

Exploring Cyber Deviant Behaviors in Young Adults: A Thematic Content AnalysisSumaira Ayub**, Mujeeba Ashraf^a^a Institute of Applied Psychology, University of the Punjab, Lahore-Pakistan**Abstract**

The present study aimed to explore the cyber deviant behaviors in young adults of Pakistan. For this purpose, a qualitative approach was used using semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. The data was collected from eleven young adults aged 21 to 33 ($M = 26.27$, $SD = 5.13$), including victims or perpetrators, five experts dealing with cybercrimes and two focus group discussions with young adults. The participants were recruited using a criterion sampling strategy. Three open-ended questions were asked from each participant. All the interviews and focus groups were audiotaped, ensuring confidentiality of the information obtained. Thematic content analysis was used to analyze the interview transcripts. The results revealed nine main themes of cyber deviant behaviors in young adults, which included: 1) unauthorized access, 2) online identity deception, 3) cyber harassment and blackmailing, 4) cyber financial fraud, 5) cyber defamation and negative campaigning, 6) cyber misinformation and manipulation, 7) cyber dating and sexting behavior, 8) cyber addiction, and 9) misuse of AI in digital space. The thematic structure of the data highlighted multiple forms of cyber deviant behaviors, which are prevalent in young adults of Pakistan. Understanding these behaviors is critical for developing preventative strategies and promoting healthier online interactions. So, the study contributes to the field of forensic psychology to explore the cyber deviant behaviors in detail. The findings will be helpful in the development and evolution of programs to control the deviant behaviors in cyberspace in young adults.

Keywords: Cyber Deviant Behaviors, Young Adults, Thematic Analysis, Online Misconduct.

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1. Introduction

The Internet has become a powerful and open space where people connect, express themselves, and access information freely. It not only brings countless benefits such as convenience, creativity, entertainment and productivity, it also opens the door to harmful and deviant behaviors—the acts that violates social and moral norms in a digital realm (Choo, 2005; Sung et al., 2006; Holt, 2019). These acts are particularly prominent among young adults, who are active and often unsupervised users of digital platforms (Habiba et al., 2018). The cyber deviant behaviors refer to socially inappropriate use digital space contradicting the established societal norms, morals, and sometimes law and cause emotional, psychological, and financial loss for anyone (Cioban et al., 2021). Cyberspace provides a completely different platform for the expression of one's needs in comparison to the face-to-face world. The use of cyberspace by youth is becoming a major concern due to the emergence of engagement in deviant use of internet applications (Sharma et al., 2021).

Cioban et al. (2021) identified various form of online deviance, including cyberbullying, Internet-based radicalization, online sexual deviance, cyber dating abuse, social spamming, problematic social media usage, and problematic use of the Internet. Addressing gender based cyber deviance, Hadler and Jaishanker (2008) highlighted numerous forms of online abuse targeting women such as e-mail harassment, cyber-stalking, defamation, hacking, morphing (editing pictures), e-mail spoofing (where the origin is misrepresented), cyber pornography, cyber sexual defamation, flirting online, and cyber bullying. Other manifestation of cyber deviant behaviors includes self-exposure to explicit content, falsifying personal information and impersonating others, illegal downloading, and plagiarism (Bounnik & Deshen, 2013). Online trolling also represents a significant form of cyber deviance, where individuals engage in disruptive behavior (Hardaker, 2010).

In the literature, a number of factors have been discussed which are considered as predictors of deviance. Various predictors of online deviance have been identified including family dynamics (parental abuse, parental deviance, parenting style, etc.), socio-demographic factors (gender, age, and socio-economic status, etc.), victimization (offline history of victimization (offline bullying, exposure to violence), and pattern of internet use (access, frequency, digital literacy etc.) have been determined to be the main predictors (Cioban et al., 2021). The online toxic disinhibition, anonymity, sensation-seeking behaviour, impulsivity, deviant socialization, and lack of educational system addressing gender sensitivity and sexual awareness contribute to deviant behavior in cyber space among both adolescents and adults (Sharma et al., 2021; Udris, 2016; Zhang et al., 2022; Kurek et al., 2019). Furthermore, individual attitudes and social norms also play a significant role. Environmental factors such as exposure to media violence and peer pressure, along with personal and psychological traits (e.g., moral disengagement, impulsivity, narcissism) are strong predictor of cyber deviance (Robles-Haydar et al., 2021). Additional risk factors include daily strain, loneliness, depression, low self-control, self-esteem issues, anger and hyperactivity (Panagiotidi & Aoverton, 2021; Kim, 2021; Holt et al., 2012; Nam, 2021).

