



In the spotlight and under attack: Cyber sexual harassment of public figures on Instagram

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ABSTRACT

In Malaysia, celebrities on Instagram are increasingly at risk of cyberbullying, particularly through obscene messages—a form of online abuse known as cyber sexual harassment. This type of harassment involves various behaviours that exploit digital content on social media platforms to target individuals. This study focuses on cyber sexual harassment directed at Malaysian celebrities on Instagram, examining its emotional impact and the coping strategies they employ in response. In-depth interviews were conducted with 13 male and female celebrities who have experienced cyber sexual harassment, revealing that both male and female celebrities are subjected to such harassment. The emotional impacts identified include feelings of fear, trauma, anger, depression, disturbance, emotional pain, and a constant sense of being watched. Celebrities reported using coping mechanisms such as ignoring the messages or blocking the perpetrators. The findings indicate that cyber sexual harassment can have serious emotional consequences, prompting a range of coping actions. This study suggests that no single action effectively addresses all aspects of harassment, as celebrities often employ multiple strategies to manage their experiences. Future research should evaluate the effectiveness of these coping mechanisms in reducing the emotional impact of cyberbullying.

Keywords: ***Cyber sexual harassment, cyberbullying, Instagram, celebrities, emotional***

INTRODUCTION

Cyber sexual harassment on Instagram is a multifaceted issue involving unsolicited sexual messages, derogatory comments, and public shaming. Public figures are disproportionately targeted due to their high visibility and constant public scrutiny (Iqbal et al., 2024). Such harassment not only affects mental health but also raises questions about the adequacy of platform policies in protecting users from harm.

Unlike general cyberbullying, which encompasses broad forms of intimidation, cyber sexual harassment refers specifically to online sexual behaviours that are unwanted and distressing (Basu et al., 2021). For public figures, this often manifests as explicit messages or vulgar comments posted in public forums, where their visibility intensifies the psychological impact (Morales, 2023). Although platforms like Instagram claim to apply higher tolerance thresholds for public figures under the rationale of “newsworthiness” (Cover et al., 2024), this approach has sparked debate about fairness and safety (Yee et al., 2023).

Instagram has become an essential platform for celebrities to share personal and professional content, foster engagement, and generate income (Mohd Ramly et al., 2024). However, its open and interactive features—such as public comment sections and direct messaging—also create avenues for both overt and covert harassment (Mohd Ramly & Mohamad Salleh, 2023). In Malaysia, where digital literacy and enforcement of platform governance remain inconsistent, these vulnerabilities are particularly pronounced.

Cyber sexual harassment can inflict serious emotional harm, including shame, anxiety, and trauma. These effects are compounded by repeated exposure and the viral potential of abusive content (Iqbal et al., 2024). For public figures, the burden is heightened as they must manage both their emotional well-being and public image. Since much of the existing literature on this issue is based on Western contexts, there remains a significant research gap in Southeast Asia, particularly in Malaysia. The cultural, social, and regulatory dynamics here may influence both the form of harassment and the coping responses.

This study addresses this underexplored area by examining the emotional impact of cyber sexual harassment on Malaysian celebrities and the coping strategies they adopt. By anchoring the research in Malaysia’s specific socio-cultural context, this study contributes fresh, localised insights to global conversations about online abuse. It also highlights culturally nuanced coping mechanisms that are often overlooked in Western-dominated literature.

Research objectives

This study aims to explore the emotional impact of cyber sexual harassment experienced by Malaysian celebrities on Instagram and to examine the coping strategies they employ in response to such experiences. By focusing on public figures, the research seeks to uncover context-specific insights into how visibility and celebrity status shape the harassment experience and subsequent responses.

The specific objectives are:

1. To assess the emotional consequences of cyber sexual harassment among Malaysian celebrities on Instagram.

2. To explore the coping strategies employed by these individuals in dealing with online sexual harassment.

Research questions

In order to guide the investigation, the study is structured around the following research questions:

1. What are the emotional impacts of cyber sexual harassment on Malaysian celebrities using Instagram?
2. What coping strategies do Malaysian celebrities employ to deal with cyber sexual harassment on the platform?
3. How do factors such as visibility, platform features, and cultural context influence the nature of harassment and the effectiveness of coping responses?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Cyberbullying and harassment against celebrities

Instagram is among the most popular platforms used by celebrities to maintain visibility and engagement with audiences (Eslami et al., 2022). It offers interactive tools such as photos, videos, live streams that foster connection but also increase vulnerability to cyber sexual harassment.

