organisations and gender-based violence prevention programmes aim to educate men against violence against women and girls (Allen et al., 2019; Casey et al., 2017). Such in-person prevention programmes include but are not limited to community interventions, education, and outreach, all involving having men actively engage and participate in allowing for behavioural and attitude changes (Casey et al., 2017). Research by Casey et al. (2017) sheds light on why men may participate in anti-gender-based violence events or programmes, ranging from engaging in such violence, hearing about or knowing someone who has been abused, to being concerned about social justice issues. However, these do not always educate about online violence. Unfortunately, due to the anonymity and freedom of the internet, it is often more challenging to get men to attend such events and programmes. This does not detract, however, from the importance of combatting gender-based cyber-harassment.

Interestingly, some research suggests that men experience more online harassment than women. However, it is essential to point out that the types of cyber-harassment experienced by men and women differ in that men are more often targeted due to their nationality, skin colour, ethnicity, and beliefs, such as religious or political views. In contrast, women are likely to be targeted because of their gender, which may be more harmful (Nadim and Fladmoe, 2019). This same study states that men may be more subject to cyber-harassment due to them being more likely to share their views online, which may mean that while women are more vulnerable to cyber-harassment, they may encounter less due to being less vocal online (Nadim and Fladmoe, 2019).

While younger people see cyber-harassment as normalised within society and online, they feel it is a severe problem, with public displays of cyber-harassment being perceived as more serious than private ones (Macaulay et al., 2022). Ortiz (2020) states that not all trolling is perceived as always negative, with some trolling being seen as involving more pointless topics. Malicious attacks or provocation by a troll are perceived as offensive, while joking behaviour may not be (Ortiz, 2020). Thus, there is often a clear difference between what people view as harmful and less harmful or harmless regarding trolling.

Finally, when harassment targets sexual minorities, the language may become homophobic in addition to offensive gender-based language. Sexual minorities such as gay or lesbian individuals experience severe adverse effects from such homophobic treatment from others, causing distress in work, community, or academic environments (Silverschanz et al., 2008). Furthermore, lesbian, gay, and bisexual people are very likely to be targeted by online harassment (Vogels, 2021). Thus, gender-based harassment, whether offline or online, can target people from all walks of life.

Gender-Based Violence and Cyber-Harassment in South Africa

South Africa is still a relatively conservative and patriarchal country where violence against women runs rampant in the offline world. Due to misogyny and ingrained patriarchal mindsets, women often endure hostile and sexist treatment from men (Felmlee et al., 2020). To offset such patriarchal attitudes, educational programs and interventions are often implemented with the youth or older men (Becker et al., 2014). Such beliefs can be due to cultural, legal, financial, and political factors. Cultural factors include patriarchal and misogynistic views that allow violence to be legitimised by men. This then allows them to enforce dominance and superiority over women. Legal factors include unfair differentiation of public and private spaces, which prevents many women from protection in their homes. Financial factors include a lack of available resources to women, and political factors involve a lack of representation of women and other targeted minorities in politics. This inhibits public awareness of gender inequality (Pandea et al., 2019). Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and Intersex + people are also at a high risk of gender-based violence worldwide (Pandea et al., 2019). Thus, gender-based violence is enforced by strict heteronormative and patriarchal views that put power into only men’s hands and punish any transgressions against them.

With patriarchy and misogyny going hand in hand, it is not surprising to expect the male-dominated culture in South Africa to allow a perpetuation of misogyny (Yesufu, 2022). This behaviour is also expressed online in a technological society with such traits. As a result, online and offline gendered abuse share characteristics (Camacho et al., 2018). South Africa has 41.19 million internet users as of January 2022, with 28 million using social media - around 46% of the total population, 60.14 million as of 2021 (Statista, 2022b). Consequently, there is a lot of room for negative behaviours to be expressed online. The distribution of internet users across genders in South Africa is relatively equal, as is that of social media users; however, women worldwide are still more vulnerable as internet users mainly due to their unequal standing on the internet, especially when using social media (Statista, 2022c; Statista, 2022d; Megarry, 2014). The online world may not be the same as the real world, but its treatment of women is very reminiscent of the real world. This raises the question of how the online world is failing women, as it is an unsafe and hostile space for them. This indicates a need for women to have some form of effective protection from such online hostile behaviours, especially if such behaviours continue to be perpetuated. It also illustrates the importance of educating against misogyny in South Africa, where this behaviour stems.

Chapter 3: Methodology and Analytical Strategy

Previous studies such as those conducted by Choja and Nelson (2016), Kraft and Wang (2010) and Alonzo and Aiken (2004) focus on quantitative and survey research to explain cyber-harassment and statistical representations of who experiences it and in what forms. Winkelman et al. (2015), Moloney and Love (2018) and Jane (2012) give examples, specifically of gender-based cyber-harassment, through mined online articles and quotes from the comments sections of websites. While these kinds of research can provide much information on the statistics of cyber-harassment and examples of what people have said about committing and responding to it, they do not give as robust and rich information on the lived experiences of women victims from their direct experiences, as a one-on-one interview would. Subsequently, some nuances and data may be missed when not asking the victim what they experienced in more depth. Thus, to understand these experiences, this study asked the women for their stories.

Research Questions

The research question of how women experience cyber-harassment in South Africa can be broken into four sub-questions:

1. What is their understanding and perspective of the harassment in the forms of flaming and trolling?
2. Have they changed any of their behaviours because of the cyber-harassment?
3. How did they seek help?
4. What are their recommendations for other women and social networking sites?

The responses to these questions may give rich insight into what women endure online and what they feel must be done to prevent further cyber-harassment.

Qualitative interviews were selected to gather deep enough insight into these women's personalised experiences and thoughts, unlike in a survey (Jain, 2021). All interviews were online over the Microsoft Teams, Zoom, Discord, and WhatsApp communication applications. The limitations of existing survey research to encapsulate women's experiences of gender-based cyber-harassment include reducing the victims and their experiences to numbers, which leaves out the details of how they might have expressed their experiences and emotions regarding the situation. Additionally, a qualitative interview allowed for the behavioural aspects of the women being interviewed to be acknowledged about what they are explaining, such as vocal intonation (Opdenakker, 2006). Finally, using qualitative interviews

as a data collection method allowed one to ask for clarification or probe for more information (Jain, 2021). This was helpful when the interviewed women gave short or vague answers.

Methodology

The women participating in the study were interviewed one-on-one, with an open-ended questionnaire providing written informed consent to the research and understanding that any information they provided would remain confidential. Gender-based flaming and trolling concepts were explained verbally and in an information sheet to the participants, and the interviews were recorded and transcribed.

One-on-one interviews were selected to gather data so the participants could share their experiences of gender-based flaming and trolling. They did not discuss or compare experiences such as what is usually done in focus groups (Morgan, 1997). A focus group could also make it difficult to arrange time and location and the data difficult to analyse (Babbie, 2021). This may also have posed an issue for in-person interviews. Thus, online interviews were also used. In the case of online discussions, the participants needed to consent to the interview being recorded through an online platform, such as Zoom or Microsoft Teams. They were emailed an electronic consent form, which they signed and then sent back to the interviewer. The consent form included all details about the study, that it was entirely voluntary, and that participation may be withdrawn at any time without consequences. They also received an information form, a hard copy if interviewed in person and an email if interviewed online. At the start of the interview, the participants were asked if they understood the information provided and the sheet to ensure informed consent. The information form contained the definitions of gender-based flaming and trolling used by this study and the contact details of psychological and counselling helplines where they could receive assistance should they need to.

Interviews consisted of a standardised open-ended questionnaire and used the following definitions of flaming and trolling:

Flaming: directing an expression of intense, offensive, and hostile language and emotion towards another person (Petit et al., 2021).

Trolling: being led into a meaningless and laborious argument where the troll gains amusement from the argument and upsets their victims (Herring et al., 2002).

Gender-based trolling: trolling directed towards women, using gender-based insults and vulgar language to insult and humiliate the victims (Mantilla, 2013).

This interview method was chosen to yield as comparable results as possible, as all the participants were asked the same questions and to reduce interviewer bias over multiple interviews (Patton, 2015). The questionnaire was designed specifically for this study and covered what the women's experiences of cyber-harassment entailed and on what online platforms it took place. They were asked if they knew who the perpetrator was, how the harassment made them feel, what behaviours they had changed online and offline, what kinds of help they sought, how effective they feel that help was and any recommendations they may have regarding the support they may have sought. Probing and follow-up questions were also applied to ensure the flow of dialogue during the interviews and request any elaboration from the participants.