It is found that youth is mostly exposed to cybercrime, particularly in the form of cyber bullying, blackmailing, and hacking, often without being aware of cybercrimes and thus vulnerable to online exploitation

(Faizullah et al., 2021). A critical finding by Munir and Gondal (2017) highlights that Pakistani youth, in particular, has limited awareness of cybercrimes, making them susceptible to victimization and even unintentional involvement in deviant online behaviors. So, this could be argued these deviant behaviors have affected our society the most. However, an important and under-explored question remains: how much dose culture influence the study of deviant behavior in Asian context, particularly in countries like Pakistan? As youth represent the future of society, it is concerning that many of them fail to conform the acceptable societal norms and values. There is no hard-line which can be drawn to differentiate between what is deviant and what is not. In today's rapid shifting moral landscape, behavior once considered acceptable, are now deviant and even borderline criminal, influenced by the rise of "woke: culture and culture. While much of the existing literature on online deviance has focused on adolescents, there is a gap in understanding patterns of cyber deviant behaviors particularly among young adults. The literature also highlights the certain forms of cyber deviant behavior, anyhow a comprehensive understanding is still lacking, as many other forms of cyber deviance remain unexplored in existing research. Furthermore, existing studies have predominantly addressed victims of cyber deviance, leaving perpetrators' behaviors unexplored. Therefore, the current study aims to expand knowledge on cyber deviant behaviours adopted and experienced by young adults in Pakistan. This research will contribute towards the field of forensic psychology by exploring collectively the phenomenology of cyber deviant behaviors in young adults of Pakistan.

Purpose of the Study

To explore the patterns of cyber deviant behaviors in young adults of Pakistan.

Research Question

What are the possible deviant behaviors at cyberspace which are adopted by young adults?

2. Method

Study Design

For the present study, qualitative research designed was used to explore the various patterns of cyber deviant behaviors in young adults.

Participants and Data Collection

Data was collected through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions using interview protocol. The in-depth interviews were conducted in two levels. Firstly, included the interviews with the victims and perpetrators of the cyber deviant activities. Secondly, I included interviews with the experts dealing with cybercrimes. The stepwise procedure of data collection is given below:

Interviews with Victims/Perpetrators. The semi structured interviews with the eleven young adults age ranged 21 to 33 ($M = 26.27$, $SD = 5.13$) were conducted. The participants included both men ($n = 6$) and women ($n = 5$). The inclusion criteria were: 1) The participants must have daily internet and social media user's (5 - 6 hours minimum), who had accessed the Internet via computer or mobile device, 2) the participants must have history of any deviant behaviour at cyber space (at least 1 incident). They were approached through various social media platforms using criterion sampling strategy. The All the interviews audiotaped and were conducted with each person individually either face-to-face or online after taking written consent. They were ensured about privacy and confidentiality of the data they gave. The probing technique was also

used for obtaining additional information where required. The interviews length varied from 30 minutes to 60 minutes. All the interviews conducted until data saturation. The details of the participants characteristics are given below:

Expert interviews. In the second step, to get the more detailed picture of the construct, the in-depth interviews with five experts dealing with cybercrimes were conducted after getting permission from the authority. The experts included the officials of Cyber Crime Wing (FIA) i.e., forensic scientist, legal expert, SHO, and psychologists. The interviews were conducted with each expert individually either face-to-face or online upon their suitability and availability. Upon taking consent, the expert interviews were audiotaped, and confidentiality of the data was ensured to them. The interviews length varied from 30 minutes to 60 minutes.

All the interviews were transcribed and thematic analysis was conducted. The coding structure of the data produced theoretical saturation and there was need to move forward for data triangulation. Consequently, in the next step two focus group discussions with young adults were conducted.

Focus Groups. Two focus group discussions were conducted in this step. First focus group discussion comprised of seven participants ($n = 1$) age ranged 18 to 25 years and second focus group comprised of six participants ($n = 6$) age ranged 26 to 35 years following the inclusion criteria i.e., 5-6 hours/day internet usage time and history of any deviant behaviour at cyber space (at least 1 incident). The participants were approached using different social media platforms as well as directly. Both the focus groups were conducted online following focus group instructions and ethical guidelines. The duration of both focus group discussions was 100 to 120 minutes each. Both the focus group discussions were audiotaped following ethical guidelines. Focus groups used after interviews produced data saturation and confirmed the thematic structure developed in the previous step.