Cyber sexual harassment constitutes a form of technology-facilitated gender-based violence and has escalated with social media expansion (Bansal et al., 2024). On Instagram, it takes the form of unsolicited explicit messages, inappropriate comments, and sexual imagery, whether in public comment threads or private direct messages (DMs) (Renuat & Kusumaningtyas, 2022). Instagram's private messaging function can obscure abuse from public view, complicating detection and enforcement (Moreau, 2022).

Harassers are often anonymous and persistent, exploiting platform features to bypass detection—what Dovi (2020) refers to as “cyber sexual bullying.” This is not confined to Instagram but occurs across platforms. Victims report serious emotional consequences, including fear and shame, but research often overlooks how platform design and enforcement policies enable recurrence. There is also a lack of inquiry into how this differs for public figures, who often face more frequent and intense forms of harassment.

According to Never Okay Project (2020), cyber sexual harassment includes not only explicit messages but also threats, body shaming, and digitally manipulated content, all of which thrive in digital environments with limited regulation. In Malaysia, where digital literacy and reporting frameworks are inconsistent, these abuses may be more difficult to counter.

Cyber sexual harassment among celebrities: Global and Malaysian perspectives

Cyber sexual harassment affects both everyday users and public figures, with celebrities especially vulnerable due to their visibility (Gordon, 2024). These attacks can be persistent, highly sexualised, and psychologically damaging (Abaido, 2020).

Global examples, such as Selena Gomez's documented experiences with cyberbullying—where she described how negative comments “cut to your soul” and

revealed she often deletes Instagram due to its impact—show how even globally admired figures are affected (“Selena Gomez explains”, 2017). Gomez withdrew from social media and relied on her team to manage her accounts. Yet, research suggests that such passive strategies (disengagement, blocking, ignoring) rarely prevent future abuse. Harassers return through fake profiles, circumventing controls (Jodha, 2022; Kanja, 2020). This points to a need to critically examine the effectiveness of common coping mechanisms, which may only offer temporary relief.

In Malaysia, similar stories emerge. Rozita Che Wan publicly condemned sexual harassment through Instagram (Dzulkifly, 2021), taking defensive actions like blocking and issuing warnings. However, harassment often returns, exposing a key limitation of reactive strategies. Moreover, studies increasingly show that male celebrities are also targeted, although their experiences are often downplayed (Mohd Ramly & Mohamad Salleh, 2023), revealing a gender bias in societal and academic attention.

Despite such high-profile cases, empirical work on how public figures emotionally process and respond to harassment remains underdeveloped in Southeast Asia. The lack of focus on celebrities’ unique online vulnerabilities is especially evident in Malaysian scholarship. This gap hinders the development of localised interventions.

Celebrities’ responses to cyber sexual harassment as role models

Celebrities influence followers’ social and behavioural norms through their online activities (Al-Ansi et al., 2023). By responding to harassment publicly through advocacy, formal reporting, or emotionally transparent communication, they help shape audience perceptions of online abuse and its broader social implications.

Teenagers, in particular, often look to celebrities for cues on how to behave online (Von Felbert & Breuer, 2022). As such, celebrity responses are not just personal coping mechanisms but symbolic acts with a cultural influence. However, research on how Southeast Asian public figures navigate cyber sexual harassment is virtually absent, especially within conservative or religiously influenced digital cultures like Malaysia (Kalaiselvan et al., 2025). This study seeks to address that blind spot.

While broader studies explore online harassment (Bugueño & Mendoza, 2020), few examine the emotional toll on public figures or how cultural values shape their responses. This gap hinders the development of localised interventions and support systems.

Strategies for addressing cyber sexual harassment

Lazarus and Folkman’s (1987) Transactional Model of Stress and Coping (TMSC) defines coping as the process by which individuals assess and respond to stressors. Frydenberg’s coping typology, which includes support-seeking, productive, and non-productive strategies, is commonly applied to youth populations but is also relevant to public figures navigating online threats. Celebrities often adopt a combination of these coping mechanisms to manage digital harassment and its psychological impacts:

- Technical (blocking, filtering content)
- Assertive (calling out abuse publicly)
- Avoidant or passive (ignoring, disengaging)

However, the long-term utility of strategies like blocking and ignoring is widely questioned. Victims often report that abuse resumes via new accounts. Ignoring harassment may suppress victims' emotions and reinforce impunity (Gordon, 2024).

