



FEAR OF CYBER COMMUNICATION THREAT EFFECTS ON ONLINE FREEDOM OF EXPRESSIONS

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ABSTRACT

This research article provides insight into the issue of the effect of cyber communication threats on online freedom of expression. Victims of cyber communication threats may avoid expressing themselves on cyber communication technology. This study quests for the rate of cyber communication threats faced by students having a relationship with how freely they express their views about political and social issues in online spaces. The study interviewed 800 students from six leading universities of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa of Pakistan over a closed-ended questionnaire. Hypotheses were tested through statistical procedures. Results revealed that the hypothesis is partially accepted. Results also suggested that that cyber harassment and online identity theft harm online freedom of expression about political and social views while receiving unwanted material, hacking, and viruses showed positive correlation and having a positive effect on online freedom of expression about political and social views.

Disciplinary: Communications and Social Media Studies (Cyber Communications, Political Communication), Information Technology.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Freedom of speech and expression means the right to express our own opinions freely using words from mouth, writing, typing, printing, pictures, or any other mode. In the modern era, it is accepted worldwide that the right to freedom of speech is the essence of a free and democratic society and it must be protected all the time. The first principle of a free society has not hampered the flow of words in a blog, social media, paper, or in an open forum. Freedom to express opinions and ideas without halt, and especially without fear of getting punished plays a significant role in the development of a free and open society. It is one of the most important fundamental liberties guaranteed against state suppression or regulation. Freedom of expression (FoE) is guaranteed not only by constitution or statutes of various states but also by various international conventions like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), the European Convention on Human Rights

(ECHR) and fundamental freedoms, International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). These declarations openly talk about the protection of freedom of speech and expression (Sharma & Alam, 2016). While in Pakistan, the meaning of Freedom of Speech is different.

In Pakistan, the meaning of freedom of speech and expression is different. Article 19 of the constitution of Pakistan 1973 describes it as “Every citizen shall have the right to freedom of speech and expression” and there shall be freedom of the press subject to any reasonable restrictions imposed by law in the interest of the glory of Islam or the integrity, security or defense of Pakistan or any part thereof, friendly relations with foreign States, public order, decency or morality, or about contempt of court, a commission of or incitement to an offense (Mahmood, & Shaukat, 2006). Article 19-A of the constitution of Pakistan 1973 describes it as “Every citizen shall have the right to have access to information in all matters of public importance subject to regulation and reasonable restrictions imposed by law” (Ali et al., 2015). Freedom of expression (FoE), as well as press freedom and freedom of information, are indispensable to the attainment of all human rights.

UDHR Article 19 describes it as “Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes the freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas over any media and regardless of frontiers” (Assembly, 1948). FoE is broadly understood as the notion that every person has a natural right to freely express himself/herself through any media and across any frontier without outside interference, such as censorship, and without fear of reprisal, such as threats and persecution. Rule of law, freedom of information, free, independent and pluralistic media and active civil society are the conditions needed for FoE to flourish. The advent of the Internet and the World Wide Web led the advocates of FoE to believe that with the new technology, the people could truly experience a full range of FoE, from simple speech to artistic expression to political and religious debates.

Cyber communication technology is much important for self-expression. Young people use modern communication technology to experiment as well as find legitimacy for their political, social, ethnic, cultural or sexual identity (Collin et al., 2011; Zauddin and Shin, 2020). It constitutes new spaces for social engagement and political participation including information sharing and bringing together new networks for action utilizing email, user-generated content and other networking practices (Collin et al., 2011; Montgomery, 2009; Vromen, 2008). Political candidates are increasingly utilizing social networking sites (SNS) and social media, as are advocacy and issue orientated groups (Collin et al., 2011). Cyber communication technology is being used for discussion, organization and mobilization as part of emerging political discourse in young people’s everyday life (Collin et al., 2011; Kann et al., 2007). The effect of cyber communication threats (CCTs) victimization on online freedom of the expression is affecting a significant portion of the online population (Henson, 2013).

To know the relationship between cyber communication threats faced by students and their online freedom of expression, therefore, this is the main objective of the study which is aimed to investigate to emerge certain new findings.