Compliance with Ethical Guidelines

The ethical approval for this study was taken from Advanced Studies and Research Board of University of the Punjab Lahore. An informed consent containing nature and purpose of the study as well as ethical rights was signed by each participant before conducting the interviews. The permission for the expert interviews was taken by the Authorities of Cyber Crime Wing, FIA. All the participants were ensured about anonymity and confidentiality of the information. The interviews and focus groups were also recorded upon getting the permission. The audios were transcribed manually and verbatim were drawn by the researchers. Identifying information was removed and names were replaced with initials of the name during the transcription process. Later, this qualitative data was analysed using Thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2011). The transcription and themes were verified by the research supervisor. The results were reported accurately.

Data Analysis

All the audiotaped material of interview and focus group discussion was transcribed by the researcher carefully. The researcher noted down the verbal and non-verbal expressions on the transcripts by using play back command. All the transcripts were analyzed using thematic content analysis by Braun and Clark (2011). Thematic analysis (TA) is one of the most widely used methods for analyzing qualitative data, offering a structured yet flexible approach to identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns or themes within a dataset (Braun & Clark, 2006).

3. Results

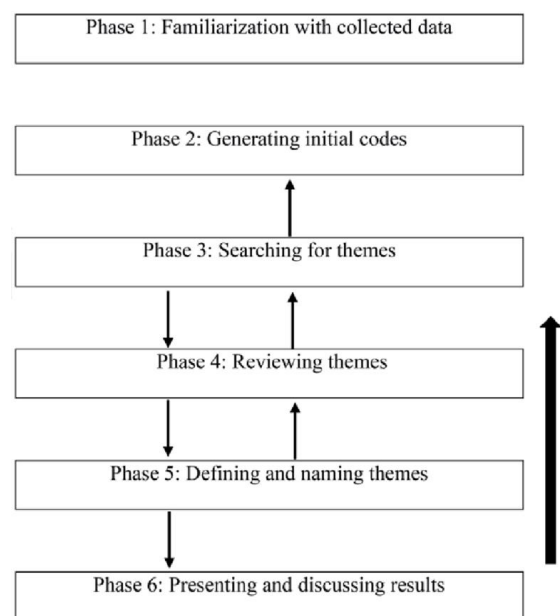
Table 1

Participants' Characteristics (N=11)

Variables	f(%)	M(SD)
Age		26.27 (5.13)
Gender		
Women	5 (45.5)	
Men	6 (54.5)	
Qualification		
Graduates	5 (45.5)	
Postgraduates	6 (54.5)	
Job Status		
Yes	6 (54.5)	
No	5 (45.5)	
Relationship Status		
Single	4 (36.4)	
Engaged/Committed	3 (27.2)	
Married	4 (36.4)	
Family System		
Nuclear	6 (54.5)	
Joint	5 (45.5)	
Residential Area		
Rural	1 (9.1)	
Urban	10 (90.9)	
Internet Usage Time		9.27 (5.27)
Internet Usage without study and Job		3.72 (1.90)
History of Cyber Deviance		
Victim	3 (27.3)	
Victim and Perpetrator	8 (72.7)	

Figure 1

Six Steps of Thematic Content Analysis



For the present study, in the first phase, after transcribing the audio recordings, each transcript was read and re-read multiple time to get absorbed into the data. Notes were made and potentially interesting passages in the transcripts were highlighted. Verbatims were extracted and line to line description of the verbatim was done which followed by extracting the initial codes, that facilitated the researcher to deeply explore the phenomenon and extract maximum information from the data.

Later, similar codes were collated into groups that were combined into preliminary themes and subthemes. It was very challenging tasks to merge the huge number of codes into distinct themes. The grouping of the codes was done considering all transcripts of interviews and focus group discussions, one by one. Later, codes were reviewed by the researchers, which were refined and defined by discarding the minor as well as irrelevant codes. Subsequently, on the basis of defined codes, the subthemes and themes were emerged.

In the next step, repeated codes and subthemes were excluded which followed to refinement of the themes. Finally, the finalized structure of thematic analysis was discussed with the supervisor and by incorporating her suggestions, the thematic structure of the cyber deviant behaviours in young adults was finalized (See Table 2).