Few studies critically assess the limitations of these coping methods, especially in non-Western societies. Emotional suppression, self-blame, or withdrawal may worsen harm. This highlights the need for a more nuanced understanding of celebrity coping behaviours that considers emotional, cultural, and technological variables.

METHODOLOGY

Research design approach

This study employed a qualitative research design, which is appropriate for exploring the complex, context-specific, and emotionally nuanced experiences of individuals. Specifically, the study aimed to understand how Malaysian celebrities experience and cope with cyber sexual harassment on Instagram. This study employed a qualitative design, guided by the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping, to explore the complex, emotionally nuanced experiences of Malaysian celebrities facing cyber sexual harassment on Instagram (Lazarus & Folkman, 1987). Qualitative research is particularly suited for examining subjective emotions and coping behaviours that emerge from such personal, context-dependent experiences (Busetto et al., 2020).

In-depth interviews were selected over other methods such as focus groups or surveys due to the sensitive and individualised nature of the topic. Cyber sexual harassment involves private, emotionally charged experiences that participants may be reluctant to disclose in group settings. Individual interviews provide a safe, confidential space for participants to express their emotions and thoughts in detail, allowing for richer narrative depth and greater emotional nuance (Busetto et al., 2020). Discussing sexual harassment can evoke emotional distress or shame, and participants may feel inhibited in group settings. In-depth interviews allow for greater confidentiality, emotional safety, and narrative depth, which is crucial for eliciting authentic insights into personal coping mechanisms.

Sampling strategy and justification

A purposive snowball sampling method was employed to recruit a hard-to-reach segment of Malaysian public figures who are active on Instagram. This technique allowed researchers to access a socially networked but elite group, where trust and discretion were essential to participation (Raifman et al., 2022). The final sample included 13 celebrities (8 women, 5 men) aged 21–36, all meeting the criteria of having $\geq 10,000$ followers, an active online presence, and Malaysian residency. This gender balance allowed a comparative analysis of emotional responses and coping strategies by gender, an underexplored aspect in harassment literature. The variety in follower count and occupation also helped explore how visibility and celebrity type influence harassment experiences.

Importantly, the sample was diverse in platform influence, ranging from micro-influencers to celebrities with over 1 million followers. This variation enabled comparative insights across celebrity status, which is critical for understanding how platform visibility shapes harassment and coping responses.

This sample size was considered sufficient based on data saturation principles, with prior studies noting saturation typically occurs between 8–13 interviews (Guest et al., 2020). Participants' follower counts ranged from under 100k to over 1.3M, providing comparative insights across celebrity influence tiers (micro vs. macro). Snowballing ensured access through trusted referrals, increasing participant willingness and data richness. Muellmann et al., (2021) further found that up to 92% of thematic codes are often captured within the first 12 interviews. Given the high quality and depth of responses provided by participants, the sample size was deemed adequate.

Data collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted between 2019 and 2022 through video calls or phone, based on participant preference. Each session lasted 45–75 minutes, was audio-recorded, and transcribed verbatim. Follow-up probes encouraged elaboration on individual coping decisions and how gender, platform features, and fame affected responses. Ethical clearance was secured from Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), and all participants gave informed consent. The interview guide focused on:

1. Personal experiences of cyber sexual harassment on Instagram
2. Emotional and psychological impacts
3. Coping strategies (both immediate and long-term)

Data analysis and coding process

Thematic analysis was employed following Braun and Clarke's (2019) six-phase framework. After transcription, all the data were coded using the NVivo software. The analysis involved both deductive and inductive coding: initial codes were informed by the theoretical framework (e.g., primary appraisal, coping strategies), while emergent themes were developed directly from the data. Coding was conducted in multiple rounds to ensure consistency and depth.

NVivo 12 plus was used to tag, cluster, and visualise codes, enhancing transparency and rigor. Two independent coders cross-verified thematic coding. Codes were initially informed by the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping (e.g., primary appraisal, emotion-focused coping, problem-focused coping), allowing for deductive alignment with theory. This was followed by inductive theme generation. A three-round coding process was used to ensure consistency and depth:

1. Initial open coding for meaning units
2. Axial coding to establish relationships between themes
3. Thematic clustering to identify overarching categories (e.g., “gendered emotional burdens,” “platform distrust,” “performative coping”)

Then all of the data were clustered into higher-level thematic categories aligned with the study objectives. Two independent coders reviewed 30% of transcripts to assess intercoder reliability ($\kappa = 0.78$). Member checking with four selected participants validated the accuracy of thematic interpretations. The emotional responses and coping strategies were also analysed comparatively across gender and celebrity type (macro vs. micro), revealing important patterns in how harassment is experienced and interpreted.

