

Cyber Harassment in Journalism: Effects on Self-Censorship on Mental Health of Female Journalists in the Pakistani Media Landscape

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Received: 08-09-2025

Revised: 03-02-2026

Accepted: 08-09-2026

Published: 09-09-2026

Suggested Citation: Dr. Aemen Khalid; Ahmad Tariq. "Cyber Harassment in Journalism: Effects on Self-Censorship on Mental Health of Female Journalists in the Pakistani Media Landscape." Lahore Institute for Research and Analysis Journal 4 (2026):16–29.

Abstract - The issue of cyber harassment towards numerous female journalists in Pakistan is gaining prevalence leading to self-censorship and mental health concerns among them. The current study investigates the pervasive issue of online harassment targeting female journalists in Pakistan using the spiral of silence theory as its lens. It aims to analyze the impact of online harassment on female journalists' tendencies toward self-censorship and its implications for their well-being. Adopting a quantitative methodology, the study employs a close-ended survey administered to female journalists from diverse urban centers. A purposive sampling technique has been used and correlation analysis has been conducted to examine the relationship between online harassment, self-censorship and mental well-being. Findings from this research have shown that a high percentage of women journalists are harassed through online harassment daily, though these women journalists contribute significantly to the flourishing media sector in Pakistan. However, many respondents showed reluctance in reporting the harassment incidents. Online harassment also depicts an alarming trend, since a majority of the women journalists who experienced harassment wish to leave journalism altogether due to the negative effects brought by online harassment. These findings underscore the urgency of interventions to address and mitigate the impact of online harassment on female journalists.

Keywords - Online Harassment, Female Journalists, Pakistani Media, Survey Method, Purposive Sampling.



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1. Introduction

Historically, journalism was a male-dominated profession, while women journalists have encountered vicious reverses and obstacles in accessing or rising through the ranks. In time, the proportion of female professionals in the journalism profession has greatly enhanced, although females still face issues including discrimination, lower pay than men, sexual harassment, and violence.¹

¹ Iqra Iqbal, Sara Chinnasamy, and Shifa Faizal, "Guardians of Truth, Targets of Harassment: The Untold Stories of Workplace Harassment among Pakistani Female Journalists," *Journal of Media and Information Warfare (JMIW)*

Online harassment of female journalists is the use of digital communication tools, and most especially social media platforms, to target the women in the journalism profession with abusive or threatening or discriminatory messages or comments.²

This kind of harassment includes activities such as trolling, and cyberbullying. According to Centre for Peace and Development Initiatives, Media Matters for Democracy & Pakistan Press Foundation, approximately 75 Pakistani women journalists issued a joint statement raising her concerns about online harassment.³ The statement continues that vile attacks via social media are widespread and seriously curtail the ability of women journalists to do their jobs effectively.⁴ A report compiled by Centre for Peace and Development Initiatives, Media Matters for Democracy, and Pakistan Press Foundation in 2020 states that close to 68 percent of women journalists have experienced some forms of attacks, threats, or harassments related to their profession as a journalist or as a person.⁵ According to Institute for the Advancement of Journalism, 2023, in recent years, Pakistan earned notoriety as one of the most hazardous environments for journalists, highly attributed to the all-pervasive impunity surrounding threats and attacks on journalists. This climate forced journalists from all forms of media into self-censorship, which affected the free flow of information.⁶

However, the challenges that female journalists face in Pakistan are more than just censorship-the more dangerous thing is that women journalists face a specific danger of systematic and persistent threats of sexual violence, especially in the online media sphere. According to Digital Rights Foundation (2018), the digital space has become a breeding ground for the proliferation of abuse and threats targeting female journalists in Pakistan.⁷ This phenomenon indicates an alarming trend wherein online platforms, seemingly created for free expression, are being weaponized to intimidate and silence female voices.⁸ The threats of sexual violence do not only threaten the physical and psychological well-being of female journalists but also become powerful tools of suppression and control. Over the years, Pakistan has remained among the world's most dangerous countries for journalists, partly due to the prevailing culture of impunity in cases of threats and physical attacks on them. These factors have forced journalists from all mediums to practice self-censorship, but female journalists suffer an added threat-the systematic and continuous exposure and threats of sexual abuse that abound in the virtual world.⁹

17, no. 1 (2024): 18–27.

² ARTICLE 19, “Online Abuse and Harassment against Women Journalists,” accessed September 8, 2026, <https://www.article19.org/onlineharassment/>.

