



Review Article

Witch-hunting in the digital age: The continued demonization of aging women's sexuality in online spaces

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Abstract

The digital age, while offering unprecedented connectivity and freedom of expression, has also become a breeding ground for harmful stereotypes and discrimination. Historically, women-especially ageing women-have been persecuted based on unfounded fears and suspicions surrounding their bodies and sexuality. This study explores how digital platforms have transformed historical witch hunting into modern-day online persecution of ageing women. By analysing cultural biases, societal double standards, and the anonymity of the internet, the research investigates the factors contributing to this phenomenon. The paper argues that ageing women are particularly vulnerable to online shaming, harassment, and derogatory portrayals due to their intersectional identities. It examines the inadequacies of existing legal frameworks and social media policies in addressing this issue and suggests the need for more targeted regulatory mechanisms to protect older women from online persecution.

Introduction

Witch-hunting has historically symbolized society's persecution of women, especially those who were seen as deviating from established norms. The phenomenon of Witch-hunting primarily targeted women, particularly those who were older,

widowed, unmarried, or otherwise perceived as societal outliers.^[1] These women were often marginalized and demonized, reflecting broader societal fears of female power, autonomy, and sexuality. The Witch-hunting were not just acts of superstition but served as tools to control women's bodies and behaviours, particularly targeting those who were older and no longer conforming to idealized norms of youth and beauty.^[2] Witch-hunting, in essence, functioned as both literal and symbolic mechanisms to suppress women's autonomy, especially older women who lived outside the structures of male authority.

Historically, the connection between female sexuality and accusations of witchcraft was deeply rooted in patriarchal anxieties.^[3] Women who were perceived as sexually deviant or independent-those who did not conform to norms of chastity or

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traditional domestic roles-were often accused of practicing witchcraft. Ageing women were seen as suspicious due to their perceived knowledge of the body and sexuality, particularly if they were involved in midwifery or herbal medicine. These professions, which involved intimate knowledge of female health and reproduction, were often equated with witchcraft.^[4]

The discourse surrounding gender and sexuality has evolved significantly over time, especially with the rise of feminist movements in the 20th and 21st centuries. Initially, feminist discourse focused on the liberation of women from patriarchal structures, advocating for autonomy over their bodies, sexual freedom, and equality in society. These movements helped challenge traditional views of female sexuality, arguing that women's sexual expression was not something to be controlled or shamed. However, older women's sexual agency is often overlooked or stigmatized in cultural discourse.^[5] While younger women's sexuality is widely discussed, ageing women face age-based discrimination in online spaces and feminist discourse.

Ageism and sexism intersect to create a double burden for ageing women, especially regarding their sexuality. Women are judged more harshly than men for ageing, as their worth is often tied to physical appearance and reproductive ability.^[6] This double standard is evident in media and online spaces, where ageing women face ageist and misogynistic backlash that restricts their ability to engage with their sexual identity, reinforcing societal taboos.^[7] For instance, in movies and TV serials, ageing female characters are often relegated to stereotypical roles, such as the wise grandmother or the eccentric spinster.^[8] Romantic comedies often depict older women as comical or pitiable figures, limiting their romantic interests to younger men or dismissing them entirely.^[9] Conversely, ageing men are frequently portrayed as virile and sexually active, celebrating their sexuality.^[10] This contrast reinforces harmful stereotypes: while men are celebrated for sexual activity, women are derided for expressing desire, sustaining societal prejudices against ageing women's sexuality.

The rise of digital platforms has exacerbated the spread of harmful stereotypes, particularly those targeting ageing women.^[11] In the digital age, the

persecution of women-particularly ageing women-has transformed but not disappeared. Social media platforms and other online spaces have become fertile grounds for what can be seen as modern-day Witch-hunting.^[12] Ageing women who assert their sexual identity or deviate from expected norms of behaviour are frequently targets of online harassment, mockery, and demonization.

Cyberbullying has emerged as a significant issue in online spaces, where individuals, particularly those belonging to marginalized groups, are subjected to coordinated attacks, insults, and threats.^[13] Ageing women are especially vulnerable to this form of harassment when they defy the cultural expectation of invisibility or asexuality. Online harassment is often gendered, with comments focusing on a woman's appearance, desirability, and worth.^[14] For ageing women, cyberbullying frequently targets their physical ageing, mocking their sexual expression as "unbecoming" or "unnatural." This harassment reflects deeply ingrained ageism and sexism, often intersecting with cultural taboos about ageing and female sexuality.

This research seeks to examine the continued demonization of ageing women's sexuality in online spaces, drawing parallels to historical Witch-hunting. The primary objective is to explore how online platforms perpetuate ageist and sexist narratives that stigmatize ageing women who express or assert their sexuality. It aims to highlight the legal and social structures that enable such harassment and examine whether existing legal frameworks provide adequate protection for these women.