Comparative framework

In order to address gaps in literature, comparative analysis was applied across gender and celebrity tier:

- **Gender dynamics:** Identified differences in emotional expression, types of harassment, and help-seeking behaviour
- **Platform governance:** Examined perceived effectiveness of Instagram's tools (e.g., blocking, reporting), and whether public vs. private account features influenced vulnerability

This framing enabled a multi-dimensional analysis of coping that reflects not only individual psychology but also socio-digital structures influencing harassment experiences.

Thematic analysis

This study continued with thematic analysis to explore the data in-depth (Naeem et al., 2023). The primary objectives of this analysis were to: i) identify the emotional impacts experienced by the informants, and ii) categorise the coping actions chosen by the celebrities.

Following the thematic analysis framework developed by Braun and Clarke (2019), this study employed a four-phase process. Interview transcripts were used as primary data for this analysis.

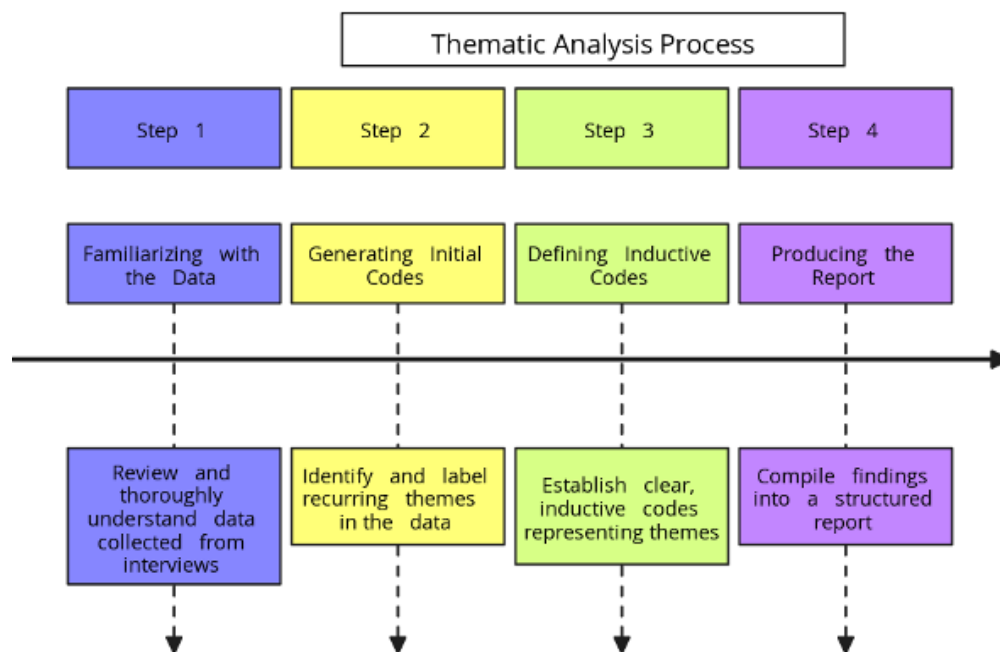


Figure 1. Step-by-step process of thematic analysis applied to interview data

Figure 1 outlines the four-phase thematic analysis framework used to extract meaning from interview data:

1. Familiarising with the Data

Researchers immersed themselves in the transcripts to develop a comprehensive understanding of the content and context.

2. **Generating Initial Codes**

Salient segments of data were systematically coded to capture recurring concepts and early thematic patterns.

3. **Defining Inductive Codes**

Initial codes were refined and grouped into inductive categories that reflect emergent themes grounded in participant narratives.

4. **Producing the Report**

Thematic findings were synthesised into an interpretive account, supported by illustrative excerpts, to convey analytical depth and coherence.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study explored various aspects of cyber sexual harassment on Instagram, categorised into four main themes: experiences of harassment, perpetrator categories, emotional effects, and actions taken by victims.

Theme 1: Cyber sexual harassment on the social media platform, Instagram

a) Prevalence of cyber sexual harassment

Ten out of 13 informants (77%) reported experiencing cyber sexual harassment on Instagram, including explicit messages, nude images, and degrading comments. Notably, 3 informants (23%) reported no such experiences. This suggests that perceived physical attractiveness may influence targeting patterns, consistent with prior studies linking appearance-based discrimination to online abuse. Despite having a large follower base, SW10's experience reflects the complex interplay between perceived physical attractiveness, social desirability, and targeting behaviour online. In contrast, SW12 described near-daily harassment:

I get pictures of men—nude pictures, all of them. Even women too, I get nude pictures of women.. all the explicit messages too.