³ Aroosa Shaukat and Waqas Naeem, “Women Journalists and the Double Bind: The Self-Censorship Effect of Online Harassment in Pakistan” (Pakistan, 2020), <https://www.cpd-pakistan.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Women-Journalists-and-the-Double-Bind.pdf>.

⁴ Julie Posetti et al., “The Chilling: A Global Study of Online Violence against Women Journalists,” 2022.

⁵ Aroosa Shaukat and Waqas Naeem, “Women Journalists and the Double Bind: The Self-Censorship Effect of Online Harassment in Pakistan” (Islamabad, December 2020), <https://mediamatters.pk/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Women-Journalists-and-the-Double-Bind.pdf>.

⁶ Shabir Hussain, Farrukh Shahzad, and Shirin Ahmad, “A Classification Framework for Analyzing the War and Peacemaking Potential of News Media in Pakistan,” *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 58, no. 5 (2023): 794–811.

⁷ Digital Rights Foundation, “Policy Document,” 2018, <https://digitalrightsfoundation.pk/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Policy-1.pdf>.

⁸ Shirin Naseer and Cameran Ashraf, “Gender-Based Violence in Pakistan’s Digital Spaces,” *Feminist Legal Studies* 30, no. 1 (2022): 29–50.

⁹ Ayesha Khan, “The Cost of Doing Their Job Online,” *From Terrorism to Television: Dynamics of Media, State, and Society in Pakistan*, 2020.

The actual actions are termed "online harassment". This behavior can be targeted at any individual or groups of people regardless of your identity. This behavior can be targeted towards specific people and others from diverse backgrounds. The term has become very common online to refer to any form of negative activity that occurs online.¹⁰ According to Slaughter and Newman (2022), recurring online action which in themselves amount to a 'course of conduct' against an identifiable person causing the identifiable person severe distress and/or fear of bodily harm". "One off episodes of online violence/ aggression in which victim and offender do not have and did not have knowledge of each other, or the violence is not specifically directed to any one person or group including communications which are rude, threatening, Not ongoing Involving power inequality Women's Studies.¹¹

According to Gerbrandt (2023), Freedom House states that online misogyny and attacks on free speech collide with each other, as explicit, personal, and sexualized threats target female journalists. These include security lapses, campaigns of disinformation, death and sexual assault threats, among many forms of online harassment. Deepfakes are becoming common sources with the development of AI, affecting disproportionately women. Online harassment of journalists is a serious concern in the digital age around the world. Escalation and reflection of the growing engagement of government and media organizations contribute to the dynamic global awareness of threats against journalists. On 9 March 2021, the Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport in the United Kingdom announced a "National Action Plan for the Safety of Journalists" with the aim to introduce new policies against harmful consequences arising from online abuse. This could be in the form of obscene messages or threats of death or rape.¹²

In September 2021, the EU adopted the "Recommendation on the protection, safety, and empowerment of journalists" to ensure safer working conditions for all media professions, whether online or offline. The EU Recommendation urges member states to promote cooperation between online platforms to counter threats and harassment that promote hatred toward journalists in the digital environment.¹³

1.1 Problem Statement

The issue of online harassment has grown to become a major concern for journalists across the world, especially women working in the media. Threats, abuse, and hostile attacks against female journalists on social media are the norm in Pakistan where unstable political environments collide with digital environments and social norms. Online harassment tends to have a big impact on the self-censorship and mental well-being of female journalists in Pakistan. The reason for this emphasis is that the woman journalist usually keeps mum in response to the online trolling that most of them receive through the social media sites. It brings them mental instability and affects the character and richness of news coverage. By highlighting these issues, the current study aims to create useful knowledge concerning the

¹⁰ Edson C Tandoc, Karryl Kim Sagun, and Katrina Paola Alvarez, "The Digitization of Harassment: Women Journalists' Experiences with Online Harassment in the Philippines," *Journalism Practice* 17, no. 6 (2023): 1198–1213.

¹¹ Autumn Slaughter and Elana Newman, "New Frontiers: Moving beyond Cyberbullying to Define Online Harassment," *Journal of Online Trust and Safety* 1, no. 2 (2022).

¹² Ricki-Lee Gerbrandt, "Media Freedom and Journalist Safety in the UK Online Safety Act," *Journal of Media Law* 15, no. 2 (2023): 179–212.