Sample Size and Sampling Plan

This study aimed to interview 10-12 women who had experienced some form of cyber-harassment. To find participants, advertisements were posted on the social networking site Facebook, through the researcher's Facebook Page, the Centre for Criminology Facebook page and various other Facebook groups, as well as on Instagram, LinkedIn and over WhatsApp. The posts were also shared, in turn, on these sites by some of its viewers. Interview participants also shared the research project information in their capacity, allowing the project to reach more people. This sample size was deemed sufficient since this study is both exploratory and phenomenological, meaning it is studying the subjective experiences of human beings. In studies of this nature, sufficient data should be collected within ten interviews (Moser and Korstjens, 2018; Rodriguez and Smith, 2018). The advertisements defined gender-based cyber-harassment, focusing on flaming and trolling and invited women who have experienced such harassment to contact the study's researcher to volunteer to participate in the study. Contact details in the form of an anonymous email address were provided for potential participants. This is a non-probability sampling method and was chosen as it is a convenient way to access participants and then lead to snowball sampling as some participants suggested taking part in the interviews with people they knew who have also been victims of gender-based cyber-harassment (Babbie, 2021). Nine women volunteered to take part in this study. Participants were across South Africa, some from Gauteng, the Western Cape, and others from the Eastern Cape. Despite the small sample, the research reached saturation, and no new information was conveyed. Women above 18 years old of any race, and any socio-economic status were allowed to respond to the advertisement as long as they

also met the requirement of having experienced gender-based flaming and trolling on the internet in South Africa.

Interviews were expected to take place in a private location to avoid interruption, according to times that suited the participants. But, to mitigate location and timing issues, interviews were held online over Zoom, Microsoft Teams and via WhatsApp and Discord. WhatsApp was used when Zoom or Microsoft Teams gave technical problems and were no longer feasible options. This brought challenges as some participants had somewhat unstable internet connections, causing some communication difficulties. Many of the online participants also preferred to have their cameras off. As it was not stipulated to keep your camera on as a participation requirement, the interviews continued with them off. This was not particularly problematic as the interview data from these participants was very detailed. However, no visual behavioural information was gained from these interviews.

The interviews did run the risk of triggering or upsetting the participants being interviewed. This would have been causing psychological harm, which may have resulted in the interviews needing to be stopped for the well-being of the participants. Thus, to mitigate any harm to the participants, psychological and counselling helpline details were provided for them should they have felt they needed it, and the interview questions were designed to be as sensitive as possible while still gaining the information necessary for the study.

Table 1 details participant information about the interviews conducted.

Participant	**Location**	**Interview**	**Technological issues**	**Comments**
1	Pretoria, Gauteng	Online, Microsoft Teams	None.	Initially unsure, she soon became very communicative. No visual data was obtained.
2	Eastern Cape	Online, Zoom	Broken computer and web camera, and she could only use the audio function. Loadshedding during the	Answered the questions in order and spoke freely. She brought up examples of cyber-related crimes and harassment that she had read about to add context to some of her answers.

			interview used data to connect, resulting in the call occasionally breaking up.	
3	Unknown	WhatsApp call	Initially, the Zoom application did not work, so a WhatsApp call was used.	Gave informed consent before recording began. She was exceptionally communicative and gave a lot of information about her experiences. Very strong feelings towards gender-based flaming and trolling, also bringing up other forms of cyber-harassment. No visual data was obtained.
4	Unknown	Online Discord call	None.	She spoke of her experiences as a female video gamer online, playing against other gamers, most of whom were male. She felt very strongly about the concept of flaming and trolling targeted at women, and it could be heard in her voice. Spoke freely and openly. No visual data was obtained.
5	Unknown	WhatsApp call	None.	Experiences as a female online gamer. Did not want to divulge too much personal information.

				No visual data was obtained.
6	Unknown	WhatsApp voice notes	She was experiencing some family issues and did not have much free time to participate in an interview, so voice notes were used so she could answer in her own time.	She seemed emotional when speaking. Gave comprehensive detail. Spoke on LGBTQ+ discrimination and cyber-harassment. No visual data was obtained.
7	Unknown	Online, Microsoft Teams	None.	Experiences as a female online gamer. Spoke freely and openly. No visual data was obtained.
8	Unknown	Online Discord call	None.	She did not seem anxious or stressed by the conversation, even though she mentioned the topic of suicidal thoughts. No visual data was obtained.
9	Unknown	Online, Microsoft Teams	None.	Unsure of if her experiences were relevant but still willing to participate. No visual data was obtained.

Analytical Strategy

Once transcribed, the content of the interviews was analysed using thematic analysis. In this process, the experiences and thoughts of the interviewed women were explored to discern patterns and themes within their interview content. Thematic analysis is instrumental when attempting to understand the varying experiences, thoughts, and behaviours that may be determined from a set of data. This study aims to understand women's lived gender-based flaming and trolling experiences (Kiger and Varpio, 2020). The interview content was read

actively to generate the codes to organise the data according to the issues raised by the data (Kiger and Varpio, 2020). Then, themes which indicate broader significance within the interview data were created and organised from this data and reviewed. After that, a definition and narrative description of the theme's meaning was generated for each theme, which indicates their importance to the main topic of study. Finally, the themes were interpreted from the responses of the women interviewed about their experiences. A predominantly inductive approach was used to determine themes as the themes are data-driven, and this study was not grounded in any pre-existing theories (Kiger and Varpio, 2020).

Ethical Considerations

The ethical considerations relevant to the research included that talking about their experiences regarding gender-based cyber-harassment may trigger traumatic or upsetting feelings and memories for the interviewed women. This may cause the participants psychological harm, which would be problematic (Babbie, 2021). As a result, attempts were made to avoid such harm by creating and implementing a distress protocol to guide the interviewer in cases of distress about whether the interview should continue or if it would be better for the participant to stop the interview. Additionally, free psychological and counselling helpline contact details were provided for the participants should they have felt the need to seek and receive psychological assistance. It was confirmed that the interview participants participated voluntarily and did not feel forced or coerced to participate. As a form of protection from psychological harm for the researcher, in case the participants' stories become traumatic to hear, the researcher also had a trained psychologist with whom they could debrief if necessary. Protocols were in place to ensure that the confidentiality of the women being interviewed was upheld in such a situation.

The following ethical consideration is that of the interviewer and author of this dissertation directly knowing the participants, as they may have been found through the author's social media accounts. However, as the participants had chosen to partake in the interviews voluntarily, this was not a problem.

The storage of the recorded data obtained from the interviews may also raise ethical concerns. Such data was stored safely and securely to prevent any privacy breaches against the interview participants. The identities and personal details of the participants were also kept confidential to protect them from any possible harm by using anonymous identifiers (Babbie, 2021). Where participants revealed any other individual's names or personal details

in the interviews, that information was redacted to protect those individuals who did not consent to the interview. All transcription and recording files were stored on a laptop that is password protected, and the files themselves were also password protected. The recording device used was stored in a safe and secure place. The password-protected files were uploaded to the One Drive cloud programme, which is also password-protected, as an extra measure of secure storage should any damage have occurred to the laptop.

Limitations

This study had several limitations. Firstly, there was little data to compare this study's data due to the lack of research in South Africa. Therefore, data gathered from this study was compared to studies conducted in other countries, raising the question of comparability. However, because this a study focussing on the subjective and lived experiences of the women that were interviewed, this was not a significant concern. Secondly, the sample of participants interviewed did not entirely represent all women and their experiences in South Africa as the research sample is relatively small. However, this study does not claim to explain the experiences of all women in South Africa or generalise the data collected to all women in South Africa. It is, thus, not a study that attempts to be representative of all women in South Africa.

A limitation regarding using a social networking site to gather participants included not being able to verify if the volunteer participant engages in gender-based flaming and trolling themselves. This posed a challenge to mitigate should it have been an issue. One idea to mitigate this was to ask the participants to bring evidence of them experiencing gender-based cyber-harassment, which was considered demeaning and invalidating to those who may not have physical proof. Additionally, the women interviewed should not have felt like they had to prove their experiences, also possibly making them feel untrustworthy. Thus, this was a risk taken by this study.

A further limitation was that the definitions of generic, trolling, and gender-based flaming and trolling differ throughout existing literature. So, for this study, set definitions were decided upon from the literature reviewed and explained to participants in easily understandable terminology. The definitions needed to be comprehensive enough to capture the different facets of each concept but not so broad that distinguishing between the two became difficult and confusing. All participants required the same understanding of what

these concepts mean for their interviews to be comparable when they underwent the thematic analysis. The data obtained supports that this strategy was successful.

The final limitation of this study can be split into two parts, with the first being that the ideal number of participants needed ($n \geq 10$) to be interviewed, as recommended by Moser and Korstjens (2018), was not reached. However, as previously mentioned, the information gained from the interviews is robust, thus still allowing for a comprehensive thematic analysis, shedding light on the different forms of flaming that women experience. The second part is that the interview data mainly consisted of information about flaming; however, trolling experiences were still discussed in enough detail to be analysed and discussed in this study.