SW12's age and high engagement rate may make her particularly visible and thus vulnerable to being targeted, reflecting platform dynamics that prioritise visual exposure. Her experience demonstrates the volume and persistence of such harassment, especially among younger macro-influencers.

b) Harassment spillover, gender dynamics, and visibility

The impact of cyber sexual harassment among celebrities often extends beyond the individual, affecting spouses and partners. Several informants described a spillover effect in which being a public figure exposes loved ones to unsolicited sexual content, illustrating how digital violations penetrate private spheres and create additional layers of emotional distress. This further underscores the normalisation and saturation of sexually explicit material on platforms like Instagram, reflecting systemic failures in platform governance (Cover et al., 2024).

Gender also plays a key role in how harassment is experienced and interpreted. While male celebrities such as SL04 and SL06 acknowledged receiving explicit messages,

their emotional reactions were generally more muted or dismissive. In contrast, female participants reported more intense emotional responses, such as fear, anger, and disgust—highlighting gendered differences in the perception of threat and societal expectations around emotional expression.

Additionally, follower count appears to influence the nature and intensity of harassment. Celebrities with fewer than 100,000 followers, such as SW03 and SW13, reported more targeted and private harassment via direct messages. Meanwhile, those with larger followings described more frequent and public abuse in the form of comment-section attacks or disruptions during live streams. This suggests that higher online visibility increases both the volume and intensity of harassment (Macaulay et al., 2022), while simultaneously limiting the individual's control over their digital boundaries.

Theme 2: Categories of perpetrators in cyber sexual harassment

a) Anonymous accounts and the weaponisation of anonymity

A key finding is that anonymity plays a central role in enabling cyber sexual harassment. A majority of the informants (62%) reported that the perpetrators' identities could not be determined, with many offenders hiding behind accounts that lacked profile pictures, posts, or identifiable information. This reflects a broader platform issue, where anonymity not only facilitates harassment but also prevents accountability. Such anonymity creates a power imbalance, shielding perpetrators while leaving victims without recourse. Similarly, informant SW08 added:

I don't know who they are because they only show their private parts in the video, but not their face. So, I can't tell who they are.

These findings align with previous studies, which suggest that anonymity is a key characteristic of cyberbullying and cyber sexual harassment. Unlike face-to-face harassment, cyber harassment thrives in digital environments where victims cannot immediately identify the aggressor (Zhu et al., 2021). In this context, Instagram becomes a safe haven for offenders, especially when platform governance mechanisms are weak or inconsistently enforced.

b) Gender dynamics: Predominance of male perpetrators

Most perpetrators (62%) were anonymous, often hiding behind blank or fake profiles. These responses suggest a gendered power dynamic, where female celebrities are more likely to be sexually targeted, and men more likely to act as aggressors. The imbalance reinforces gender-based violence norms, where male entitlement over women's digital bodies is perceived as culturally tolerated or excusable in anonymous spaces. This is consistent with research that shows men are more likely to engage in technology-facilitated sexual harassment, particularly towards women (Gómez-Guadix et al., 2023). However, 38% of informants reported experiences involving female perpetrators, challenging assumptions that cyber sexual harassment is male-exclusive.

This reflects not only the globalised nature of Instagram but also the commodification of female identities, even when women are perpetrators. In many cases, these accounts may be catfishing profiles, possibly operated by men or scammers using female images to provoke or manipulate.

c) Teenage perpetrators and emerging trends

A minority of perpetrators were identified as adolescents, some as young as 13. Informants SW13 expressed concern about the growing trend of youth involvement in harassment, often linked to anonymity and lack of supervision. While this highlights broader digital literacy and age-regulation issues, it lies outside the main focus of this study. These patterns underscore the need for further research on adolescent behaviour online, particularly how early exposure to harmful digital norms may shape long-term engagement in cyberbullying.

d) Comparative insights: Visibility, gender, and risk exposure

Younger female celebrities like SW12 and SW07, reported more intense and frequent harassment, often accompanied by stronger emotional reactions such as disgust, confusion, and fear. In contrast, male participants like SL04 and SL05 were more likely to downplay the harassment, suggesting possible gender-based desensitisation or social norms that discourage emotional disclosure among men.