Marginalization of ageing women's sexuality in the digital age

Feminist theory critiques the societal marginalization of ageing women, often tied to their physical appearance and reproductive capacity. While feminist scholars challenge these stereotypes and assert their agency, ageing women remain marginalized within the feminist discourse itself as much of the conversation around female sexuality focuses on younger women.^[15]

In the age of internet, this marginalization is exacerbated by the demonization of ageing women's sexuality in online spaces. Patriarchal

norms dictate that women's sexuality should conform to age-appropriate expectations, and any deviation is met with hostility. Feminist theory helps unpack this systemic oppression, highlighting the need for a more inclusive and age-sensitive approach to understanding gender and sexuality.

Intersectionality: Age, gender, and sexuality

Intersectionality, a concept introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw, explores how different aspects of identity—such as age, gender, race, and sexuality—intersect to create unique experiences of marginalization or privilege.^[16] For ageing women, the intersection of ageism, sexism, and sexual identity creates a distinct form of oppression that differs from the experiences of younger women or older men. This intersectionality is crucial to understanding the continued demonization of ageing women's sexuality, particularly in online spaces where harassment often combines ageist and sexist rhetoric.

Older women face unique marginalization at the intersection of ageism and sexism. Society values youth, beauty, and productivity, rendering ageing women invisible and pressuring them to conform to desexualized roles. As sexism positions women as sexual objects, their perceived value diminishes with age.^[17] Women who express sexual autonomy, particularly those defying heteronormative or asexual expectations, face even greater scrutiny. LGBTQ+ older women and those challenging sexual taboos encounter intensified marginalization.^[18] Intersectional theory highlights how age, gender, and sexuality combine to make older women especially vulnerable to public shaming, online harassment, and media ridicule, as society polices their sexual expression and identity. Intersectionality is, therefore, an essential tool in analysing how ageing women experience oppression in online spaces.

Online witch-hunting: A modern-day phenomenon

Online witch-hunting have become a pervasive form of public shaming and harassment, particularly targeting ageing women. The internet has provided a new platform for these attacks, where anonymity, virality, and the participatory

nature of social media exacerbate the spread of stigmatization and harassment.^[19] These women become easy targets for ridicule, cyberbullying, and collective outrage simply for not conforming to ageist and sexist expectations. Whether it's sharing a photo, commenting on sexual topics, or participating in public discussions about their personal lives, ageing women are frequently subject to vitriolic attacks that portray them as immoral, deviant, or absurd.^[20]

These attacks are not limited to celebrities or public figures but affect ordinary women as well, whose stories of online harassment often go unnoticed.^[21] Women who post content that is perceived as too sexual for their age are shamed into silence. The internet serves as a public forum where gender and age intersect to create a particularly hostile environment for these women, reinforcing the notion that women's worth diminishes as they age, especially when they dare to be visible and vocal about their sexuality.

Hashtags, memes, and viral content: The spread of stigmatization

In the digital age, online witch-hunting are often amplified through the use of hashtags, memes, and viral content. Social media platforms like Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok serve as conduits for rapid information dissemination, allowing stigmatizing content to reach vast audiences within a short period of time. Hashtags can serve as rallying points for coordinated attacks on women who become targets of online harassment, creating echo chambers where ageist and sexist discourse flourishes.^[22]

Memes are a particularly powerful tool in the spread of stigmatization, reducing complex social issues into digestible, often humorous, visual content that is easy to share and replicate.^[23] When ageing women are depicted in memes, their bodies and sexuality are frequently mocked. Memes act as a digital form of public humiliation, enabling widespread shaming and ridicule of women who challenge norms around ageing and sexuality.

The viral nature of content on social media also exacerbates the effects of these online witch-hunting. A single post, comment, or image can be shared millions of times, subjecting the target to an

overwhelming wave of public shaming.^[24] The sheer volume of responses can overwhelm women, making it difficult for them to defend themselves or seek support. This virality also means that the harassment often spirals out of control, drawing in people who may not have even encountered the original content but who join the witch hunt for the sake of participation, further amplifying the stigmatization of ageing women.

Online Witch-hunting represent a modern-day continuation of historical patterns of persecution, particularly in relation to ageing women's sexuality. The use of hashtags, memes, and viral content facilitates the rapid spread of stigmatization, turning the internet into a platform where ageing women are continually marginalized and demonized.