In the present study, nine main themes of cyber deviant behaviors in young adults were emerged which included unauthorized access, online identity deception, cyber harassment and blackmailing, cyber financial fraud and scam, cyber defamation and negative campaigning, cyber misinformation and manipulation, cyber dating and sexting behavior, cyber addiction, misuse of AI in digital space, with one miscellaneous category. These results highlighted that these patterns of behaviors are prevalent in young adults of Pakistan. The detail of the subthemes under each main theme is presented in Table 2.

Table 2 highlighted those patterns of cyber deviant behaviors which are prevalent in young adults of Pakistan and emerged during the present study. The description of each theme which are supported by the verbatims from participants is given below:

Theme 1: Unauthorized Access

This is first main theme which highlighted a range of behaviors in which a person gain entry into others' digital spaces, devices, or personal content without consent. It included several subthemes such as data monitoring, hacking accounts, unauthorized use of social media account, devices or digital files, sharing and distribution of someone's personal content, editing and manipulating someone's personal content/digital data, use of proxy servers, and use of copy righted material without permission. Collectively, these sub themes demonstrate that unauthorized access is a multidimensional form of cyber deviant behaviors in young adults, which ranged from cyber intrusion to content manipulation and misuse. Furthermore, narratives from victims, perpetrators, and experts revealed the normalization of these behaviors. Here are the verbatims from the participants supporting this theme:

One of the experts stated that: *"To get access to someone's device without permission and copying the things is considered as deviant act"*. He also added, *"There are porn sites which are banned in Pakistan, but the youth visit it daily using Proxy servers."* (E1)

A female participant of interview stated that: *"We download the material which is not available publicly, such as articles, books, movies etc. by using proxy servers."* (P9)

A male participant of the interview added that: *"Someone hacked social media account of my friend, he was receiving messages that they have his private videos of family."* (P2)

Theme 2: Online Identity Deception

This was the second main theme comprised of four subthemes including impersonation, identity theft, misuse of someone's identity and fake digital presence. It refers to various ways in which individual misrepresent the identities for deceptive purposes. Together, these subthemes illustrate how online identity deception is multifaceted, ranging from mild manipulation to serious breaches of privacy and trust. This theme emerged strongly across interviews with victims, perpetrators, experts and focus group discussions. Here are few narratives from the data which supports the present theme:

An expert stated that: *"On social media, people use someone identity information to generate fake profile and deceive others."* (E5)

In a focus group discussion, A participant stated that: *"One adopted someone's identity and started misleading others by using his/her details."* (FG1)

Another participant mentioned that: *"Someone created my fake profile on Instagram and uploaded those pictures which I never shared on social media even in a post or in messages."* (FG-2)

In an interview, a participant stated that: *"Fake profiles of celebrities are made on social media and fake posts are created that falsely represents their lives."* (P8)

Talking about misrepresentation of the professional, a participant stated that: *"Someone does not know how to deal with the specific mental health issue and they provide online consultation without any proper degree and knowledge."* (P10)

Theme 3: Cyber Harassment and Blackmailing

This was the third major theme cyber harassment and blackmailing was emerged predominantly from the interviews with victims/perpetrators, expert interviews and focus group discussions. It included nine subthemes such as body shaming, abusive language, blackmailing others (relationship/money), offensive messages and threatening someone, mocking and meme culture, stalking and intimidation, online relationship advancement, unwanted friendship requests and calls, misuse of personal content. This theme characterized by emotional and psychological harm caused by hostile, coercive, or invasive online interactions. Here are few narratives of the participants which support this theme:

An expert stated that: *"I have something against you which I will use, I will share it publicly."* (E1)

Another expert highlighted that: *"It is normal trend in youngster, if there is a conflict between them, they start using abusive language against them and criticize publicly, they send offensive message and threat them."* (E3)

In a focus group, a participant added that: *"If there is breakup in boyfriend and girlfriend relationship, then one start blackmailing to the Ex, and demands money."* (FG-1)

A participant from the interview stated that: *"I am engaged in an organization promoting women empowerment. I received a call in which a girl was complaining about leaking of her pictures and videos by her boyfriend to black mail. He was blackmailing her by forcing her to engage in online intimate activities by sharing private pictures and videos, and to do whatever he demands."* (P11)

She further Added about compassion pages: *"Confession pages are the platform for bullying and harassment. Commenting against anyone with identifiable information in very common, which cause serious distress in someone's life."* (P11)

From the data, it was also found that, some people normalized their actions as humorous or justified responses, while some consistently portrayed these responses as violation of dignity, trust and safety.