Chapter 4: Findings

After the nine women were interviewed, their interviews were transcribed and thematically analysed. Codes were created from the interview data and then grouped into themes. The following themes echoed existing research from other countries where women are cyber-harassed in any location and in various ways online. This research also emphasised that a particularly common online space for gender-based cyber-harassment included computer gaming sites. The forms of cyber-harassment were diverse and paralleled traditional gender-based harassment in its use of language, intent, and effect on the victims. However, differences were found in the extreme anonymity that the internet provides for the harasser, and the amount of access harassers have to potential victims online.

Places of Cyber-harassment

Women can be cyber-harassed on various platforms, from phone calls to emails, as well as on social networking sites and online dating or gaming sites. Participants reported that their experiences of cyber-harassment had occurred on social networking sites, online computer gaming sites, online dating sites, over WhatsApp, and over email. These included 'Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, and then also on phone calls'. The gaming sites mentioned included Xbox Live, where you can receive messages "in your inbox on your like Xbox profile" and on online games such as Call of Duty, Minecraft, Dota, League of Legends and Genshin.

Forms of Cyber-harassment

As Table 1 shows, the participants experienced a range of forms of cyber-harassment, from comments that were focused on their religion to lies about them to their gaming ability.

Table 2 details examples of the cyber-harassment the participants experienced and spoke about.

Forms of Cyber-harassment	
Threats of violence	Homophobia
(Gendered) derogatory/hostile language	Sexism
Lies about the victim	Sexual cyber-harassment
Religious harassment	Harassing the victim's family
Victim-blaming	Trolling
Gaslighting	Insulting victim's gaming abilities

This study focussed on the experiences of both flaming and trolling. However, the data contained a more comprehensive range of examples and incidents of flaming when compared to trolling. As expected from previous research, threats of violence and derogatory/hostile language, often using gendered language, were prevalent in the examples given by the participants of what they experienced (Mantilla, 2013). Further examples of the different forms of cyber-harassment encountered by the participants include spreading lies about the victim, religious harassment, victim-blaming and gaslighting, homophobia and sexism, sexual cyber-harassment, the harassment of the victim's family and trolling.

Participant 1 was cyber-harassed by her ex-boyfriend and his current girlfriend, whom she did not know, over Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp and later via phone calls. She recounted how her ex-boyfriend threatened her with violence by saying that he would find her in an accident along the road but that "it would not be an accident from his side". She also reported that he would engage with her using language that contained "a lot of swearing, and like, very derogatory language". She further said his girlfriend would "threaten [her] with physical violence". This indicates how violent and frightening flaming can be for women, as Participant 1 states that his behaviour "was very scary".

Participant 2 experienced flaming in the form "of a lot of big, nasty words" due to her belief system. As someone who follows Wiccan beliefs, she described the people harassing her as "extreme Christians" who would argue with her about her belief system, denying any validity it may hold for her. As she was termed a "witch" in a derogatory sense, it can be seen how this feminine terminology is gendered abuse towards Participant 2, as the term "witch" has been used to refer predominantly to women with negative connotations (Dictionary, 2022) She also experienced trolling from her mother and stepfather where they would "create fake accounts, pretending to be customer's, heckling [her] and trying to ruin [her] business name". Like Participant 1, this shows how flaming and trolling can involve people you know and do not know. It also explains how those you know may have more personal information and reasons to engage in cyber-harassment. In contrast, those who do not may be cyber-harassing the victim due to more detached reasons, such as religious differences between strangers.

Participant 3 experienced flaming and sexual cyber-harassment over online dating sites that she had used. She received unsolicited sexual messages and conversations where she was once told to "stop acting tighter than a nun's cunt". She was called gendered derogatory terms such as "slut", "whore", and "bitch" by men as a response when "they [didn't] like what

[you'd] said". This misogynistic behaviour indicates men's underlying values about treating, interacting with, and valuing women (Ging and Siapera, 2018). Other examples of sexual cyber-harassment she has experienced include unsolicited sexual pictures and videos. However, these do not necessarily fall into the categories of flaming or trolling. This interview illustrated how sexual cyber-harassment and sexual, verbal cyber-harassment can co-occur when perpetuated through a dating site, which would generally be used to meet people romantically, possibly leading to an intimate relationship. Sexual cyber-harassment and sexual, verbal cyber-harassment are linked in that they are both forms of online sexual harassment; for Participant 3, the sexual harassment was a man sending her unsolicited pictures of his genitals and the sexual, verbal cyber-harassment involved being insulted with sexual terminology such as when he told her to "stop acting tighter than a nun's cunt".

Participant 4 spoke of experiencing flaming and trolling when playing online computer games and recalled how once the other individuals gaming "realise you're a girl…they start screaming at you for no reason at all" and that "once they find out you are a different gender…those are the moments where they get violent for no reason at all". This indicates the treatment women often receive in a male-dominated space, especially online (Nadim and Fladmoe, 2019). Some of the language used includes "fuck you", "you belong in the kitchen", "why don't you make me a sandwich or something", and "you're my bitch". Participant 4 felt that trolling often "has some sort of sarcasm behind it" and that she can tolerate it. She explained that in the gaming community, "we all troll each with each other", thus causing her to be more accepting of that behaviour. However, she also mentioned that there were times when she would worry about fellow male gamers potentially saying "something rude or mak[ing] some sexual joke about your own body or something like that" once they were aware that she was a woman. This further indicates the misogynistic ways in which men interact with and value women, especially when in a space they may feel belongs to them. Furthermore, how normalised this behaviour is, even by the women being targeted. This type of behaviour may be continuously targeted towards women gamers, so it falls under gender-trolling.

Participant 5 recounted how she was asked by a fellow gamer to "snip their private parts" and has been told she is a "[bitch]" when gaming online. She also mentioned the "aggression and male dominance" that is a part of gaming and that she does not want to deal with that. As with Participant 4, Participant 5 was subjected to gender verbal abuse when being called a "bitch". Notably, while some people use the term bitch in an off-hand manner,

meaning no actual harm, the way it is used as described by these participants indicates an intent to be offensive and gendered (McCormick, 2021).

Participant 6's experiences of flaming and trolling included being harassed because of her sexuality as an LGTBQ+ woman. She was told by her harasser that LGBTQI+ people would be the "first to be harmed when society falls" and that she should "prepare [herself] for death". Alongside other "disgusting emails", the participant was also told to "get [her] hormone levels checked" and that "what [she] is doing is unnatural, that people naturally want to procreate and what [she's] doing as a woman is unnatural". These comments are not only homophobic but also misogynistic and sexist, reducing Participant 6's worth as a woman to only her reproductive abilities. Once again, it indicates a man's opinion of her value as a human being in that she deserves death and has less value as a woman. Furthermore, the trolling from her harasser is gendered, falling under the term gender-trolling.

Participant 7 spoke of her experience of cyber-harassment while gaming online, specifically about the game Call of Duty. She reported being called terms such as "dishwasher", "whore", and "bitch" and being told that she is a "hacker" and that she was cheating in the game because her fellow gamers felt that "there's no way that a girl can be better than them" in terms of gaming ability. She further stated that men would try "to troll her into a situation just to get under her skin" and that she "knew being a woman in a male-dominated game, [she] was going to get sexual harassment or the trolling" with someone even "stalking [her] in the past because of it". These examples illustrate misogyny in the online space of gaming. In one severe example, she was doxed reporting that one male gamer in one of the games "said [her] legal name", and "in every single game he would be giving up [her] full name, [her] husband's name, until [she] stopped playing for a while". He further shared "[her] gaming details on Twitter". Participant 7 felt that this harasser was behaving this way because "he was trying to troll[her] just to get a reaction", as she was not reacting to his trolling. This is a very severe form of cyber-harassment as doxing can lead to serious consequences for the person wishing to remain private, such as the person's address being made public to everyone that was harassing them online (Jane, 2015)

Participant 8 spoke of how, when gaming online, she would get told that she is "such a bad person" and is "so bad at gaming" or "fuck you, you suck" by other male gamers. This exemplifies how they would talk down to her and invalidate her gaming abilities and skills. She also mentioned that women who game or draw hentai, such as herself, are more "prone to

being flamed" and that "the males are really hard on [them]". She went on to state that if you are in the business of making adult content like [she is], then they turn on you and just harass you and flame you". In this instance, she means her career of drawing hentai which, in western countries is used as a term to label pornographic anime or manga (Peters, 2017). She has also been called "garbage" and a "thot", which is modern slang for the term slut or whore and told that "[she] should kill herself". This all indicates derogatory and hostile language targeting women with gendered language.

