Excessive social media use, online sexual victimization, and online individual racial discrimination: the effect of overusing of Instagram on self-esteem.

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1. Introduction

In the digital sphere, the dynamic between humans and technology is in a constant state of flux, influencing and reshaping social behavior (Noble’s, 2019). In such an environment, individuals might face distinctive vulnerabilities that render them susceptible to adverse psychological, physical, and social outcomes, primarily attributable to the pervasive and explicit exposure to racism and sexual harassment within online environments (B. T. Keum & Miller, 2018a, 2018b; Megarry, 2014).

Sexual harassment refers to a deliberate and calculated action aimed at intimidating, belittling, humiliating, or sexually assaulting the victim (Quick & McFadyen, 2017), which encompasses unwelcome sexual advances, both in verbal and physical forms, as well as the solicitation of sexual favors. It involves behaviors that create a hostile or offensive environment for the victim (O’Callaghan et al., 2022).

One perspective on racism posits that racism encompasses any belief system, “whether conscious or subconscious”, that categorizes individuals from different racial groups “as biologically distinct and inferior to one's own”(Herbst, 1997, p. 193). According to this definition, anyone who perceives another racial group as inferior would be considered racist.

Online harassment and online racism are potentially more damaging than traditional ones due to several factors. Firstly, it can take place at any time, without geographical limitations. Additionally, it can be directed towards a wide range of individuals, and the identity of the perpetrator may remain unknown. Unlike traditional harassment and racism, legal intervention may be challenging due to the digital nature of the acts. Moreover, perpetrators of sexual harassment and racial discrimination can exhibit extreme levels of cruelty since the absence of face-to-face interaction allows for emotional detachment from their actions (Choirunnisa, 2021; Coletta, 2017; B. T. H. Keum & Cano, 2021; Powell & Henry, 2019).

Those who have experienced online sexual victimization (OSV) (especially women) and online individual racial discrimination (OIRD), may suffer from various adverse effects, including but not limited to shock, fear, agitation, low self-esteem, depression, feelings of loneliness, depression, and anxiety, as well as lower levels of life satisfaction and emotional detachment (Eisenberg et al., 2016; Festl et al., 2019; Steele, 2016). In addition, OSV and OIRD have been found to have a positive association with aggressive behavior or physical aggression (i.e., perpetrating or threatening physical harm),
relational aggression (i.e., manipulation of social relationships or social standing) (Wright & Wachs, 2019) and verbal aggression (Reed et al., 2016).

Understanding the theoretical mechanisms behind coping behaviors is crucial due to the adverse consequences of victimization and discrimination, whether non-aggressive or aggressive. It is important to comprehend why individuals may choose to withdraw or exhibit aggressive behaviors as coping strategies in response to these strains. Such understanding has significant policy implications in terms of reducing the detrimental effects of being victimized.

This study enhances the existing literature by investigating the impact of sexual victimization and racial discrimination on negative emotions and subsequent behaviors. It does so by applying the general strain theory (GST) and the stressor-strain-outcome theory (SSO).

According to GST, experiencing strain, such as in the form of victimization causes negative emotions. Depending on the available resources, this can lead to various outcomes, including deviant or criminal behaviors, as well as non-delinquent responses (Agnew, 1992). Feelings of anger, depression, and fear can create emotional pressures that drive individuals towards engaging in criminal activities (Agnew, 2006).

However, when it comes to the behavioral response to a strain factor such as low self-esteem, researchers have not yet reached a conclusive understanding, and research exploring the application of GST often overlooks the examination of self-esteem as an isolated behavioral response to strains.

On the other hand, the SSO theory offers a concise and organized approach to investigate the impact of technological features as environmental stimuli on virtual user experiences (Zhang et al., 2016). This suggests that when individuals face overwhelming environmental demands that exceed their capacity to cope, it can lead to increased stress levels, subsequently contributing to the occurrence of strains (Ayyagari et al., 2011; Nisafani et al., 2020). In this current study, we argue that the excessive use of Instagram has a stressor role that turns into OSV, OIRD, and low self-esteem, thereby affecting the usage of Instagram and the users’ behavior.

Specifically, this study assesses the effects of OSV and OIRD on social isolation, the discontinuous use of Instagram, and the extent to which this relationship is explained through self-esteem.

This study contributes to the literature in the following ways. Firstly, few studies have examined low self-esteem as a behavior response to strain and hardly any research has explored how low self-esteem mediates the relationship between strain and non-aggressive behaviors. Furthermore, the majority of studies in this area tend to rely on trait emotions, which are inherent emotional tendencies of individuals, rather than focusing on state emotions, which refer to specific emotional reactions to a particular strain (Agnew, 2008). The uniqueness of this study lies in its utilization of distinct data, where respondents are specifically asked about their experiences of both low and high self-
esteem in response to situations (i.e., sexually victimized, or racially discriminated). Moreover, the data used in this study are highly suitable for examining GST and SSO framework, as they enable the assessment of situational coping strategies employed by individuals in response to sexual victimization and racial discrimination.

2. Method and data.

We adjusted the measures from previous research to the circumstances of this investigation to ensure validity. Questionnaire items that assessed the excessive use of social media were adapted from Caplan & High (2006) and those evaluating OSV from Tynes et al., (2010) and those measuring self-esteem from Rosenberg (1965). The assessment of PSI and the discontinuous use of social media was done by questionnaire items that had been taken from Miljeteig & von Soest (2022) respectively. We employed a Likert scale to assess each item, where participants rated their agreement level from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

2.1. Data analysis

IBM SPSS 25.0 was employed to generate descriptive statistics, while AMOS 25.0 was utilized for conducting Structural Equation Modeling (SEM). The SEM process consisted of two steps. Firstly, the measurement model, which involved Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA), was utilized to establish the reliability and validity of the research constructs. Following this, the structural model was applied to test the hypotheses.

3. Findings

In this research, the SSO framework was employed to examine the impacts of excessive Instagram use as a stressor, while the GST was utilized to support the study of strains. The findings demonstrated that individuals who engage in excessive Instagram use experience strains such as OSV and OIRD. These strains subsequently lead to a behavioral response characterized by decreased self-esteem. The outcomes of this behavioral response include mental health issues, depression, social isolation, and the discontinuation of Instagram usage. These findings are consistent with prior research that supports the notion that regular utilization of social media platforms like Facebook is often associated with adverse psychosocial consequences. These negative effects include mental health problems, feelings of depression, social isolation, diminished well-being, social media fatigue, and decreased life satisfaction (Miljeteig & von Soest, 2022; Primack et al., 2017).

4. References