Theme 4: Cyber Financial Fraud

The fourth theme was identified as cyber financial fraud, referring to deliberate use of deceptive or manipulative tactics in digital environment to exploit someone financially. It comprised of five subthemes such as fraudulent online work, online business and employment scams, fake investment schemes, online shopping scams, and consumer deception through fake reviews. This theme was also emerged strongly across interviews with victims/perpetrators, expert interviews and focus group discussions. From the following verbatims, the present theme found the support:

An expert stated that: *"In online shopping, we received poor quality products with handsome price, that fake website for online shopping led them to financial suffering"*, She further added to support fake investment schemes for online business: *"Now people follow podcast for online investment... if you will invest some money, you will get double triple amount...the greed for double amount enable them to invest through fraudulent online earning schemes."* (E2)

In a focus group discussion, a participant shared her experience of online earning fraud. She added: *"In an online earning platform, I worked hard to complete the assigned task, on the time of payment, they deceived me by asking bank information and Facebook profile, later they blocked me."* (FG-1)

Talking about deception in online shopping, a participant of interview stated that: *"We order something online considering the reviews under the product. Sometime these reviews are fake which are posted by someone to earn money and deceiving the customers."* (P9)

Theme 5: Cyber Defamation and Negative Campaigning

This fifth major theme, refers to intentionally harm the reputation, credibility, or social standing of any individual or institutions. Its subthemes included defamation of individual/professionals & institution, hate speech/campaign, false allegation and reputation damage, media trial (suspect/victim), spreading rumors and negative propaganda, sensationalism and fame driven behavior, and religion and sect-based defamation. This theme highlighted the weaponization of online communication, where false, exaggerated or malicious content is spread widely with the intent to defamation or shaming the target. These are few verbatims which support the present theme:

A participant stated that: *"We intentionally built fake narratives about some public figures and damage their reputation."* (P8)

An expert talked about the media trials and stated that: *"A suspect who was caught due to some criminal investigation, we viralize his/her personal details on social media (media trial), which suffer his/her family in a long run."* (E1)

Another expert talked about her experience of defamation and her institute and said: *"My officer shared a video, who made a video against me and my institution and uploaded it on YouTube, it was full on program, the story line was we didn't listen him when he came to us with*

his issue. He wanted us to resolve his matter which was not under our domain". She also added: *"There are certain trends on social media which are against the state and army, which in turn distort the image of our country."* (E3)

Another expert stated that: *"Someone has created a story against someone using fake information, and them share it on social media to defame the particular person."* (E5)

Theme 6: Cyber Misinformation and Manipulation

This was the six major theme in the data, which reveals how online platforms are used not only to spreading misinformation but also for manipulating narratives, identities and public perception across personal, institutional, political, and religion domain. This theme encompasses subthemes such as spreading misinformation (personal/institutional/religion/ political), illogical/irrational arguments, fake news and false narratives propagate, fake references and false attribution, information manipulation, irresponsible information sharing, professional misrepresentation, and misuse of professional online platform/page. Collectively the subthemes highlight the fabrication and propagation of false or misleading information in the digital space. Here are few verbatims which are presented supporting this theme:

A participant from the interview said that: *"There are channels, that promote specific political parties, they try to fabricate the political content and spread misinformation about the opposite party."* (P11)

Talking about fake references, a participant stated that: *"On social media, self-created quotes, poetry or even words are being circulated using the name of famous poets, columnists, religious scholars, public figures etc."* (P8)

Further an expert added about spreading misinformation and stated that: *"On social media accounts, we receive fake news, we share it to others either in groups or social media posts, without verification."* (E1)

Theme 7: Cyber Dating and Sexting Behavior

This was the seventh main theme which captures the romantic or intimate interactions mediated through cyberspace. It included six subthemes such as online dating (friendship, multiple relationships, secret love affairs), sexting, partner infidelity and extramarital affairs online, premarital affairs online, sharing intimate/explicit content, and explicit activities. The participants shared experiences and observations reflecting how online spaces are used for exploring relationships, engaging in flirtation, and even pursuing infidelity. To support this theme, here are verbatims of the participants:

An expert stated that: *"There was a married woman, having two daughters, she was in an open relationship with her online friend and getting financial support as well. The guy was already married, and was in multiple relationships on cyber world. He used to exchange the nude material of his online female friends to other."* (E2)

Another expert stated that: *"There started a friendship between opposite gender online... video chats... sharing sexual or intimate content... involvement in online sexual activities with the remarks that it is safer than being in physical..."* (E3)

In a focus group discussion, a participant stated that: *"In an online dating relationship, sexting is very common with an intent that it is important for the survival of relationship.... otherwise, my relationship will end."* (FG-2)

Table 2

Subthemes and Main Themes for Cyber Deviant Behaviour in Young Adults (N=11)

Theme	Subtheme
Unauthorized access	Data monitoring, Hacking accounts, Unauthorized use of social media account/ devices/digital files, Sharing and Distribution of someone's personal content , Editing and manipulating someone's Personal Content/ digital data, Proxy Servers for unauthorized access, Use of copy righted material without permission
Online Identity Deception	Impersonation , Identity theft, Misuse of someone's identity, Fake digital presence
Cyber Harassment and Blackmailing	Body Shaming, Abusive Language, Blackmailing others (Relationship/ Money), Offensive messages and threatening someone, Mocking and Meme Culture, Stalking and intimidation , Online relationship advancement, Unwanted Friendship Requests and calls, Misuse of personal content
Cyber Financial Fraud and Scam	Fraudulent online work, Online business and employment scams investment scams, Online shopping scams, Consumer deception through Fake reviews
Cyber Defamation and Negative Campaigning	Defamation of individual/professionals & institution, Hate speech/campaign, False Allegation and Reputation damage, Media trial (suspect/victim), Spreading rumors and Negative propaganda, Sensationalism and fame driven behavior , Religion and sect-based defamation
Cyber Misinformation and Manipulation	Spreading misinformation (personal/institutional/religion/political) , Illogical/irrational arguments, Fake news and False narratives propagate, Fake references and False attribution , Information manipulation , Irresponsible information sharing, Professional misrepresentation, Misuse of professional online platform/page
Cyber Dating and Sexting Behaviour	Online Dating (Friendship, Multiple relationships, secret love affairs), Sexting, Partner Infidelity and extramarital affairs online, Premarital affairs online, Sharing Intimate/explicit content, Explicit activities
Cyber Addiction	Wasting time over internet, Overuse of digital and social media , Digital overuse and social dysfunction, Digital overuse and Academic dysfunction, Daily horoscope online
Misuse of AI in Digital Space	AI and Social Manipulation, AI misuse in Academia and Work, AI and Sexual need fulfilment
Miscellaneous	Promoting and normalizing harm and violence, Cheap entertainment consumer/creator, Watching explicit content, Providing adult services online, Monetization of Explicit Content

Theme 8: Cyber Addiction

This main theme refers to excessive, habitual and compulsive engagements with online platforms, particularly social media and internet-based content. The subthemes under cyber addiction are wasting time over internet, overuse of digital and social media, social and academic dysfunction, and overly reliance on daily horoscope online. This theme highlighted the psychosocial consequences of digital overuse leading to impaired social and academic functioning. There are the verbatims which supports the present theme:

As an expert stated that: *"We keep scrolling on internet and waste our time.... whatever we want to do, we search and browse on internet.... we totally rely on internet overly without knowing authenticity of information we get."* (E2)

A participant added that: *"I have multiple social media account. I don't know about the time when I use these. My study routine is disturbed which in turn cause academic difficulties."* (P6)

Theme 9: Misuse of AI in Digital Space

The ninth and emerging theme was misuse of AI in Digital space, which emphasizes that how AI technologies are being exploited across different domains. The subthemes included AI use and social manipulation, AI misuse in academia and work, and AI and sexual need fulfilment. This theme is basically technologically advanced form of digital misconduct. While AI offers convenience and innovation, participants shared concerns regarding its manipulative, deceptive, and inappropriate uses, particularly in social, academic, and sexual need fulfilment.