Thus the research hypothesis is

It is more likely that higher level of cyber communication threats (CCTs) faced by students will have a significant relationship with the online freedom of expression (FoE) regarding political and social issues.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The Internet is an integral part of the daily life of many individuals and has become a central and key medium for an increasing number of individuals to exercise their right to freedom of expression (Cannataci et al., 2016). However, some individual uses the Internet for the negative purposes that are creating fright in the online societies which cause impediment for freedom of expression. Pereira and Matos (2016) found that most of the victims (57.6 %) were not care to express online views following their online victimization. Of the victims who reported fear of re-victimization while expressing online views or share personal information (43.4 %), 34.3 % were moderately, and 8.1 % were very careful while using SNS after the cyber victimization. Further found that most of the cyber victim till date not used SNS due to fear of re-victimization (33.5 %), followed by 'randomly used SNS (21.6 %) (Pereira & Matos, 2016). Penney (2017) stated that online threat victimization may cause to shun online self-expression and sharing of opinions (Penney, 2017). Even various internet users adopt self-censorship while expressing their views and feelings, especially on sensitive issues because of fear, anxiety, and pressure of online victimization (Aceto & Pescapé, 2015).

In addition to self-censorship, victims hesitate to share their personal information on social media websites, forums, and other user-generated content and limit both their followers and anonymous users to reach their profiles and sharing due to the threat of the re-victimization (Yilmaz et al., 2017). Cyber communication threats (CCTs) victimization often results in quieting of the victim and leave online groups (Marganski & Melander, 2018). Some users avoid using online communication when they are unable to cope with offenders (Spangler, 2017). According to Lenhart et al., (2016) online harassment and abuse can cause victims to experience increased isolation or disconnection from their online communities, whether because of the strain the harassment has put on their close relationships, or because their harassment has made them feel more cut off from avenues for communication and information-seeking. Lenhart et al. (2016) found that 40% of victims say they experienced at least one of these types of isolation or disconnectedness due to the online harassment they experienced, 20% had to shut down an online account/profile since of online harassment/abuse and 13% of victims felt less connected to information and 13% felt less connected to friends or family because their cell phone or internet use was limited because of harassment or abuse (Lenhart et al., 2016).

Similarly, Wolak et al. (2010) stated that victim of CCTs often avoids online communication with a stranger, reduce commenting on any issue and posting on their profile, sharing of pictures and personal information, and maintaining Web pages at SNS (Wolak et al., 2010). Pew Research Centre survey found that around one-quarter of Americans (27%) say they have decided not to post something online after witnessing the harassment of others, while more than one-in-ten (13%) say they have stopped using an online service after witnessing other users engage in the harassing behaviors, 45% say it is more important to let people speak their minds freely online; a slightly larger share (53%) feels that it is more important for people to feel welcome and safe online (Duggan et al., 2017). The Britain court declared that CCTs victimization directly affects freedom of expression (Shariff & Hoff, 2007). The emerging research on cyber communications indicates that cyber victimization and threats infringe on their constitutional rights i.e. FoE and creates a

hostile and negative environment for online users (Shariff & Hoff, 2007).

Higgins et al. (2008) suggested that CCTs victimization was significantly related to avoiding online communication. Past research suggests that individuals take a threat of online victimization seriously. For example, many social network users often avoid to comment or post personal information that could be used to harass or commit identity theft (Henson et al., 2013). Wilcox et al. (2007) study indicated that 81.5% of student respondents after victimization avoided online activity at least sometimes. Generally, researchers have found that an individual's level of online self-expression is often influenced by his or her previous experience with CCTs. However, Reisig et al. (2009) finding revealed that; nearly 60% of respondents indicated that it was somewhat or very likely, suggesting that their fear of victimization is fairly high. Fear of victimization also significantly and negatively affected individuals' online behaviors, reducing their likelihood of making online purchases, spending time online or online self-expression (Henson et al., 2013).