Participant 9's experiences of flaming and trolling also predominantly involved gaming situations. Like when she was told that "female gamers can't game" or when the other gamers were "trying to like insult and, kind of create a bit of tension and argument". Her experiences of trolling when playing Minecraft involved a male gamer who tried to engage in an argument by building on her Minecraft property and "put[ing] stuff on top of [her] house". The "stuff" she describes was "a tower of wooden blocks on [her] house, and [he] kind of made them look slightly suggestive like genitalia". He then messaged her privately through the game, asking her if "[she] liked [his] wood?". This was an attempt to troll her by provoking an argument and using gendered and sexist imagery to target her.

Psychological Effects

As seen in Table 2, the participants experienced various psychological effects during and after being cyber-harassment.

Table 3 details the psychological effects that the participants experienced after being cyber-harassed.

Psychological Effects	
Helplessness, fear, depressed	Unwelcome and unwanted
Anger, frustration	Panicked, unsafe, distrusting, vulnerable, cautious
Insecurity (due to be female)	Exploited
Irrational reactions/responses to harassment	Become dismissive/less tolerant.
Overwhelmed, paranoid	Affects the victim's family negatively.

All the participants reported feeling negative when being flamed and trolled. These feelings included anger and frustration at the system. The participant felt overwhelmed, depressed, and paranoid and became more distrustful of people online. Participant 1

mentioned that she “acted really irrationally” when she was being cyber-harassed by her ex-boyfriend. Similarly, Participant 2 stated that she would go into “anxiety mode” and experience panic attacks, meaning the anxiety caused by the trolling her to act irrationally. Participant 3 said that sexual cyber-harassment made her feel “unsafe, insulted, vulnerable, exploited”, with such experiences making “it very difficult as a woman to put yourself out there in the physical world”. Participant 4 said she experienced feelings of “complete anxiety and insecurity” after being flamed and trolled. Participant 5 mentioned that these experiences make one “feel a bit uncomfortable” in the gaming community, as well as wary of letting other gamers know that they are women because she “[doesn’t] feel like letting them know [she’s] female”. Participant 6 felt “extremely frustrated” because what was said was “so incredibly unfair, and [she] felt bullied”. Her immediate family also experienced emotional turmoil as they were also sent derogatory emails by the person harassing her. She explained that the harassment was “really affecting [her] father's health at that point”.

Participant 7 also reported feeling overwhelmed by her harassment and described that it “worsened [her] anxiety”. She also mentioned how it made her “feel shit to be a female because it’s like [she’s] not good enough for anything, " causing self-doubt and lowering her self-esteem. She is furthermore now distrustful of men, getting an “I don’t trust men feeling”. Participant 8 felt that it “really fucks with your head” and that it “[made her] suicidal” and “want to kill [herself]”, as well as depression and feeling “vulnerable and caged” when in such hostile online situations. She further said it made her turn from a “being this happy, bubbly person to kind of this depressed, non-social gremlin kind of person” and that she “[has] pills for this”, as in the effects of being harassed online. In keeping with research from elsewhere, in all these responses, cyber-harassment elicits negative emotions in women (Febro-Naga and Tinam-isan, 2022).

Participant 9 said that she felt “uncomfortable” when being trolled and flamed as well as described the experiences using the emotions “angry”, “frustrated”, and “betrayed.” she further felt “a sense of caution, fear, voicelessness and a little bit trapped”. This is because she thought she could not fight back, and engaging in the trolling arguments aimed at her was pointless. She also mentioned that she started “expecting something like that to happen again” after being trolled. Thus, she felt like it would be a continuing gaming pattern that she needed to be aware of and careful of. Participant 9 also described an online experience where knowing the person who harassed her made her feel “hurt” and that she “completely stopped

speaking to them". This suggests a protective mechanism to avoid further cyber-harassment and emotional turmoil.

Anonymity

Not all the participants' cyber-harassers were unknown to them. Whether the victim knew their harasser affected how they felt about their experience. Participant 1 was more scared of her ex-boyfriend's harassment as "he knew everything about [her]", while the harassment by his current girlfriend, whom she had never met, was not as scary as she "was far away". Participant 5 stated that not knowing the harasser "feels less personal" and that if she knew them, she would want to find out who they were. Participant 6 felt it was worse knowing that her harasser was her half-brother because she did not realise, he was the kind of person to harass her as he did. Participant 7, like Participant 5, was also "obsessed about the people that picked on [her] a lot" because she "wanted to see who are these people?". In contrast, she mentioned she would have "preferred to know who they were, but [she] just never did. So being anonymous [she] think[s] bothered [her] more than knowing who they were". Participant 8 felt that "not knowing [made her] feel kind of better" as she could "just block this person or delete this person or leave a random server" when gaming online. She felt that knowing the person meant "you can't leave that situation".

Participant 2 felt more at ease knowing that her harassers were her mother and step-father as she then "didn't have that constant fear of not knowing who it was". Participant 3 also felt a "sense of security" knowing who the person is. Participant 9 felt that "because even if you know the person, um, I think people feel like they're hidden by their screens". In this instance, Participant 9 spoke about how being online can make people feel more confident and, thus, more likely to flame or troll someone else. This is also mentioned by previous research where not being seen increases an individual's propensity to commit offensive behaviour, such as flaming or trolling (Camacho et al., 2018; Fox and Tang, 2017).

Online Activity

Participants 1-9 changed their social media use; for example, they changed their profiles from public to private, became more cautious online and deleted or blocked their harassers and those associated with their harassers. Participant 1 stated that she "started changing all [her] things to private", such as her Instagram and Facebook accounts. She also said she does not "accept friend requests unless [she] knows the person personally". This indicates a change in her previous online presence due to the harassment she experienced.

Participant 2 states that while “when [she] was in college, [she] was big into Instagram and Facebook”, but now, if she “didn’t have to have it for [her] business, [she] wouldn’t have social media, or just have WhatsApp”. This shows a change in online behaviour because of her experiences.

Participant 3 also “made all [her] profiles private”, and Participant 4 does not use her microphone anymore unless she knows her gaming peers to prevent being harassed as a female gamer, as she had been “harassed so many times”. She, therefore, prefers to keep her identity private. Participant 5 has become more selective of the types of online games she plays. Participant 6 “deleted and blocked” her harasser and his family members to prevent them from seeing what she shares on social media. She has also become more “cautious about who [she] has on [her] social media” to protect herself from further harassment. Participants, therefore, similarly described becoming more cautious and disengaged when using online networking sites. This can also be seen in Participant 7’s behaviour as she reports that she no longer “talk[s] at all” when gaming, that “[she] removed all [her] personal pictures” from Instagram as she has “gaming stuff on there” as well as “dele[ting] her LinkedIn” account. Participant 8 said that she used to “pop into voice calls and be happy”, but now she prefers to “play Genshin alone, or League alone”. Thus, she is removing herself from a situation where she could be harassed.

Participant 9 also mentioned “removing [herself] from the situation” multiple times and explained that she now will “avoid interacting with people that [she] doesn’t know at all online”. She stated she has “the mentality of trying to be as PC (politically correct) as possible” to avoid cyber-harassers targeting her. All of these behaviours echo findings of existing online harassment research (Megarry, 2014).

Responses to Cyber-harassment

Participant 1 said that “it would be good to take a proactive stance”, and if it “is ongoing and quite severe, then do something about it”. Participant 2 reported that what action to take or not to take depended on the harassment and who was harassing her. Participant 3 felt that victims do not need to tolerate cyber-harassment and there is no need to explain one’s actions because “we’ve got to protect ourselves”. Here, Participant 3 is not engaging with the harassment at all.

Participant 4 explained that if one is being cyber-harassed, they must not “stand down” as they are “fighting for the next generation”, being proactive in their stance against

being cyber-harassed. She noted that “if you have to be the bitch in the situation, be the bitch”, especially about standing up to male gamers and their sexist views. Participant 5 mentioned spreading awareness as a victim and to seek help from other gaming communities. Finally, Participant 6 initially replied to her harasser’s first message asking him to stop, saying, “please spare me your disgusting, homophobic comments.” She then “blocked him” as “it was extremely offensive”. Participant 6 reported that her harasser “continued for months to harass [her] via email, and his intention clearly was to get in an argument with [her] and get [her] to reply, and [she] just would not reply apart from [her] initial message”. She also spoke to her family about the issue and was advised to speak to a legal aid organisation about holding her harasser accountable; she decided not to do so as she felt “that would’ve just made things worse”.

Participant 7 said she “tried to report people” but that “nothing came of it”, indicating a lack of action from the gaming sites themselves. Participant 8 said, “There’s really nowhere to go. There’s no one to tell. There’s nothing to do about it because who are you going to tell?”. She later said she does not know if she “wants that kind of target on [her] in asking for help in that kind of situation”. This suggests that she believes there is nothing one can do to mitigate the online harassment she has experienced. Some participants were proactive in their responses to the cyber-harassment in terms of their own reactions and ways to feel supported, while some took action directly against the harasser. Participant 9 stated that she has “left servers” when online gaming to avoid cyber-harassment and has also “asked [her] boyfriend to come online and just offer some form of support” as she said he “felt like a buffer”, thus allowing her some form of protection from any potential flaming or trolling.