¹³ Na Yeon Lee and Ahn Park, "Unraveling the Digital Threat: Exploring the Impact of Online Harassment on South Korean Journalists' Professional Roles," *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 101, no. 2 (2024): 529–51.

specific problems Pakistani female journalists suffer from due to online harassment and its implications for their professional life. It finds its basis in the fact that from very convincing findings regarding the media environment, the rationale for streamlining the concentration on the experiences of female journalists with self-censorship and online abuse finds its basis. This aspect has made progress toward gender equality, but unfortunately, there is a higher amount of online abuse that female journalists experience in Pakistan as compared to males. It includes types of harassment such as ridicule statements, threatening comments, and defaming processes for damaging their reputation as a professional worker.¹⁴ Eventually, most women journalists resort to self-censorship processes. They desist from discussing sensitive matters or develop dissident views for escaping harassment.

In current times, Pakistan has become the hub of danger for journalists due to general impunity of threat and attack. Such circumstances have brought self-censorship to media across Pakistan. The female journalists here are more vulnerable and go through systematic and persistent threats for sexual violence especially online.¹⁵

The research study would be contributing to the corpus of knowledge regarding online harassment and its effects on Pakistani female journalists. The study is to use the clarity of interaction between self-censorship, online abuse, and journalistic practice to enhance knowledge and discussion on the protection of rights for journalists and the development of an inclusive media environment. In the long run, stakeholders have to collaborate to solve the problems brought forward by online harassment to ensure that journalists especially women can work safely, securely, and effectively in the digital world.

1.2 Objectives

The study aims to

1. Examine the prevalence of online harassment experienced by female journalists in Pakistan.
2. Find the impact of online harassment on the self-censorship among female journalists.
3. Study the impact of online harassment on the mental well-being of female journalists.

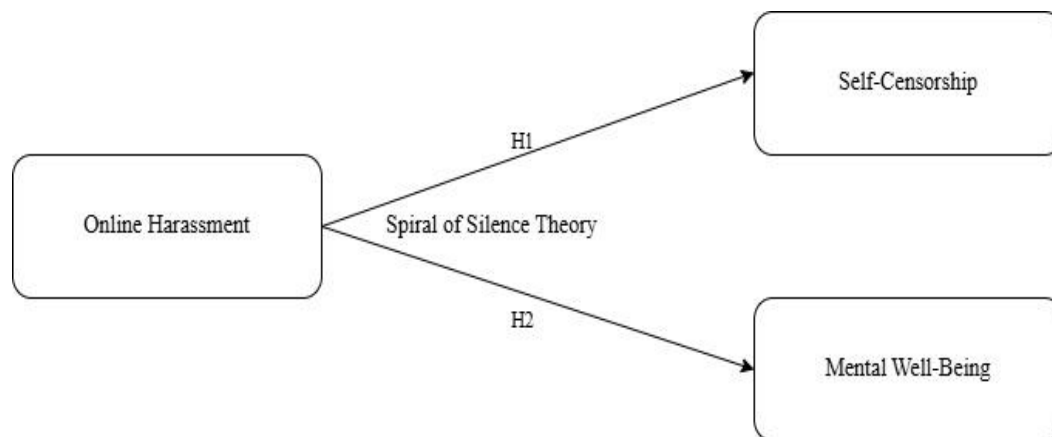


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of the study

¹⁴ Aleah Bastien, *Access to Sexual Violence Services for Underserved Communities in Southern Alberta* (University of Lethbridge (Canada), 2024).

¹⁵ Iqbal, Chinnasamy, and Faizal, "Guardians of Truth, Targets of Harassment: The Untold Stories of Workplace Harassment among Pakistani Female Journalists."

2. Literature Review

Online harassment is an emerging and prevalent problem that women journalists encounter, according to the available literature. Several studies have reported that females are more susceptible to suffering from online harassment than males. The causes for such disparities are varied, and they range from deep-seated misogyny to the notion that women are incompetent in their jobs.¹⁶

The online violence against female journalists is a serious threat to press freedom.¹⁷ Besides, it has been evident that the online harassment leads to self-censorship among the female journalists, and this tendency of self-censorship is more prevalent among women than among men when faced with online harassment. This may result in the worst consequence for the quality and variety of news reporting as female journalists might avoid reporting certain subjects or expressing specific views due to cyberbullying.¹⁸

The foremost reason for self-censorship among women journalists is political intolerance. Political intolerance is distinct from the force imposed by conventional organizations and religious institutions. In addition to intimidation and defamation, political parties inflict the fear of police action. Most of the female journalists (eight out of ten) in Pakistan claim that there has been a significant rise in self-censorship of journalists during the last three years. Furthermore, a vast majority-77 percent-believe it is impossible to practice journalism in Pakistan without self-censorship.¹⁹