Cultural and social taboos on ageing and sexuality

Cultural taboos around ageing and sexuality are deeply rooted in societal norms that prioritize youth, beauty, and fertility, devaluing women as they age. Society often views older women as "past their prime," "making their sexual expression taboo, while moral policing dictates that they should adhere to "age-appropriate" behaviour, avoiding provocative dress or discussions of sexuality.^[25] Media further reinforces this by glorifying youthful desire and ignoring older women's sexuality, perpetuating the notion that they should accept desexualisation. Online spaces exacerbate these taboos, where anonymity and algorithmic amplification enable the rapid spread of shaming and harassment against ageing women who embrace their sexuality.

Psychological impact on ageing women: Self-perception and mental health

The stigmatization of ageing women's sexuality, particularly in digital spaces, has significant psychological impacts. Constant ridicule and online harassment can negatively affect their self-perception, leading to feelings of shame, inadequacy, and diminished self-worth. Many ageing women internalize societal pressures to conform to desexualized roles, resulting in reduced confidence and fear of expressing their sexual identity. The fear of public judgment and shaming

often forces self-censorship, limiting their ability to engage in authentic relationships or explore their desires. This environment of ageist and sexist harassment fosters mental health struggles like depression, anxiety, and isolation. As a result, many ageing women withdraw from public and digital spaces, reinforcing their social isolation and exacerbating feelings of invisibility and worthlessness.^[26]

Ageism and misogyny in online communities: Trolls, cyberbullies, and online mobs

The intersection of ageism and misogyny in online spaces creates a hostile environment for ageing women. In these virtual communities, ageist and sexist ideologies often merge, resulting in targeted harassment that devalues both a woman's gender and age. Trolls, cyberbullies, and online mobs are the primary perpetrators of ageist and misogynistic attacks on ageing women in digital spaces.

Internet trolls engage in provocative behaviour, intentionally seeking to upset or harm their targets. For ageing women, trolls often exploit ageist and misogynistic stereotypes, mocking their appearance, questioning their relevance, and shaming them for expressing their sexuality.^[27] Trolls often post inflammatory comments or share doctored images that ridicule older women, provoking further abuse from other users.

Cyberbullies, unlike trolls who primarily seek attention, aim to cause emotional distress. The repeated, relentless nature of this abuse can have long-term emotional and psychological effects on the victims.^[28]

Through social media hashtags, viral posts, or comment threads, mobs of social media users can collectively shame and dehumanize ageing women. These mob dynamics create a culture of "digital Witch-hunting", where one person's expression of sexuality or confidence invites a flood of mockery and abuse, often extending far beyond the original post or context.^[29]

These actors often leverage platforms' anonymity features and lack of immediate consequences to amplify their attacks, making ageing women particularly vulnerable to mob harassment.

Platforms that enable or deter harassment

The architecture and policies of social media platforms play a crucial role in either enabling or deterring harassment. The character-limited format of Twitter and the forum-based structure of Reddit contribute to their potential for fostering toxic environments.^[30] Twitter's brevity encourages emotionally charged responses, while Reddit's subcommunities allow like-minded individuals to congregate in hateful spaces. Both platforms have features that can amplify harmful content, such as hashtags, re tweets, and upvoting/downvoting. This can lead to the rapid spread of ageist and sexist messages, creating echo chambers that reinforce harmful views about ageing and gender.

On the other hand, Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok have implemented features to mitigate harassment. Instagram's focus on visual content and stronger moderation tools, along with features like comment filters and restricted accounts, help reduce overt trolling.^[31] Facebook's real-name policy and community standards aim to deter anonymous harassment,^[32] while TikTok's emphasis on creative expression and personal video moderation can help limit some forms of abuse.^[33] Other social media platform, such as Telegram, Snapchat, WhatsApp, YouTube, also have similar policies to prevent online abuses. However, all these platforms continue to face challenges in addressing ageism and misogyny.

Legal responses to online harassment in India

The rise of online harassment has prompted discussions around legal frameworks to address these issues. India's digital landscape has expanded significantly in recent years, making it necessary to assess how existing laws deal with gendered and ageist harassment in online spaces.

The Indian Constitution, while providing a robust framework for individual rights and freedoms, faces challenges in addressing online abuse. While Article 14 prohibits discrimination and Article 19(1)(a) allows for reasonable restrictions on freedom of speech, the rapid evolution of technology and the anonymity offered by the internet can hinder effective enforcement and protection of guaranteed rights.^[34] Moreover, the implied right to privacy under Article 21,

recognized by the Supreme Court,^[35] provides some protection against online harassment, but its scope and limitations remain to be fully defined.^[36] Article 21 serves as a cornerstone for legal challenges against online abuse, providing a constitutional basis for seeking protection and redress. This Article ensures that individuals have the right to live with human dignity, free from threats to their mental and emotional well-being. Online harassment, cybers talking, and other forms of online abuse can directly violate this fundamental right by causing severe distress and interfering with an individual's personal life.