Advice for Victims

Advice included blocking and reporting the harasser’s account, taking legal action against the harasser, sharing their experience with others, and raising boys into men who are not sexist or homophobic. Participant 1 advised people experiencing cyber-harassment or flaming “to take a proactive step, or a proactive stance towards it and not let it turn into something”. By this, she means to stop the cyber-harassment as soon as possible. The second participant said that women should “be more vigilant with who [they] add on to social media”, as well as how “staying out of chat groups if you don’t know anyone from them could save your life”. Here, Participant 2 is speaking of precautionary measures to prevent cyber-harassment.

Participant 3 recommends women follow their instincts in that

> "Your instinct will will tell you, you feel disrespected, or it'll tell you that you're not comfortable. You don't need a justification to follow your instincts. If you feel uncomfortable or you don't wanna tolerate it behaviour, don't, you're under no obligation to explain yourself."

She continues to say, "Save yourself and just don't tolerate the boundary, crossing the disrespect or the uncomfortable feeling", which results from being cyber-harassed. Participant 4 took a proactive stance and said, "Don't ever stand down that even stay quiet. You stand up continuously. Continuously, because right now you're fighting for the next generation", speaking of how the current misogynistic mindset of people, and in her situation the gaming community, needs to change.

Participant 5 said that she thinks "we don't really know how to tackle it yet when you can't rely on the government, it's like spread awareness and talk to, you know, search for like Facebook groups or people" as a recommendation for women to combat online flaming and trolling. Here lies the theme of Support and validating one's feelings about the situation when there is little faith in higher authorities intervening. The theme of Support is also present in Participant 4's responses, especially from her male gamer counterparts, whom she described as her friends. This illustrated how victims of cyber-harassment feel being emotionally supported can be beneficial when responding to and coping with online harassment.

Participant 6 said that women should share their experiences of cyber-harassment even if it does not end the flaming and trolling because then "at least people are aware of what you are going through in case you are in danger from the perpetrator and also they can provide emotional supports and any other support that you might need". In this, validation and support are again seen as methods for coping with cyber-harassment, so the victims do not feel alone or at fault for their experiences. Furthermore, she mentioned shaming the harasser so "that people know exactly what they've done. And this might also prevent it from happening to another woman if they are aware that yes, this person who we know is abusing women, and let's avoid them". Thus, taking a proactive stance against the harassment. However, this runs the risk of the harasser reacting badly or being harassed themselves.

She also reported that another thing women can do "is report it and try to get a restraining order", but she goes on to say that,

> "With our criminal justice system, this is often very difficult and, if not impossible, to achieve. And sometimes, of course, the women do not know the perpetrator. They may be using a fake name just to harass women, so it's extremely difficult to combat this long term."

Here, once again, a lack of faith in the policing and higher authorities in South Africa is present in terms of combatting cyber-harassment. She further mentioned that "it's a problem that needs to be dealt with in families to raise boys and young men that do not treat women this way", linking to the misogynistic views many men have internalised, thinking they can treat women negatively. As Participant 6 is part of the LGBTQI+ community, this also indicates homophobic views from the harassers.

Participant 7 said that she does not "think there's a way to combat it" and that it will happen regardless but that you must not "feed into it" because it "makes them feel more empowered the moment you respond or react". Her advice is, therefore, "Don't even respond". Unfortunately, she said, "no matter what you do or say, these people are going to try anyway". This shows the trolling nature of cyber-harassment on gaming sites. Participant 8 said she "is seeing a psychiatrist" and suggested "something like a support centre or a forum for people like that, that can assist you, that you could just be talking to". This ties into the need for validation from others and even medication to assist with coping with managing the psychological effects of the harassment. Participant 9 stated that while she wishes "[she] could be the kind of woman who doesn't remove [herself] from the situation" when being cyber-harassed, she feels that it is "for her mental benefit" to do so. However, she thinks that "women really need to have that strength to report that person, to make that noise and say this isn't right". This indicates taking a more proactive stance against the cyber-harassment.

Recommendations for Social Networking Sites

This involved advice on how to make social networking platforms safer. It includes more consistent rules and the social networking sites blocking, shutting down or sending a warning to the harasser's account and spreading awareness on what to do when cyber-harassed. Participant 1 mentioned social networking sites changing their policies and that "if there is evidence that the person is, or the profile is harassing a person, that they should then shut down the profile" to allow for more stringent treatment of harassers. Participant 2 feels that in terms of social networking sites, it "does not seem like they're doing anything to stop inappropriate things" and that there "should be an age restriction for social media as well".

Here, she provided an example of a sex scandal when she was in high school, which escalated due to social media access, illustrating that there can be severe repercussions for what teenagers may post online.

Participant 3 feels that "there's gotta be consideration for what's, you know, hate speech" and that while,

> "There's freedom of speech; you don't need to tolerate hate speech and bullying. The problem is that those pages are monitored by people who are just as likely to have those biases. So really, you can't control what other people do, but you can control how you react to it, what you interact with."

Once again, this shows a lack of faith in the social networking site's ability to protect women and participants suggest that victims are responsible themselves. Participant 4 stated that she felt that the gaming sites she uses "are very on it" and "when it comes to the toxic players and when you have a complaint, they always stay there, especially against sexual harassment, but they're very on it", expressing that it is mainly the men she plays with that need to stand up for victims. She speaks of how she "only game[s] with men, so it would be nice if they could just stand up with [her] instead of leaving [her] to do it on [her] own". Therefore, she identifies an important role of support, especially support from male friends.

In terms of what social networking sites can do to combat cyber-harassment, Participant 5 mentioned.

> "Maybe if they do pick up foul language or things like that, even a warning message could pop up or something like that. Not immediate, you know, reporting action and dismissal, because that requires a huge amount of maybe human stuff or really, really expensive technology to scam through every bloody message and try to pick up, and it'll be all the talk, so, so maybe like yeah, a warning message."

Thus, giving the harasser notice that they have violated a rule against cyber-harassment to prevent them from further rule violations. This is also a method mentioned in research by Kuzma (2013) among young people experiencing cyber-harassment. Participant 5 further says she agrees with the idea of there being "like a limit on the amount of warnings one person can receive". She suggested that it may "be worthwhile putting in a system that sends the person who received a message and asks, "Are you okay? We picked up a rather

rude statement, would you like to lay a complaint against this?" type message. This suggestion would have the social networking site warning the harasser and checking in on the victim.

Recommendations that Participant 6 has for social networking sites include "dealing with a service of social networking, social media, and how to make it safer". She feels that social networking sites must stop treating their users as products but instead view them more as customers. She says that,

> "The way that social media sites are set up right now, it's really not in [the victim's] favour because we are the product. Our data is taken from us and used for advertisers. So, we are sold, we are the products, we are putting our information out. and we do not have much protection…If I was the customer instead of the product, I believe I would be taken more seriously. Maybe [she'd] actually be able to speak to a person on Facebook if I have a problem. Just like if I subscribe to Netflix, Audible and so on".

In this, she adds that she would be content with paying a fee for such sites to ensure proper care and that if people had to "do a mass boycotting of Facebook and say, we're cancelling our subscription for this month until something is done about this, then they're going to lose a huge amount of money. It's going to give them bad publicity". She believes that the social networking sites would then make a more significant effort to combat cyber-harassment. Overall, Participant 6 feels that,

> "You can't stop men and what they do. You can shame them if they've done something wrong, but it's up to the platform of social media to actually step in and control things better. It's not up to us as women to stop this. It's up to the social media platform to make it safe… they currently are not interested in that because we are not paying them."

This data, therefore, indicates frustration at the situation and how social networking sites manage it compared to Participant 4's feelings about the gaming sites that she uses.

In addition, Participant 7 said that in terms of gaming Facebook pages, "the people running these, say, Facebook pages or communities to actually stand up for the women or anyone really that's being targeted". They should "enforce strict rules" such as "if you're gonna act this way, you get kicked out". She feels that "a man's not gonna listen to a woman

at the end of the day, especially in gaming communities. But that if a man that is in a hierarchy higher up tells them, quit it, stop doing that", that they may "listen or just back down". However, she also feels that this may not be successful either. Participant 8 felt that "there should be a system where you can report someone, and people take you actually serious". She also suggested that social networking sites could have the option to "ban people that troll other people or flame them" or learn from Facebook's new feature where "you can block this person and the accounts they create". Participant 9 said that "there should be a larger effort in the reports that people make" being "checked and vetted" by social networking sites. That way, the cyber-harasser has more limited access to you in that they may not be allowed on the same sites, and you and the correct people are being held fully accountable for their flaming and/or trolling.