Self-censorship is a form of non-mandatory withholding or suppression of information, opinions, or expressions based on perceived risks, pressures, or repercussions. It can show up at the individual, group, or societal levels and interfere with the free exchange of ideas and information. The deliberate restraint or repression of one's own ideas, thoughts, or speech is known as self-censorship.²⁰ To fit in with the prevailing social standards and prevent rejection or other negative social consequences, people may alter their speech or conduct. This alarming situation is largely due to stereotypes that women are not as capable in professional settings as well as ingrained misogyny.²¹ Such harassment has far-reaching effects that go well beyond slights against individuals but seriously endanger journalistic integrity and press freedom. Studies show that cyberbullying establishes a climate of fear in the personal and professional lives of female journalists, limiting their ability to express themselves freely.²²

According to Posetti et al., many cases in which female journalists have continued to face severe online abuse such as disparaging remarks up to explicit violence threats. Such attacks target not only specific journalists but the entire voice and views in the media environment.²³

¹⁶ Bastien, *Access to Sexual Violence Services for Underserved Communities in Southern Alberta*.

¹⁷ Angelique Lu et al., "Legal and Normative Frameworks for Combatting Online Violence against Women Journalists" (< bound method Organization. get_name_with_acronym of< Organization: United~..., 2022).

¹⁸ Bastien, *Access to Sexual Violence Services for Underserved Communities in Southern Alberta*.

¹⁹ Shaukat and Naeem, "Women Journalists and the Double Bind: The Self-Censorship Effect of Online Harassment in Pakistan," December 2020.

²⁰ Daniel Bar-Tal, "Self-Censorship as a Socio-Political-Psychological Phenomenon: Conception and Research," *Political Psychology* 38 (2017): 37–65.

²¹ Bastien, *Access to Sexual Violence Services for Underserved Communities in Southern Alberta*.

²² Posetti et al., "The Chilling: A Global Study of Online Violence against Women Journalists."

²³ Iqbal, Chinnasamy, and Faizal, "Guardians of Truth, Targets of Harassment: The Untold Stories of Workplace Harassment among Pakistani Female Journalists."

Although the presence of women professionals in journalism and better representations have been achieved with significant strides, especially in the Western world, scholars have noted that many issues remain. For instance, there is "tough resistance" by women journalists to achieving the most senior positions in newsrooms.²⁴

In a critical review of the field in the past three decades, noted media scholar lamented that women still faced the threat of "symbolic annihilation" that limited the scope of opportunities to realize their best selves.²⁵ Women journalists had to navigate male-dominated news organizations, adverse news cultures, the masculinization of professional ethos.²⁶ There have been significant evidences of tensions around professional identities of journalists, the objectification of women in the news representation, the lived reality of everyday gendered bias including harassment of female journalists and the gendering of news audience expectations among others.²⁷

2.1 Hypothesis

H1: Online Harassment experience by female journalists positively correlates with self-censorship.

H2: The greater the exposure to online harassment, the more significantly it impacts the mental well-being of female journalists.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1 Spiral of Silence Theory

If an individual perceives that he has an opinion among the few minority and will end up suffering in society due to such thoughts, they might likely keep the same within the silence spiral theory. Relating this to a female journalist, who ends up getting harassed online regarding certain reportages or work done; this is quite an escalated issue among such journalists today. This anonymity and sense of detachment from online platforms may embolden harassers to hurl abusive, threatening, and derogatory comments, messages, and e-mails at female journalists. Female journalists become hesitant in respect to expressing open views, fearing further harassment in future endeavors.

3.2 Application of Spiral of Silence Theory

There has been a scaring rise in the electronic abuses of journalists, especially women journalists by using the internet. As proposed by the theory, people do not express opinions if they see that they are a smaller section of the society; the reason is the fear for social boycott or poor results. This view provides a prism through which it is possible to analyze the impact of cyberbullying on journalistic practices, most especially with regard to self-censorship and how it affects gender equality and freedom of expression in the profession. The Spiral of Silence Theory was developed by Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann in 1974 to explain how public opinion forms within social organizations. Put simply, it states that people watch what people have to say and then change their minds so not to get ostracized or casted. People either freely express themselves or

²⁴ Vivian Smith, *Outsiders Still: Why Women Journalists Love-and Leave-Their Newspaper Careers* (University of Toronto Press, 2015).

²⁵ Shreyoshi Ghosh, "Symbolic Annihilation and Stereotyping of Native American Women in News: A Content Analysis of Health, Safety, and Economic Status Related News," 2022.

²⁶ Natalia Organista and Zuzanna Mazur, "'You Either Stop Reacting or You Don't Survive. There's No Other Way': The Work Experiences of Polish Women Sports Journalists," *Feminist Media Studies* 20, no. 8 (2020): 1110–27.