Interestingly, informants SW13 (less followers) also encountered harassment, though it was often more direct and less public (e.g., DMs). This supports the argument that while visibility (macro-influencer status) increases exposure, no public figure is immune, regardless the number of follower count.

Theme 3: Emotional impact of experiencing cyber sexual harassment

a) Emotional impact and psychological strain

Participants described a wide spectrum of emotional reactions to cyber sexual harassment, ranging from initial shock and disgust to fear, anger, and in some cases, emotional detachment. While some laughed off the incidents as absurd or irrational, others reported deep discomfort. For example, female informants more often expressed feelings of objectification, violation, and moral outrage, while male participants tended to minimise or dismiss the emotional impact.

The most frequently cited emotional burden was the fear of reputational damage, especially for those in the public eye. This concern often led to non-engagement, reflecting a strategic choice to preserve professional image. For some, especially macro-celebrities, repeated harassment led to psychological exhaustion, hypervigilance, or even trauma symptoms such as stress and anxiety (Buchanan et al., 2018; Burn, 2019).

These emotional responses reveal the cognitive appraisals central to the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping—where the perceived severity of harassment, the individual's emotional resilience, and their public visibility interact to shape both immediate distress and longer-term coping decisions.

b) Fear of reputation damage and manipulation

For many celebrities, the most pressing concern was the potential for online harassment to be manipulated and weaponised against them—particularly through public exposure or reputational sabotage. Informant SL06 articulated this clearly:

I just ignore it... I know what it is... If I respond, I might fall into a trap meant to ruin my reputation. It's better not to engage. We know this kind of thing can create problems.

SL06's deliberate non-engagement shows a conscious risk appraisal aimed at preserving public image over emotional release. Similarly, SL05 noted the volatility of social media visibility. These views show that male celebrities are especially cautious of entrapment scenarios, where their responses might be captured, misinterpreted, or used against them in a digital smear campaign.

Collectively, these accounts illustrate a heightened sense of digital vulnerability among male influencers, which may be tied to the fragility of public reputations in the platform economy. This supports previous studies suggesting that cyber harassers strategically provoke responses from victims, often to manipulate or blackmail them (Mukred et al., 2024). Notably, male celebrities have been targeted in high-profile cases involving such traps, making online harassment a serious threat to professional reputations

c) Psychological distress and trauma

Several informants described sustained emotional disturbance, especially when harassment was persistent. Informant SW13 initially responded with humour, but over time, distress intensified:

It was a bit traumatic and stressful. I felt scared... It was terrifying.

These expressions reflect a shift from avoidance to trauma, as described in cyber trauma literature (Burn, 2019). As a celebrity, SW13 may feel less protected by platform privilege and more exposed to constant targeting. Her experiences reveal how repeated exposure can erode emotional resilience, particularly for women.

d) Anger and moral outrage

Anger was also a recurring emotional response, particularly when harassment challenged one's dignity or humanity. This reaction reflects a moral and religious boundary being violated, which prompted an emotionally charged response. In this case, anger functions as both a coping mechanism and an assertion of agency against digital transgression. Meanwhile, SW12 expressed anger linked to objectification:

It makes me so angry... Why me? It's sexual harassment, and they treat us like objects.

This response illustrates the dehumanising nature of cyber sexual harassment, particularly when women's bodies are targeted for male gratification. Her outrage also aligns with feminist critiques of online violence as an extension of offline gender oppression.

e) Emotional responses: Hypervigilance and indifference

Participants in this study expressed a spectrum of emotional responses to cyber sexual harassment, ranging from heightened fear to emotional detachment. Some celebrities described a persistent sense of being watched, even after their online interactions had ended. This digital hypervigilance blurred the boundaries between online and offline safety, contributing to feelings of anxiety and loss of control. Conversely, a few participants downplayed the emotional impact. SW07 noted:

This kind of thing doesn't really affect me. I'm not the type to stay home—I'm always out and about.

This response suggests a coping strategy of emotional desensitisation or compartmentalisation, where stress is managed by externalising the experience or distracting oneself with routines. These statements reflect resilience or disengagement, possibly influenced by age, experience, or social positioning. Such remarks illustrate how some celebrities maintain emotional boundaries to protect their careers, particularly among male informants who perceive harassment as an unfortunate by-product of public visibility.

Overall, these varying emotional responses highlight individual differences in coping, shaped by personal experience, gender norms, and social pressures of maintaining a public image.