Support

Participants described that they sought and experienced support during their experiences of cyber-harassment. Participant 1 "went to counselling after the whole thing happened", who then referred [her] to a clinical psychologist, while Participant 2 "normally just handled it [herself] or [she'd] speak to [her] dad". Participant 3 spoke of how it would be beneficial as support systems as you "feel more supported and you also feel better knowing that there are people out there that aren't fucked in the head". This point was emphasised by Participant 4, who reported that when her male gaming friends do not support her, it is an "awful feeling, because especially if they're your friends, they're basically supporting someone who is hurting you, which isn't right". Participant 7 also reported that "out of her friend group, only one, one guy would stand up for [her]" but that she thinks that "if [they] weren't friends, [he] would be the type she could see joining in on it, to be honest". She stated he would insult her harasser in return. This comports with findings by Herring et al. (2002), which show that retaliation is also used to combat cyber-harassment.

Furthermore, Participant 5 also agreed that validation as support would benefit women being cyber-harassed, and Participant 6 mentioned receiving support from her sister and parents. Her saying that "what [she] did to get help was [she] spoke to [her] sister and she, without me asking, she revved our brother and told him that his behaviour was unacceptable". Furthermore, Participant 6 also "ended up receiving help from it, was that [her] mother shared those screenshots with the rest of [their] family because she was in such a rage".

Participant 8 said that “sometimes you get support from the people that actually know you and know you for who you are”, but that “you can’t ask for help when you’re in this situation because either the friend is gonna help you and get into trouble or not gonna help you and you are gonna have these feelings of resentment”. By this, she means those who help you will also become targets. She describes receiving help as “kind of rare”, suggesting that receiving support from others is difficult in the online gaming community. However, when supported, people experiencing this negative harassment behaviour are provided with the comfort of knowing that they are heard. Such support can also be through helplines or external organisations (UN Women, 2020). Participant 9 also mentioned asking her boyfriend to “offer some form of support” online to feel safer. Whether emotional or practical, validation and support from others are important when coping with the cyber-harassment.

Perceived Severity of the Cyber-harassment

This theme focussed on how the participants perceived the severity of their experiences of cyber-harassment. Only four participants mentioned how seriously they perceived the cyber-harassment, ranging from it not being very serious to feeling that their life was at risk. Participant 1 made the most comments relating to this theme, likely because she knew one of her harassers and was receiving death threats from him. This also links to the theme of Anonymity, as she stated that “the potential for the threat to feel real is much higher” regarding knowing the harasser. Furthermore, Participant 3 felt that “when you don’t know the person, it’s sometimes easier to just think, okay, what’s this person going to do?”.

This reiterates that knowing the harasser impacts to what level of seriousness the harasser is taken. Participant 4 spoke of how she was negatively impacted by flaming when online gaming and felt it was unacceptable, but her male gaming peers did not share the same sentiment. She commented that her male peers view flaming from other men as “just a part of his personality that you have to accept,” meaning that she has to “accept abuse because it’s fine with [them] and they don’t take it as seriously”. This links to the need for male support and validation when women experience this kind of cyber-harassment, as some research supports the idea that men do not perceive online harassment as seriously as women do (Duggan, 2017). This, the way some victims view cyber-harassment, is not necessarily the same as the way bystanders and perpetrators do, and that feel it is worse than it appears.

In contrast, Participant 4 stated that she could “accept [trolling]” as it is a part of the gaming community. This is also mentioned by research from Fichman and Sanfilippo (2015).

Thus, her perception of trolling is that it is less serious than flaming, regarding her experiences of it when gaming online. Participant 7 agreed with this sentiment and stated that "in the beginning, you kind of see it as funny, like you know, they're just being silly", but that over time "it makes [her] feel shit to be female". She also felt that being called derogatory terms "didn't bug her". Participant 8 stated that "sometimes [she thought] it [was] a joke" about flaming and trolling, but that "then there's those that you do kind of let into your circle and from that when you say no, then it turns to this kind of harassment". This reveals that trolling can quickly turn from something silly to very serious. This also illustrates a difference in the levels of severity between how victims perceive cyber-harassment.

Participant 5, also spoke from a female online gamer's point of view, stated that she thinks "girls do often get harassed on these gaming sites and although, like, it doesn't bother [her], [she] doesn't want to put [herself] in that situation". As a result, she understood and acknowledged that being flamed online occurs but is more tolerant of such behaviour. Furthermore, Participant 5 spoke of how she had experienced trolling attempts towards her but that she had "never replied to them". This links to the theme of Responses to Cyber-harassment in that she avoids engaging with people trying to cyber-harass her as a protective mechanism. Participant 9 mentioned that while she has "never gotten too deep into a situation where she felt attacked or unsafe", she has "definitely seen a lot of moments where it could have escalated in conversations", "specifically being female and being on gaming platforms". This suggested that she perceived flaming and trolling as problematic online even though she had never experienced it in extreme forms.

Summary of Findings

Participants were harassed online in different spaces, from dating and gaming sites to Instagram and Facebook comments. Gaming sites seem to be particularly rife with gender-based cyber-harassment. The psychological effects that victims experience from online harassment have long-lasting consequences. Some participants still experience paranoia and negative and unsafe feelings about being online and are prescribed medication to treat the effects of being cyber-harassed. Anonymity played a more frightening role for some participants than others. There is a contrast between fearing the perpetrator because they were unknown, and so was what they may be capable of, and not knowing them, allowing them to seem less close to home and dangerous. Participants changed their online behaviours, such as fellow gamers not standing up for each other because they would be targeted. Thus, victims often avoid or remove themselves from any potential such situations, which puts the onus on

them to protect themselves from further harassment instead of having the cyber-harasser stop their harassment. Online gamer participants also perceived trolling and flaming as a serious problem, as it could escalate from more acceptable conversation and banter to serious cyber-harassment.

Participants need psychological support and validation from others and other victimised women. Counselling and receiving validation were mentioned to be appreciated when discussing their experiences. Furthermore, there is a need for female gamers' male gamer counterparts to stand up for them and against the other men cyber-harassing them when they are all engaged in online gaming sites. This is illustrated in how Participant 9 received support from her boyfriend, which helped her to feel safer and more comfortable online. There is a want and need for male support when women experience gender-based cyber-harassment to change the sexist views that other men may hold against women. This further links to how women cannot only prevent traditional gender-based violence. It is done by involving those who perpetrate and those impacted by it.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Overview

The data from this study shows that gender-based cyber-harassment is a serious problem for women on the internet and occurs on and over multiple online sites. While women experience gender-based flaming and trolling differently, it harms them psychologically. It often causes them to change their daily behaviours, just as traditional gender-based violence would. The parallels between traditional gender-based violence and cyber-harassment also include how safe men feel in the real world and on the internet when compared to how safe women feel. The data further shows that the nature of the gender-based cyber-harassment they experience is often due to them being a female in a male-dominated space, with both men and women feeling that gaming sites are such spaces (Williams et al., 2009). Women in this study have mixed opinions on how effective social networking sites are in combatting flaming and trolling, arguing that some sites adequately protect their users and others do not. Finally, there is a feeling of futility when women consider how to prevent such gender-based cyber-harassment. It is difficult enough to fight against traditional gender-based violence, so the complex world of online abuse can also seem impossible to stop.

Gender-Based Cyber-Harassment and Traditional Gender-Based Violence

The findings suggest that gender-based cyber-harassment is not that different from traditional gender-based violence. Both flaming and trolling experienced by the study's participants can fall into the category of gender-based violence because they contain verbal abuse, such as derogatory and hostile language towards women. They also involve misogynistic mindsets and a highly unequal power dynamic between men and women. This makes women feel unsafe and vulnerable and allows men to feel superior and to assert these feelings aggressively. Some participants were targeted with threats of violence, while others were targeted with highly gendered, vulgar, and offensive language by their gaming peers because they were women. These findings are in line with Nadim and Fladmoe (2019), who find that women are often targeted because of their gender in misogynistic online spaces. Thus, this is gender-based cyber-harassment because the language used refers to a woman in a derogatory way. An example from Participant 7 would be when men online equate her to a dishwasher as it relates to a traditionally female gender role. This sheds light on how men perceived women and language about women in misogynistic ways (Nadim and Fladmoe, 2019). Felmlee et al. (2020) suggest that gendered terminology is commonly used to offend on the internet, showing traditional gender roles are still perpetuated online in an offensive

way to make women feel inferior. Flaming and trolling, therefore, mirror traditional verbal harassment in real-life relationships (Camacho et al., 2018). Whether in-person or online, the language used is derogatory, hostile, and inflammatory aimed to hurt or impact the women negatively, often simply because they are women and therefore viewed as less valuable than men.