An expert stated that: *"ChatGpt is a serious threat to youth's creativity, getting unnecessary help for educational activities can hinder their professional life in future."* (E1)

An interview participant stated that: *"Many students wrongly claimed AI generated material as their own. They also used AI to plagiarized someone's work."* (P8)

Someone talked about role of AI in meeting sexual needs and stated that: *"People use AI application to meet their sexual needs. These are paid apps when you login, there is a virtual partner, who can do whatever you want from it to fulfill sexual desires."* (P7)

4. Discussion

The study was to contribute in the growing literature on cyber deviant behaviors by using qualitative approach. The findings shed light on the specific patterns and categories of cyber deviant behaviors that are prevalent among young adults which included unauthorized access, identity deception, harassment and blackmailing, financial fraud, defamation and negative campaigning, misinformation and manipulation, cyber dating and sexting, cyber addiction, and misuse of AI. These behaviors reflect not only the evolving nature of digital platforms but also the social, emotional, and psychological vulnerabilities of young users.

The findings of this study align with the existing literature that highlights how anonymity and easy access to internet contribute to deviant behaviors at cyber space (Choo, 2005, Holt, 2019; Jaishankar, 2007). Themes like identity deception, unauthorized access, and cyber harassment confirms earlier research pointing to the breach of digital boundaries and the rise of risky online behaviors among youth (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010). However, this study moves beyond previous work by presenting a broader and deeper understanding of these behaviors through the experiences of not just victims, but also perpetrators and experts. Thematic triangulation added depth, credibility and trustworthiness to the findings.

Unlike many earlier studies that focus on the specific form of cyber deviant behavior, this study contributes to the literature by offering holistic view of cyber deviant behaviors through the voices of those who are directly involved. Notably, emerging patterns such as misuse of AI, fake digital personas and fame driven behavior represents newer, underexplored areas in the literature, making significant addition to the field indicating how new tools and online culture are reshaping the boundaries of acceptable behaviors. These modern expressions highlight the need to update legal, institutional, and educational frameworks to match the technological pace at which these behaviors evolve. Instead, it was found how gray areas of behavior like sharing memes, online dating, or even overusing social media can evolve into more serious harm depending on the context and intent.

Now a days, spreading and tackling the misinformation at cyber space is emerged as bigger challenges for the stakeholders. The present study also highlighted this pattern of cyber deviance named as cyber misinformation and manipulation, which supports growing concerns about the spread of fake news and irresponsible digital discourse (Tandoc et al., 2018), but goes further by including personal and academic misrepresentation and AI-generated misinformation, which are again emerging concerns. The theme on AI misuse, either in academia, or workplaces or sexual need fulfillment is a novel finding that challenges existing discussions that often view AI purely as a tool for efficiency or innovation (Vincent, 2023).

The present study highlighted how the digital landscape is increasingly used to target individuals, professionals, and institutions through deliberate acts of character assassination, rumor spreading, and online hate. This aligns with the earlier findings suggesting that online environment often amplifies defamation due to its speed, access and permanence (Citron, 2014). In the present study, the participants described experiences of false allegation, media trials, hate speech, echoing concerns raised by Marwick and Boyd (2011) about the role of social media in reputation damage and public shaming. What adds depth to this theme is the way it captures the intentionality and strategy behind such actions—highlighting not only spontaneous hate but also coordinated negative campaigns driven by personal jealousy, sensationalism, or even political and religious grounds.

The results revealed that cyber deviance is not limited criminal acts, it is often socially embedded, normalized and emotionally complex. Addressing this phenomenon, there required interdisciplinary collaboration among educators, legal professionals, psychologists and technologists to develop effective preventive strategies to curb this issue effectively.

Limitations and Suggestions

Despite offering rich insight, this study has some limitations. The study relied on self-reported experiences through interviews and focus groups, such data can be affected by social desirability bias and underreporting of the sensitive or illegal activities, particularly from the perpetrators. As this was a qualitative study and the findings are contextually bound, may not be generalizable to broader populations. The culture, social and technological context of the participants may influence the types of cyber deviant behavior. Conducting comparative studies across different demographics i.e., gender, cultural context, could provide deeper understanding of how these behaviors manifest and interpret differently.

Implications of the Study

The present study explored the multifaceted nature of cyber deviant behaviors among young adult by engaging a diverse group of participants including victims, perpetrators, experts and the members of the general youth population. The findings of the study hold significant value across educational, organization, and home settings. This study shed light on the specific patterns and categories of cyber deviant behaviors that are prevalent among young adults. This understanding can be serves as foundation for awareness campaigns and digital ethical trainings in educational institutes as well as through media outlets. In short, this study will be helpful in the development and evolution of the programs to control the deviant behaviours at cyber space providing practical implications for stake holders to create safer and more ethical digital environment.

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