Russo and Roccato (2010) reported that individuals who had experienced either direct or indirect victimization (someone within respondent's social network) were significantly more likely to fear for their safety and reduce online activities such as online communication and self-expression. In one of the few empirical studies focused on the fear of online threats, Higgins et al. (2008) reported several findings relevant to the current study. They found that self-control was significantly related to fear of online victimization, with individuals who had higher levels of self-control also reporting higher levels of fear. While many internet users who have not encountered pestering still say they have self-censored to avoid potential harassment, people who have seen or experienced harassment online are much more likely to self-censor for this reason than those who have not. The focus of this research paper is on individual victims of CCT. Online freedom of expression means how freely individuals expressing their thoughts and ideas on different online platforms. The study focuses on how freely and actively university students express and share online their opinions about social and political issues. Therefore, in this study investigated how fear of CCTs can affect online FoE.

3. RESEARCH DESIGN

This study uses a cross-sectional survey research design to collect fresh and up to date data. Studies of individual behavior rely most heavily on the use of survey questionnaires as the primary method of data collection from the Universities of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) ranked by the Higher Education Commission (HEC) of Pakistan (UniRank, 2017), in which students are unit of analysis. As a popular research tool in mass communication research (Yang & Wyckoff, 2010), survey methodology gathers primary, explorative and important descriptive data from the target population. The data gathered from this approach is quantitative and the themes were derived from a review of the relevant literature. Subsequently, the survey questions are formulated based on the themes arising from the empirical literature on the field, and theoretical framework.

3.1 POPULATION AND SAMPLE

The total 51887 with 38991 male students and 12896 female students from top-ranking six public sector universities of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province are population for this study, including Khyber Medical University Peshawar, University of Peshawar, The University of Agriculture

Peshawar, Abdul Wali Khan University Mardan, University of Engineering & Technology Peshawar and Gomal University Dera Ismail Khan. Different scholars have provided different criteria for deciding the sample size. According to Gay's (2013) criteria, for the population of more than five thousand (>5000), the sample size of four hundred is sufficient. This study takes 800 sample size. The sample from each university is according to its proportion in the entire population, as well as proportion based on their gender.

3.2 DATA COLLECTION INSTRUMENT & ANALYSIS TECHNIQUE

A well-structured close-ended questionnaire measuring the concepts of the study was distributed personally and the respondent was requested to fill the questionnaire at the distribution spots, during October-November 2019. The questionnaire used a four-level Likert Scale.

SPSS software is used for analyzing quantitative data using both descriptive & inferential statistics to find out the answer to the research question.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The research hypothesis of this study states that it is more likely that a higher level of cyber communication's threats faced by students will have a significant relationship with the online freedom of expression regarding political and social issues. To test this hypothesis, the Pearson correlation coefficient test was used to find the relationship between cyber communication threats faced and online freedom of expression regarding political and social issues. The alpha level is 0.05. Tables 1 and 2 present the results.

Table 1: Basic statistics.

Variables	Mean	SD
Cyber harassment	1.99	.64
Online identity theft	1.90	.71
Receiving unwanted material	2.30	.86
Hacking	1.84	.86
Viruses	2.30	.91
Freedom of political views	2.10	.96
Freedom of social views	2.57	.99

Table 2: Relationship among level of cyber communication threats.

Variables		Cyber Harassment	Online Identity theft	Unwanted material	Hacking	Viruses	Online freedom of expressing political views	Online freedom of expressing social views
Cyber Harassment	Correlation	1						
	Sig. (2-tailed)							
Online Identity theft	Correlation	.623**	1					
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<0.01						
Receiving unwanted material	Correlation	.819**	.498**	1				
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<0.01	<0.01					
Hacking	Correlation	.525**	.806**	.419**	1			
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<0.01	<0.01	<0.01				
Viruses	Correlation	.683**	.421**	.667**	.390**	1		
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<0.01	<0.01	<0.01	<0.01			
Online freedom of expressing political views	Correlation	-.174**	-.314**	.105**	.164**	.167**	1	
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<0.01	<0.01	0.003	<0.01	<0.01		
Online freedom of expressing social views	Correlation	-.366**	-.159**	.355**	0.043	.341**	.497**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<0.01	<0.01	<0.01	0.226	<0.01	<0.01	

N= 800; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Table 2, Pearson correlation coefficients were determined to compare the mean score for online freedom of expression (FoE) about political and social views with various categories of CCT victimization like; cyber harassment, online identity theft, receiving unwanted material, hacking and viruses. There was a negative correlation between FoE about political and social views and cyber harassment and online identity theft while showed a statistically positive correlation with receiving unwanted material, hacking and viruses.