Another parallel is just as men feel safe and powerful in the real world, they also feel that way online, while women do not. As a result, women do not feel safe in online or offline spaces. The women's results of a United Kingdom Ofcom report indicate that women feel less safe and as if they have less of a voice online than when compared to the men's results (Ofcom, 2022). Thus, there is a power imbalance between men and women. From a young age, men follow patriarchal beliefs where they feel that they can enforce power over women (Pandea et al., 2019). They are ingrained with these beliefs to the point where verbal violence and derogatory views against women are acceptable to them. Feminist researchers argue that such beliefs are internalised due to the perpetuation of patriarchal culture and its related aspects of misogyny, sexism and the objectification of women (Felmlee et al., 2020). Such behaviour clearly exists in South Africa and worldwide, creating dangerous spaces for women (Govender, 2023).

These feelings of unsafety are compounded by the debilitating psychological effects that cyber-harassed women experience. Traditional gender-based violence also causes intense and harmful adverse psychological effects, which are consistent with those caused by cyber-harassment (Pandea et al., 2019; Febro-Naga and Tinam-isan, 2022). This is seen in how participants 1-9 expressed a range of negative emotions, such as feelings of helplessness, rage, fear, a lack of online and offline safety, anxiety, and the most severe example, thoughts of suicide. These psychological effects led the participants to change some of their behaviours online and offline. Examples include reporting the harasser, becoming more withdrawn and less interested in socialising, and becoming more distrustful, fearful, and wary of men. These behavioural changes parallel those of women who experience traditional gender-based violence (Netcare, 2018). This emphasises how severe cyber-harassment can be.

Furthermore, the women were harassed online by people they knew and by strangers. This also occurs in traditional gender-based violence (Pandea et al., 2019). The participants felt differently about this concept of anonymity, with some feeling more frightened or angered by their harassers. Others did not experience such intense negative feelings when the cyber-harassers were known. In these cases, participants detailed that they were betrayed, upset, and

saddened more so than angered or felt more detached from their harasser because they did not know them. There was a disconnect between the two in that a known harasser may use personal information against them while an unknown harasser was further from the situation. Another possible reaction involves the need to know who the harasser is to offset obsessing over them. All of this suggests that the effects of anonymity depend on different factors in terms of the victim's experience of them and the victim's personality. There is a link here that the feelings of women who experience online harassment mirror those who experience traditional gender-based violence.

Online anonymity gives the harasser more freedom to commit cyber-harassment, so there are more available places and more people to cyber-harass (Camacho et al., 2018; Fox and Tang, 2017). This differs from traditional gender-based violence as the locations to commit it have broadened significantly. It further makes it more difficult to apprehend the person cyber-harassing as there may only be an alias or digital trace of them. As a result, enforcing any South African cyber-crime law to prevent cyber-harassment will likely remain challenging. It is possible to report the online profile of a cyber-harasser to the social networking site for them to take it down; however, this does not prevent the harasser from creating more profiles.

Another difference is how women respond to the cyber-harassment. Some participants said to stand up to their harassers or to take proactive action against the cyber-harassment. However, this is a stark contrast to what most women who experience traditional gender-based violence do. Many women in abusive relationships stay in the relationship for fear of more harm, death, homelessness or out of financial dependence (Pandea et al., 2019). In the real world, women are vulnerable to physical violence if they stand up for themselves or show defiance. In such an instance, one cannot simply shut down the harasser and disengage from the interaction as some of the study's online participants did. While the participants may have reported or blocked their cyber-harassers to the site they were using, most gender-based violence crimes are not reported out of fear or shame (Pandea et al., 2019). Thus, in online spaces, women may appear to be more able to take a stand. However, this is not always the case. Some women feel they cannot defend themselves no matter what they do and that to fight the cyber-harasser would be pointless. This shows a lack of faith in the sites they use abilities to protect them, just as traditional gender-based violence victims have a lack of faith in real world law enforcement (Pandea et al., 2019). All the participants gave recommendations consistent with current literature about managing online harassment

(Herring et al., 2002). These recommendations indicate a need for better regulations and protections on social networking and internet sites.

Interestingly, some participants mentioned that while the flaming cyber-harassment they encountered was challenging to manage, the trolling they experienced was more acceptable as it is considered a part of gaming culture and is perceived as done with fun intentions (Fichman and Sanfilippo, 2015). However, they still see it as offensive when it goes too far, while others feel it should not occur. Some forms of cyber-harassment are therefore considered more acceptable than other forms. In online gaming situations, trolling is a part of gaming and interacting online, which may or may not get out of hand. In contrast, sexual cyber-harassment is not seen as acceptable and is instead unsafe, offensive, and demeaning. This differs from traditional gender-based violence, which is seen as problematic overall (Pandea et al., 2019).

It is important to note that other forms of harassment, such as religious harassment and LGBTQI+ harassment, which use gendered language and sexist or queerphobic beliefs about the victim, can also be gender-based. This is also seen in traditional gender-based violence against the LGBTQI+ community (Pandea et al., 2019). This indicates that the religious and LGBTQI+ online harassment that the participants experienced mirrors that of offline gender-based harassment towards people who practice alternative religions and the LGBTQI+ community.

What is Being Done to Help?

There are mixed opinions about whether or not social networking and gaming sites could adequately combat flaming and trolling and what they should implement to do so. An interesting point raised by one of the participants was to have social networking sites treat their users as ‘customers’ and not as ‘products’ from which to profit. If sites were to use paid subscriptions and potentially lose users and revenue due to cyber-harassment, they might knuckle down on user experience and safety. Thus, it will empower users when they decide to use the site or not. This part of the argument plays into traditional gender-based violence prevention programmes, which aim to empower women against abuse by strengthening their autonomy and self-esteem (Pandea et al., 2019). Further research on this concept would be beneficial to determine the success of such an agreement between the users and the social networking sites. Previous studies focus much of their attention on what cyber-harassment victims can do to protect themselves from further victimisation. However, these results demonstrate that women think and have opinions about what social networking sites can do to

improve their policies and better prevent cyber-harassment on their platforms. This emphasises the integral role that social networking sites have to combat online gender-based harassment and the responsibility that their users place on them to uphold their commitment to creating a safe online space for all.

Unlike traditional gender-based violence, social networking sites can play a direct role to prevent online harassment. The harassment does not need to escalate to the point of a protection order or official law enforcement intervention. This is, however, difficult to implement in a country that has yet to become fully competent in dealing with cyber-crime (Moyo, 2022). However, when it comes to traditional gender-based violence, social networking sites can play a supporting role as they would help stop the perpetuation of gender-based cyber-harassment. Some of the participants support this view from the experiences they have with online gaming sites. Unfortunately, not all of the participants felt this way. Most felt that social networking sites could not make a big difference as one cannot control what others do and that there was nothing that can truly be done even though more should be done to hold cyber-harassers accountable. This is consistent with the results from an American study, where Vogels (2021) found that participants felt that social media sites were doing an inadequate job at addressing their concerns about cyber-harassment. It also mirrors women's hopeless and negative feelings about gender-based violence prevention in South Africa (Artz, 2006). Women have no hope in the real world’s prevention methods, so they have no hope in online spaces. Women are not afforded sufficient support offline, so they are not surprised when they do not receive it online either.

Directions for Future Research

Recommendations for Further Research about the Experiences of Cyber-Harassment

This study only focuses on women, but men may also experience flaming and trolling, so it may be useful to look at their experiences and compare the similarities and differences. Recommendations for this study on gender-based cyber-harassment would be to interview more women for their experiences and opinions on managing and combating flaming and trolling based on what they went through. This would then aim to improve policies around cyber-harassment and how to deter it better. Furthermore, possible cyber-harassment interventions could be developed to explain the seriousness of it and its detrimental effects, hopefully leading to less online aggression. Future research can also include interviews that gain behavioural information from women, as physical gestures or movements may add more nuance and detail to how women feel when they speak about their experiences.

Additionally, future research should ensure a diverse group of participants that can speak on more types of cyber-harassment. Most of this study's participants experience flaming and trolling while gaming. As Dunn et al. (2017) explain, the online gaming world is an especially hostile and aggressive environment in which women interact due to many of their male gaming counterparts. This means that this study gave very situation-specific examples of flaming and trolling. It would be useful to include more of the other areas of the internet, such as Facebook or other social media sites or forums. Furthermore, it would be interesting to research why victims do not necessarily take legal action against their cyber-harassers. It could be what Moyo (2022) reports, in that law enforcement in South Africa is inept in tackling cyber-crimes due to a lack of necessary skills. Therefore, there is a lack of faith in the police. However, victims may also be uninformed about their legal rights and how to enact them. Lastly, further research could include how to incorporate cyber-harassment prevention programmes into gender-based violence prevention programmes to enhance men's understanding of how harmful it is and give them insight into what and how it affects women online.