Theme 4: Actions taken by celebrities when facing cyber sexual harassment

a) Common responses and coping mechanisms

The most common coping response was ignoring the harassment, reported by 62% of participants. This passive, emotion-focused strategy was often motivated by a desire to avoid escalation or protect family and public image. Several informants described deliberately disengaging from explicit messages to maintain control over their reactions.

While ignoring is typically framed as instinctive, the findings suggest it is a learned and adaptive behaviour reinforced by experience. In some cases, participants initially responded politely but eventually adopted avoidance after repeated harassment proved unresolvable. This illustrates a shifting coping mechanism over time aligned with the Transactional Model's emphasis on appraisal and adaptation.

b) Blocking perpetrators: Boundary-setting and digital control

The second most common response "blocking the perpetrator" was recorded by 31% of participants. Blocking appears to function as a more proactive boundary-setting strategy, allowing celebrities to take some control over their digital space. SW12 stated:

I just block them so they can't contact me anymore.

This suggests a problem-focused coping response aimed at stopping future interactions. Meanwhile, SW07 highlighted the importance of declining message requests before the sender is aware that their message has been seen:

I immediately decline and block. I don't entertain that stuff... No, I don't reply. You know how we can choose to allow or decline messages? If we allow and read it, the sender will see that we've seen it. But I don't even allow it.

This highlights a high level of platform literacy and strategic use of Instagram's interface to avoid psychological confrontation or escalation. However, some informants expressed frustration at the persistence of harassers, who create new accounts after being blocked, underscoring the inadequacy of platform safeguards.

c) *Collective resistance and advocacy-based coping*

While most coping strategies were individual, a small number of celebrities adopted community-driven or advocacy-based approaches. One participant described mobilising their followers to mass-report abusive accounts, reflecting a shift toward collective digital resistance. Although rare (7.7%), this tactic aligns with findings that social amplification can pressure platforms to act more swiftly (Brevers & Turel, 2019).

Another informant used Instagram stories to raise awareness about harassment, reframing their personal experience as a tool for public education. This form of transformative coping goes beyond self-protection and reflects a desire to influence broader social norms around online abuse. Though infrequent, these responses signal the potential for digital advocacy as a coping and empowerment strategy.

Comparative analysis of gender and celebrity tier dynamics

This subsection explores how emotional responses, coping strategies, and perceptions of platform governance differ across gender and levels of celebrity influence. By examining patterns among male and female celebrities, as well as between macro- and micro-celebrities, the analysis provides a nuanced understanding of how visibility, social expectations, and platform features shape the experience of cyber sexual harassment.

Table 1. Comparative thematic matrix by gender and celebrity tier

| Theme | Female Celebrities | Male Celebrities | Macro-Celebrities (≥100k) | Micro-Celebrities (<100k) |
|-----------------------------------|--|---|---|---|
| 1. Emotional Impact | High emotional burden: anxiety, fear, body shame; felt pressure to maintain image | Mixed responses: discomfort and anger, but some normalized the experience | Greater concern for public image; pressure to remain composed | More expressive about trauma; reported vulnerability |
| 2. Visibility & Vulnerability | Reported more unsolicited DMs and comment harassment tied to appearance | Harassment often dismissed or seen as “banter” | Felt more exposed, especially in comment sections | Reported less volume but more direct attacks via DMs |
| 3. Coping Strategies | Blocking + emotional support seeking; some disengaged from social media | Humour, ignoring, or direct confrontation; emotional responses less disclosed | Often used PR teams or filters; some issued public responses | Used personal coping; leaned on peer or fan support |
| 4. Platform Governance Perception | Felt Instagram protections were inadequate, especially in reporting repeat offenders | Sceptical of enforcement; felt men were taken less seriously | Concerned about loss of follower engagement due to action | Viewed reporting tools as ineffective or performative |
| 5. Gendered Harassment | Frequent comments on body, modesty, and appearance; sexualized messaging | Harassment often mocked or feminized; “man up” language common | Women faced hypervisibility and moral policing | Men experienced underreported harassment and shame |

Theoretical implications

The findings of this study offer significant insights when interpreted through the lens of the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping (TMSC) (Lazarus & Folkman, 1987). The model posits that individuals undergo a two-step cognitive process: primary appraisal (evaluating whether an encounter is threatening) and secondary appraisal (assessing available resources and options for coping). This study's data aligns with, but also extends, this model in several important ways.