Online FoE about political views and respondent's cyber harassment has significant relationship [$r = -.17, p < .05$], a higher level of cyber harassment is being associated with lower levels of FoE about political issues. Online FoE about political views and respondent's online identity has significant relationship [$r = -.31, p < .05$], a higher level of online identity theft is being associated with lower levels of FoE about political issues. Online FoE about political views and respondent's receiving unwanted material has significant relationship [$r = .11, p < .05$], a higher level of receiving unwanted material is being associated with higher levels of FoE about political issues.

Online FoE about political views and respondent's hacking has a significant relationship [$r = .16, p < .05$], a higher level of hacking is being associated with higher levels of FoE about political issues. Online FoE about political views and respondent's viruses victimization has significant relationship [$r = .17, p < .05$], a higher level of viruses is being associated with higher levels of FoE about political issues. Online FoE about social views and respondent's cyber harassment has significant relationship [$r = -.37, p < .05$], a higher level of cyber harassment is being associated with lower levels of FoE about political issues.

Online FoE about social views and respondent's online identity victimization has significant relationship [$r = -.16, p < .05$], higher level of online identity theft is being associated with lower levels of FoE about political issues. Online FoE about social views and respondent's receiving unwanted material victimization has significant relationship [$r = .36, p < .05$], a higher level of receiving unwanted material is being associated with higher levels of FoE about political issues.

Online FoE about social views and respondent's hacking victimization has an insignificant relationship [$r = .04, p < .05$]. Online FoE about social views and respondent's viruses victimization has significant relationship [$r = .34, p < .05$], a higher level of viruses is being associated with higher levels of FoE about political issues.

Based on the results, the hypothesis is accepted and thus substantiated. Results suggested that cyber harassment and online identity theft harm online freedom of expression about political and social views while receiving unwanted material, hacking, and viruses showed positive correlation and having a positive effect on online freedom of expression about political and social views.

5. DISCUSSION

It would be futile to attempt to develop prevention programs that encouraged youth to reduce their use of the Internet. The use of the Internet is often necessary for educational, information, entertainment purposes, and many youths use the Internet to socialize and connect with others. Rather than encouraging youth to stop socializing on the Internet, it would be more effective to educate youth on the dangers present online so they are aware of the potential for victimization. Adolescents using the Internet should be educated to only participate in cyber communication with people they know each other and trust. If adolescents limit their online communication to people

they know, the risk of victimization should be lower. Awareness-raising seminars should be held regularly to inform internet users about what is available for them to handle CCTs and how they can access it.

Educational Institutions should introduce separate offices to prevent CCTs victimization of users. Pakistan does have cyber protection laws, but it is needed that people should be informed about those laws as well as the mechanism through which they can seek relief. Also, it is important to remove ambiguities, if any, in the legal structure and to improve the ability of the organizations who are responsible for the implementation of cyber laws. For future researchers, it is suggested that causes and prevention mechanisms of other forms of CCTs which are related to organizations and institution should also be studied.

6. CONCLUSION

Looking at the relationship between cyber communications threats (CCTs) victimization and students' freedom of expressing (FoE) political and social views in online settings. The mixed results indicate that certain online crimes like cyber harassment and online identity theft can make the internet users more cautious about what they are sharing while other types of threats like receiving unwanted material, hacking, and viruses will not limit their online FoE. Pearson correlation coefficient showed that cyber harassment and online identity theft harm online freedom of expression about political and social views while receiving unwanted material, hacking and viruses showed positive correlation and having a positive effect on online FoE about political and social views. Online FoE about social views and respondent's hacking victimization has in a significant relationship. Online FoE about social views and respondent's viruses' victimization has a significant relationship, the higher level of viruses is being related to higher levels of FoE about political issues. These findings support hypothesis partially that which stated that "It is more likely that higher level of CCTs faced by students will have a significant relationship with the online freedom of expression (FoE) regarding political and social issues".

7. AVAILABILITY OF DATA AND MATERIAL

Data can be made available by contacting the corresponding author.

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