Recommendations for Social Networking Sites

Further research could include how social networking sites can better prevent online gender-based flaming and trolling and utilise women's recommendations when doing so. With online cyber-harassment mirroring traditional gender-based violence, such as verbal attacks, and how prevention programmes have been put into place for this, gender-based violence prevention methods or programmes must also be in some way implemented to change misogynistic behaviour online (Casey et al., 2018). However, this is a challenging goal for social networking sites and is more necessary to start in the home lives of cyber-harassers. While an online platform cannot directly send cyber-harassers to gender-based violence prevention programmes, they can make it more difficult for them to continue to flame and troll women online. This would, in turn, be in the favour of anyone falling victim to such harassment. They can also be more stringent in the rules and policies they already have implemented regarding cyber-harassment, allowing for reporting cyber-harassment to be taken more seriously. Consequently, when a cyber-harasser is blocked or banned, it is more permanent than simply restricting an email address. Social networking sites can also hold or sponsor gender-based violence prevention programmes or workshops that include cyber-harassment prevention to show support and implement change.

This study contributes to the field of criminology as it sheds more light onto the experiences of women who have endured cyber-harassment in South Africa and shows that their lived experiences are like those already researched in other countries. It also indicates just how serious the issue of flaming and trolling is and how impertinent it is to find ways to mitigate online harassment. This research also gives insight into how men continue to view and value women in misogynistic ways online, regardless of whether they are anonymous. Finally, it draws the parallels between cyber-harassment and traditional gender-based violence, how it affects women, and if women feel like the social networking sites and South African laws can protect them or prevent the cyber-harassment.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

While the number of participants interviewed restricts how generalisable these results are, this research still allows for more insight into how exactly women may feel after encountering such cyber-harassment and how they think it can be dealt with by other women and the online platforms on which the harassment occurs. This is due to the phenomenological nature of the research; it is meant to describe and understand an everyday experience as it aims to gather subjective data (Rodriguez and Smith, 2018). This research also asks the question of why social networking sites do not consult women's recommendations about how to combat cyber-harassment better when they have opinions to express. Women's voices need to be heard when implementing changes to prevent cyber-harassment to create a safer online world.

By analysing the experiences of cyber-harassment these nine women endure, this research shows that women experience harassment online through flaming and trolling simply because they are women, which makes their harassment gender based. This online gender-based violence that women regularly experience causes severely adverse emotional effects and behavioural changes, both online and offline. This is in line with current research in other countries worldwide, such as in America, Pakistan, and other African countries, showing that South Africa is representative of similar experiences (Vogels, 2021; Hassan et al., 2020; Ayub and Malik, 2020; Choja and Nelson, 2016). Women experience the same things online as they do in the real world in many of the same ways due to misogynistic and patriarchal mindsets that men maintain. Men feel safe and powerful in the real world and online, and combined with their attitudes, this creates a dangerous space for women. Furthermore, the methods women use to avoid cyber-harassment and protect themselves in South Africa are consistent with those used in other countries (van Laer, 2014). This indicates that women experience the global issue of online gender-based violence similarly and protect themselves in the same ways. Lastly, just as many women feel that there is no point in legal protections and the fight against domestic abuse and gender-based harassment, the fight against gender-based cyber-harassment is also often seen as futile. There is a serious problem of response, where there is no actual response. This is an extension of a more significant concern about men's positionality in the world and an imbalance of power and equality.

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Appendix A

Dissertation Advertisement 1

Appendix B

Dissertation Advertisement 2

Appendix C

Information Sheet

Women's Experiences of Gender-Based Cyber-Harassment on the Internet in South Africa: Flaming and Trolling

Good day, my name is Savannah van den Heever and I am conducting research towards a Master's degree in Criminology, Law, and Society at the University of Cape Town. I am researching the stories of women who have experienced gender-based cyber-harassment in South Africa, in the form of flaming and trolling and would like to invite you to participate in the project.

What the project is about

I am interested in finding out about how women in South Africa have experienced flaming and trolling on the internet and want to understand how you felt about it and what you have changed about your lives when using the internet and offline or in real-life situations after those experiences. For the purpose of this research, the following definitions of flaming and trolling will be used:

Flaming: when someone directs intense, offensive, and hostile language and emotion towards you.

Trolling: being led into a meaningless and difficult argument where they (the troll) enjoy upsetting you through arguing.

Gender-based trolling: when the trolling is directed towards women, and it uses language intended to insult and humiliate women in specific.

I would also like to learn if you looked for any help with your experiences, how effective that help was, and if you have any recommendations about dealing with or trying to stop gender-based cyber-harassment – for other women and for internet communication platforms.

Participation will involve taking part in an interview of approximately 20-25 minutes where you will be asked a set of questions about your experience(s) of gender-based cyber-harassment focusing on flaming and trolling.

The information from the interviews will then be looked at to find any patterns and underlying themes that can help with gaining a better understanding of your experiences.

* Should you need psychological assistance with regard to any emotional discomfort caused by your experiences of gender-based cyber-harassment or retelling your experiences when being interviewed, you can contact:

The South African Depression and Anxiety Group (8am-8pm Monday-Sunday) at 011 234 4837
Dr Reddy's Help Line at 0800 21 22 23
Cipla 24hr Mental Health Helpline at 0800 456 789
Cipla Whatsapp Chat Line (9am-4pm, 7 days a week) at 076 882 277

Appendix D

Informed Consent Form

Women's Experiences of Gender-Based Cyber-Harassment on the Internet in South Africa:

Flaming and Trolling

By signing this form, you consent to participate in a research study about your experiences of gender-based cyber-harassment in South Africa and that you understand the following:

- Your participation is voluntary. The choice to participate is yours alone. If you choose not to participate, there will be no negative consequences.
- If you choose to participate, but wish to withdraw at any time, you will be free to do so without negative consequences.
- Should you at any point feel that you no longer wish to participate, you may withdraw from the research.
- Participation would involve taking part in an interview of approximately 20-25 minutes where you will be asked a set of questions about your experience(s) of gender-based cyber-harassment focusing on flaming and trolling.
- If this interview is taking place over a video communications platform such as Zoom or Microsoft Teams, you have access to the internet, and are aware that those costs are not able to be reimbursed.
- If this interview is in person at the University of Cape Town, should you be able to meet in person, you are aware that any transport costs are not able to be reimbursed.
- Your interview will be recorded and transcribed in order to do a thematic analysis of your experiences and thus, I request explicit permission to record your interview.
- It will be audio recorded if in-person and video recorded if a video communications platform is being used.
- There is no direct benefit to you, however, I hope to give an accurate reflection of your experiences to better understand them.
- The risks of harm regarding this research may include emotional discomfort or upset when retelling your experiences of being flamed and trolled online. Should you feel uncomfortable during the interview, but wish to continue, we may pause for a breather.
- You will also be provided with contact details for mental health services should you wish to contact them for any assistance; however, the risk is not anticipated to be more than minimal.
- While your names will be used recorded during the interviews, they will later be anonymised and not made known to any other person. This anonymity will be maintained by using Participant 1-12 labels in the transcriptions and my research. I will not reveal your name or any identifying information to anyone in order to protect your identity.
- The data will be stored safely and securely.
- The transcripts of the interviews will not be made public or included in the final thesis submission.

- Should you want any feedback about the research once it is complete, you may contact me, and I will assist how I can.
- By agreeing to this research, you also consent to your anonymised data possibly being used in further research.

Signed: _____

* Should you need psychological assistance with regard to any emotional discomfort caused by your experiences of gender-based cyber-harassment or retelling your experiences when being interviewed, you can contact:

The South African Depression and Anxiety Group (8am-8pm Monday-Sunday) at 011 234 4837

Dr Reddy's Help Line at 0800 21 22 23

Cipla 24hr Mental Health Helpline at 0800 456 789

Cipla WhatsApp Chat Line (9am-4pm, 7 days a week) at 076 882 2775

Appendix E

Interview Questionnaire

Women's Experiences of Gender-Based Cyber-Harassment on the Internet in South Africa: Flaming and Trolling

1. Can you please describe your experiences of gender-based flaming on the internet?
2. Can you please describe your experiences of gender-based trolling on the internet?
3. How did these experiences make you feel?
4. If you knew the perpetrator, how did knowing their identity make you feel?
5. How have these experiences changed your behaviour online?
6. How have these experiences changed your behaviour offline, in the real world?
7. If you sought help with combatting the trolling and flaming, what did you do?
8. Was this help effective?
9. What recommendations do you have with regard to combatting gender-based flaming and trolling for other women?
10. What recommendations do you have with regard to combatting gender-based flaming and trolling for social networking or other internet communication sites?