²⁷ Shabir Hussain, Hajra Bostan, and Irfan Qaisarani, "Trolling of Female Journalists on Twitter in Pakistan: An Analysis," *Media International Australia* 191, no. 1 (2024): 129–46.

desist from doing the same by whether they feel they form a majority or minority in a certain given setting. This is because the fear of social sanctions and the urge for social approbation are at work here.²⁸

Online harassment threatens the credibility of journalism and personal and mental health, especially of female journalists who specialize on sensitive and divisive stories. Through cyberspace, harassers can isolate the journalists from their audience and anonymity that allows them to anonymously spew foul, abusive, and threatening remarks. In addition to undermining female journalists' professional autonomy, this ongoing harassment fosters a hostile work atmosphere that may have serious psychological and emotional repercussions.²⁹

Women journalists, in this case, have to make choices whether or not to self-censor and hold back their opinions out of their safety and conflict avoidance or keep reporting on sensitive topics and risk further harassment. This is based on the Spiral of Silence Theory that states that individuals silence their opinion because of fear of isolation or revenge. This enhances the majority opinion and silences the opinion of the minority.³⁰ These involve gender dynamics and power inequalities in and around journalism in a sociopolitical context. It incorporates elements that determine the extent of online abuse targeting female journalists on the basis of its form and scope. Although in different forms, research finds the attempts to destroy professional journalistic credentials alongside threats of sexual assault as well as gendered slurs in which these are disproportionately hurled at female journalists. This targeted harassment erodes journalistic credibility further while maintaining the structural inequalities in the media since women are always subject to more scrutiny and criticism than their male colleagues.³¹

In retaliation to cyberbullying, female journalists self-censor, feeding into the "spiral of silence" surrounding the industry. The journalists may dumb down their ideas, avoid contentious topics, or alter their report to change in line with social norms or opinions of the perceived majority out of the fear of revenge or more harassment.³²

4. Method

To ensure geographic diversity and representation of different regional settings, the survey was conducted across three major cities in Pakistan. Google survey implementation had several advantages: these included affordability, quick data gathering, and access to participants from many parts of the geographic space. Issues such as how to ensure respondents' access to the internet and being 'digital literate' were resolved through focused outreach and, if needed, even help with completing the surveys. Collaborating with media sources proved necessary to contact respondents successfully. In-person meetings, emails, and postal correspondence were contacted to interact with the editors and managers to ensure that the survey was distributed to the female journalists who were actively using the online platforms for work reasons. The study ensured ethical requirements that protected participants' privacy and confidentiality. To promote

²⁸ Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, "The Spiral of Silence a Theory of Public Opinion," *Journal of Communication* 24, no. 2 (1974): 43–51.

²⁹ Oscar Björkenfeldt, "Online Harassment Against Journalists: A Socio-Legal and Working-Life Study of the Challenges and Impacts in Swedish Journalism," 2024.

³⁰ Tanvi Thakur, *Spiral of Silence and the Use of Social Media by Sexual Violence Survivors* (Rochester Institute of Technology, 2022).

³¹ Marjan Nadim and Audun Fladmoe, "Silencing Women? Gender and Online Harassment," *Social Science Computer Review* 39, no. 2 (2021): 245–58.

³² J Nathan Matias, "Preventing Harassment and Increasing Group Participation through Social Norms in 2,190 Online Science Discussions," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 116, no. 20 (2019): 9785–89.

anonymity and reduce the chances of bias regarding the experiences of online abuse, respondents were promised anonymity in the experience they shared. Inferential statistical analysis and descriptive statistics were employed to observe trends and associations among the variables under consideration.

Using this method, some key relationships between self-censorship among female journalists, their mental health and online abuse were identified, thus clarifying the study's research objectives. Survey was distributed among journalists having more than three years' experience in the media. The survey was conducted over three cities of Pakistan namely Islamabad, Lahore, and Karachi. This strategy would further help in documenting national diversity with regard to female journalists' experiences with self-censorship and online harassment. The study covered a range of regional contexts by surveying three cities in Pakistan—Islamabad, Lahore and Karachi. Each location reflected unique sociocultural characteristics that may have an impact on how female journalists suffer self-censorship and online harassment.

The sampling method was purposive, and data were sourced from those female journalists with three years' experience or even more.

The online version of the survey was published for journalists working within other media organizations to comment upon their experiences concerning online harassment and self-censorship. A sample of 200 respondents was selected. The subject of this study included female individuals working in journalism fields. It was found that this sample size would provide both statistical significance and continued viability in terms of data collection and analysis.