First, primary appraisal was evident in participants' initial emotional responses—shock, fear, disgust, and confusion. Many celebrities perceived cyber sexual harassment as a personal and reputational threat, particularly when harassment was public or repeated. Female informants often associated these incidents with bodily violation or moral boundary-crossing, while male participants emphasised concerns about reputational entrapment or smear campaigns. These distinctions highlight how appraisal processes are shaped by gender, visibility, and sociocultural expectations.

Secondary appraisal emerged in the range of coping responses. The most common strategy ignoring harassment reflects an emotion-focused coping style aimed at minimising psychological disruption. Blocking perpetrators represents a more problem-focused effort to assert control over one's digital space. However, some participants transitioned between strategies over time. For example, several informants initially attempted polite engagement or rationalisation, but later shifted to avoidance, public confrontation, or even advocacy. This suggests that coping is dynamic and evolves with repeated exposure, supporting TMSC's view that coping is not fixed, but recalibrated as appraisals shift.

Moreover, the data revealed that coping strategies are not only personal but also shaped by platform affordances and limitations. The decision to block, report, or speak out was often influenced by how effective participants believed Instagram's tools to be. Many viewed reporting mechanisms as inadequate or performative, which affected their confidence in problem-focused strategies. This highlights a key extension to the TMSC: coping resources are not only internal (e.g., resilience, self-regulation) but also structural, tied to the platform's governance and design.

Lastly, while TMSC emphasises short-term coping, this study points to the longer-term emotional toll of cyber sexual harassment. Several participants described lingering fear, emotional exhaustion, and trauma-like symptoms, especially when harassment was ongoing. This supports calls to integrate TMSC with trauma frameworks that address the cumulative toll of digital abuse.

Overall, the findings validate core elements of the TMSC while also demonstrating that celebrity coping is multi-dimensional, socially influenced, and mediated by platform structures.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study provides a comprehensive, theory-grounded examination of cyber sexual harassment experienced by Malaysian celebrities on Instagram, highlighting four key areas: prevalence, perpetrator characteristics, emotional impact, and coping strategies. A majority of participants (77%) reported exposure to unsolicited sexual messages, explicit content, or degrading remarks. Women—especially younger macro-influencers—

were disproportionately affected, with visibility and appearance acting as primary risk factors.

Perpetrators were typically anonymous male users, though cases involving teenagers and female profiles also emerged, complicating assumptions about offender demographics. These findings reveal how anonymity, weak moderation, and youth digital literacy gaps collectively enable harassment to persist.

Emotionally, participants described experiences ranging from shock and fear to trauma and numbness. Male and senior celebrities often reported detachment, while women disclosed deeper emotional distress. These varied reactions align with the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping (TMSC), where threat appraisal and coping resources shape psychological outcomes. Coping responses ranged from emotion-focused strategies (e.g., ignoring, humour, withdrawal) to problem-focused tactics (e.g., blocking, mass-reporting).

A few celebrities also adopted transformative strategies, such as digital advocacy and community-based resistance—though these were limited by ineffective platform tools and recurring harassment from new accounts. Notably, the study finds that coping is not static. Some participants shifted strategies over time, transitioning from disengagement to activism or vice versa. Long-term effects such as emotional exhaustion, hypervigilance, and reputational anxiety suggest a cumulative psychological burden, particularly for public figures under constant scrutiny.

From a practical standpoint, these insights call for:

- Stronger content moderation and platform accountability, especially in private message channels;
- Enhanced user reporting mechanisms that are faster, transparent, and responsive;
- Targeted mental health support for public figures facing chronic online abuse;
- National digital literacy education emphasising consent, online ethics, and respectful engagement, especially among youth.

From a theoretical lens, this study reaffirms the value of TMSC in analysing how individuals in public life appraise and manage digital threats. It also contributes to non-Western cyber harassment literature by addressing a gap in culturally contextualised research from Malaysia.

Directions for future research

Future research should broaden its scope by examining a wider range of public figures, including politicians, athletes, and religious leaders, to understand how experiences and coping strategies differ across roles. Scholars should also investigate how responses vary by harassment type such as image-based abuse, verbal threats, or stalking as each may elicit distinct reactions. Longitudinal studies could reveal how coping mechanisms shift over time with repeated exposure. Additionally, cultural norms and gender expectations warrant attention for their role in shaping digital vulnerability and resilience.

Ultimately, this research highlights the need for coordinated interventions across platform design, institutional policy, and public education to protect individuals who live and work under constant digital scrutiny.

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