Additionally, it is observed that data were collected from that female journalist who have been working in media for minimum 3 years. Moreover, only those respondents have been taken into account who used online or social media platforms for their work. The survey questionnaire, designed in the English language, was the research tool for data collection.

The independent variable of the study is the harassment that female journalists face on the internet i.e. online harassment. This includes any form of intimidation, threats, or abuse directed toward female journalists through internet platforms.

The hiding or changing of facts or opinions because one is concerned about harassment or other damaging effects is known as self-censorship.

Mental Health WHO defines mental health as complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity. It is further defined to be a balance between one's self, others, and environment especially in terms of existing culture. The mental health is envisaged by emotional well-being, relative freedom from the disabling mental health systems, and the ability to establish constructive relations to overcome the stress of life. According to WHO, the well-being involves not only the absence of disease but a positive state of functioning, considering mental health as ability to achieve development, well-being, and optimal performance and to build a social resource during a person's lifetime.³³

5. Results

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Online Harassment (OH)	1	5	4.21	0.76

³³ Rabia Tabassum, Mahvish Fatima Kashif, and Muhammad Jamil, "Impact of Mental Health \& Well-Being on Academic Performance of University Students," *Journal of Social Research Development (JSRD)* 5, no. 3 (2024): 37–48.

Self-Censorship (SC)	1	5	3.98	0.89
Mental Health Impact (MH)	1	5	4.05	0.81
Experience (Years)	3	22	9.4	4.3

Note. (Scales were assumed on a 5-point Likert format where 1 = Strongly Disagree and 5 = Strongly Agree)

The descriptive statistics (table 1) provides insight into the central tendencies and variability of the key variables examined in this study. The mean score for online harassment is 4.21 (on a 5-point scale), indicating that a significant proportion of female journalists experience frequent or very frequent online harassment. The relatively low standard deviation of 0.76 suggests that this experience is widely shared among participants with limited deviation from the mean. Similarly, the mean score for self-censorship is 3.98, implying that most respondents tend to censor or modify their journalistic content to avoid further online abuse.

Table 2: Correlation Matrix, Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Variables	Online Harassment	Self-Censorship	Mental Health Impact
Online Harassment	1.00	0.68**	0.74**
Self-Censorship	0.68**	1.00	0.62**
Mental Health	0.74**	0.62**	1.00

The (table 2) demonstrates the relationships between the three primary variables: online harassment, self-censorship, and mental health impact. A strong positive correlation ($r = 0.68$) is observed between online harassment and self-censorship, indicating that as female journalists experience more harassment, they are more likely to engage in self-censorship practices. This supports the first hypothesis of the study and aligns with the theoretical lens of the Spiral of Silence, which posits that individuals suppress dissenting views to avoid social isolation or backlash. Additionally, a strong correlation ($r = 0.74$) is seen between online harassment and its impact on mental health, reinforcing the second hypothesis. This suggests that increased exposure to harassment is associated with higher levels of stress, anxiety, and emotional fatigue among journalists. Moreover, self-censorship and mental health are also positively correlated ($r = 0.62$), implying that the act of self-censorship itself could contribute to mental strain, possibly due to frustration, guilt, or internal conflict. All correlations are significant at the 0.01 level, confirming the reliability and strength of these associations.

Table 3: Pearson Correlation

Variables	r	Sig. (2-tailed)
Online Harassment & Self-Censorship	0.68	0.000

Table 3 shows a strong positive correlation ($r = 0.68$) between online harassment and self-censorship. The p-value (0.000) indicates that this relationship is statistically significant at the 0.01 level, supporting H1.

Table 4: Simple Linear Regression (Predicting Self-Censorship from Online Harassment)

Model Summary	R	R ²	Adjusted R ²	Std. Error
Model 1	.680	.462	.459	0.65

Coefficients	B	Std. Error	t	Sig.
(Constant)	1.23	0.19	6.47	0.000
Online Harassment	0.65	0.06	11.52	0.000

Table 4 explains 46.2% of the variance in self-censorship ($R^2 = 0.462$). The regression coefficient for Online Harassment is positive and significant ($B = 0.65$, $p < 0.001$), meaning that higher levels of online harassment significantly predict greater self-censorship. This statistically confirms H1.

Table 5: Pearson Correlation

Variables	r	Sig. (2-tailed)
Online Harassment & Mental Health Impact	0.74	0.000

Table 5 suggests a strong and statistically significant positive correlation exists ($r = 0.74$, $p < 0.001$), suggesting that as online harassment increases, so do the negative mental health effects experience by female journalists. This supports H2.

Table 6: Simple Linear Regression

Model Summary	R	R²	Adjusted R²	Std. Error
Model 2	.740	.547	.544	0.61
Coefficients	B	Std. Error	t	Sig.
(Constant)	1.10	0.17	6.47	0.000
Online Harassment	0.70	0.06	12.33	0.000

Table 6 shows that the regression model accounts for 54.7% of the variance in mental health impact. The slope coefficient ($B = 0.70$) is significant ($p < 0.001$), indicating that online harassment significantly predicts deterioration in mental health among female journalists. This confirms H2. 83% of respondents reported experiencing frequent or very frequent online harassment. 68% admitted to altering or avoiding content on sensitive issues (self-censorship). 61% stated online harassment caused stress, anxiety, or other mental health impacts. Over 60% of female journalists expressed a desire to leave journalism due to sustained harassment. Strong correlations were found between online harassment, self-censorship, and mental health outcomes.

6. Discussion

This investigation illustrates that online harassment has critical implications for self-censorship and psychological well-being of female journalists in Pakistan. Our findings add to an expanding research literature illustrating that online harassment is not just a matter of interpersonal or technological issues, but also one of professional psychological gendered, and democratic relevance.³⁴ For women journalists in Pakistan, where journalists are already working under difficult conditions of gender discrimination threats harassment, and restrictions³⁵, the results

³⁴ ARTICLE 19, "Online Abuse and Harassment against Women Journalists"; Khan, "The Cost of Doing Their Job Online"; Posetti et al., "The Chilling: A Global Study of Online Violence against Women Journalists"; Tandoc, Sagun, and Alvarez, "The Digitization of Harassment: Women Journalists' Experiences with Online Harassment in the Philippines."

³⁵ Jamil, "Suffering in Silence: The Resilience of Pakistan's Female Journalists to Combat Sexual Harassment,

provide important evidence of how online abuse can be a catalyst for self-censorship, apart from its effect on journalists' psychological health. The association between online harassment and self-censorship explained by the current study can be interpreted by the Spiral of Silence Theory as presented by Noelle-Neumann.³⁶ The theory explains that how likely a person will venture an opinion depends on their assessment of how strongly they are in the minority, the strength of the fear of social isolation, which leads to self-silence.

Interestingly, this postulate is extremely pertinent to female journalists working online, where the content of journalistic opinions and work is easily visible, and will probably be stalked, trolled or threatened by misogynistic attackers, so undermining one's article, or causing reputational damage. Journalists pre-empt the attack, avoid such topics, change the framing of their articles or be less active online or stay away from certain topics themselves. Thakur, leverages the Spiral of silence explanation to fit the way social-media users behave in the digital landscape also.³⁷ The two findings are very consistent with existing evidence in Pakistan on the self-censorship effects of online harassment.

A report by Centre for Peace and Development Initiatives, Media Matters for Democracy and Pakistan Press Foundation³⁸ identified online harassment as a significant reason for self-censorship of women journalists in Pakistan and characterized the situation as a "double bind." CPDI³⁹ also stated that online harassment may prevent women journalists from reporting or commenting on sensitive content. Khan also concluded that harassment has high costs for women journalist's careers; while Jamil showed that Pakistani women journalists are exposed to sexual harassment, threatening and discriminating while practicing journalism, at the same time, they formulate resilience strategies to continue their career. All these results indicate that self-censorship should not be simply seen as individual preferences; instead, it can be a coping strategy in response to a hostile working and online environment.

There is also more research to bolster this reading, like that of Hussain et al. which found female journalists in the online space of Pakistan being harassed on Twitter confirming the gendered nature of online hate. Conversely Iqbal, Chinnasamy and Faizal have in the same way pointed to the issue of female Pakistani journalist's experience of harassment in their workplace. Naseer and Ashraf (2022) have situated such incidents within the context of the larger issue of gender-based violence in Pakistan's online sphere suggesting that this harassment is part of larger issues surrounding gender inequality and misogyny, while Duggan illustrates how these forms of gender-based victimization and misogyny can often appear on a larger socio-legal scale, and Slaughter and Newman have moved further outwards, and away from the strictly "cyberbullying" label of online harassment, to highlight that online harassment is a multidimensional and broad issue.

The same can be said for the psychological well-being. Continued frequency of threat, sexualized abuse misogyny intimidation, and reputational attack tends to have a great many psychological consequences. ARTICLE 19 pointed to serious mental tolls of online harassment

Threats and Discrimination"; Iqbal, Chinnasamy, and Faizal, "Guardians of Truth, Targets of Harassment: The Untold Stories of Workplace Harassment among Pakistani Female Journalists."

³⁶ Noelle-Neumann, "The Spiral of Silence a Theory of Public Opinion."

³⁷ Thakur, *Spiral of Silence and the Use of Social Media by Sexual Violence Survivors*.

³⁸ Shaukat and Naeem, "Women Journalists and the Double Bind: The Self-Censorship Effect of Online Harassment in Pakistan," December 2020.

³⁹ Iqbal, Chinnasamy, and Faizal, "Guardians of Truth, Targets of Harassment: The Untold Stories of Workplace Harassment among Pakistani Female Journalists."

and abuse for women journalists, while Posetti et al. shared observations of the global "chilling" effect of online violence against women journalists.

Further, Freedom House called for a better response to online harassment of women journalists. Instead, several pieces of international evidence demonstrate that the findings of the present study are not a disconnected singularity. For example, Tandoc et al. told how digital harassment was found to influence the professional experience of women journalists in the Philippines, while Yeon Lee and Park demonstrated how online harassment was found to influence the professional roles of journalists in South Korea. Björkenfeldt same thing found socio-legal and work-life effects of harassment against journalists in Sweden. The results are also relevant for the participation of women in the media and for media freedom. If journalists self-censor in the face of harassment by changing their stories or avoiding certain topics, this has implications for the diversity of opinions presented in the news media and for the existence of critical investigative and accountability reporting (see also Organista and Mazur on female Polish sports journalists who employ coping strategies in adversarial work environments and Smith on the impact of structural and professional pressures on female journalists leaving journalism). This issue is mostly significant within the Pakistani context as journalism in Pakistan exists in a context of both political and social pressures. Hussain et al.⁴⁰ stress that the influence of the news media to arouse conflict as well as evolution in Pakistan is crucial here, and because of this, the independence of the Pakistan journalists' reporting is very important. Female Pakistani journalists who have been subject to threats or harassment can have broader implications within the wider information environment and public sphere. Gendered silencing can have an ultimately detrimental impact of reducing complexity within Journalism. Ultimately the findings point to the need for multi-level legal institutional psychological and technological responses. The authors of the report Lu et al. underline how efficient legal and normative system could be crucial to prevent online violence targeted at women journalist.

7. Conclusion

The present study has highlighted the importance of training courses and educational programs for media practitioners and journalists which should involve the specifics of ethical reporting, digital security and cyber bullying tactics. Although there are some limitations, this study has produced valuable findings; because online harassment contributes toward self-censorship as well as affect Pakistani female journalists' mental health. This study has indicated that majority of Pakistani female journalists is harassed on everyday basis. That's disturbing reality and adds to the urgent need to address this issue. In the contemporary digital universe occurrence, it becomes ever more pertinent to address this problem and take concrete measures to alleviate this problem. This study makes an important addition to the existing literature by exploring the substantial effects of cyberbullying on self-censorship and mental health of female journalists in Pakistan. Cross-cultural comparative studies between the countries having different levels of press freedom and gender equality environments can yield insightful knowledge about effective tactics and widely adopted industry practices. Knowledge gained from successful projects elsewhere can help shape context relevant policy recommendations and targeted interventions in Pakistan and other nations this research highlighted extremely serious issues that the online abuse of Pakistani female journalists presents. This research draws attention to the importance of designing an inclusive response (by governments, the media, civil society and international agencies) to tackle online abuse and to the realization that online abuse affects the safety of journalists but also the very functioning of the media to which they contribute to, and the necessity of options for self-censorship while linking it to the online

⁴⁰ Hussain, Shahzad, and Ahmad, "A Classification Framework for Analyzing the War and Peacemaking Potential of News Media in Pakistan."

abuse. For the greater reforms space journalists' safety and protection of democratic values in the digital age, much more needs to be studied and achieved by the community of the world. The importance of the findings and their implications cannot be diminished. One of the potential weaknesses of the study, of its small number of participants, might not be able to reflect the experiential variety of different media environments and nation states in which female journalists face interactive digital environments and cyberbullying. Although the study offers a quantitative approach, the use of survey data may not capture subtle psychological and contextual factors that could be relevant to journalists' response to cyberbullying.

Recommendations

1. The media should ensure measures are taken to help prevent cyber harassment, and offer a safe arena for female journalists.
2. Government Institutes should hold weekly workshops for awareness of online harassment
3. Strict action against harassers must be taken by Law Enforcement Agencies.
4. Encourage female journalists to express their opinion openly.

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