The Information Technology Act, 2000 (hereinafter referred as IT Act) is the primary legislation dealing with cybercrimes in India. Section 66E which addresses privacy violations through images. In *State (cyber cell) v Yogesh Pandurang Prabhu*,^[37] the accused was convicted of sending obscene emails and creating a fake profile of the complainant, is a landmark case that dealt with cybers talking and the misuse of technology to harass and intimidate individuals. Section 67 of the Act regulates the transmission of obscene material, provide some protection for victims of online abuse. However, these sections are general in nature and not specifically tailored to gendered or ageist harassment.

Indian Penal Code (IPC) [Now Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita 2023(BNS)] also addresses certain forms of harassment through its provisions on defamation, criminal intimidation, and outraging the modesty of women. Sections 499, 503, and 507 of the Indian Penal Code [Section 356, Section 351 (1) & (4) of BNS] criminalize actions that intentionally damage a person's reputation, including defamation and threats. Section 354D (Section 78 of BNS) deals with stalking, including online stalking, while Section 509 (Section 79 of BNS) penalizes acts that insult the modesty of women, including abusive or obscene online messages.^[38]

Several significant cases in India have shaped the development of jurisprudence on cyberbullying. The *Shreya Singhal v. Union of India* case^[39] was a pivotal moment, where the Supreme Court invalidated Section 66A of the IT Act, deeming it unconstitutional. This ruling was significant as it reinforced the protection of free speech while

highlighting the need for a balanced legal framework to tackle cybercrimes without infringing on fundamental rights. Subsequent cases, like *Rajat Prasad v. CBI*^[40] and *Swami Ramdev v. Juggernaut Books Pvt Ltd*,^[41] further provided legal clarity on issues of online harassment and defamation, setting important precedents for addressing cyberbullying within the scope of Indian law. These rulings have played a key role in shaping how courts balance free speech with the need to curb online abuse.

In *Sazzadur Rahman v. State of Assam and Ors*[42], the accused created a fake Facebook profile of a 15-year-old girl, posting obscene images and derogatory comments, affecting her mental and academic well-being. The trial court denied the accused's application under Section 311 CrPC. On appeal, the Gauhati High Court dismissed the petition under Section 482 and Sections 401/397 CrPC, holding that the trial court had acted judiciously, and its discretion could not be interfered with. This case highlights the importance of respecting judicial discretion in matters involving online harassment.

In *Shubham Bansal v. State (Govt of NCT Delhi)*,^[43] the accused created a fake Facebook account using the victim's phone number, leading to her harassment. The Delhi High Court rejected the accused's plea to drop proceedings under Section 66A of the IT Act and Section 509 IPC. The court emphasized the importance of thorough investigation in cases of online harassment, directing the investigating officer to withhold the final report until the Magistrate ruled on the victim's application for further investigation under Section 173(8) CrPC.

In *Hareesh v. State of Kerala*,^[44] the accused created a fake Facebook profile, posted morphed obscene images of the victim, and shared her mobile number to incite sexual harassment. The accused applied for anticipatory bail apprehending arrest in respect of offences punishable under Section 354D of IPC and Sections 67 and 67E of the IT Act. The Kerala High Court rejected the bail application, citing clear evidence of involvement and the need to avoid interference with the investigation. The significance of this ruling lies in the court's firm stance on protecting victims of cybercrime and upholding the integrity of

investigations in such serious offenses.

Concerns regarding rising incidents of cybercrime, the Indian government has set up a cybercrime reporting portal that allows individuals to report incidents of online abuse, including harassment of women and children. While this is a positive step, many victims may not be aware of these mechanisms or may face barriers to accessing them.^[45]

Challenges and limitations in addressing online harassment

Despite the existence of legal provisions to combat online harassment, several factors hinder the effective protection of ageing women in India. India's existing legal framework, primarily the Information Technology Act, 2000, is often considered inadequate to address the nuances of online harassment.^[46] Moreover, the anonymity offered by online platforms and the cross-border nature of the internet can make it challenging to identify and apprehend perpetrators, deterring victims from reporting harassment and reducing the chances of successful prosecution.^[47]

Many victims of online harassment may not be aware of their legal rights or may hesitate to report the abuse due to fear of further harassment, lack of trust in law enforcement, or the perception that reporting is futile.^[48] Furthermore, law enforcement agencies and judicial systems may lack the necessary resources and expertise to investigate and prosecute online harassment cases effectively, leading to delays, dismissal of cases, and inadequate justice for victims.^[49] The Indian courts are overburdened with backlogs, leading to delays in resolving online harassment cases.

Cultural and social attitudes towards ageing and women's sexuality can hinder the effective implementation of legal protections against online harassment in India.^[50] Ageism and misogyny can lead to the dismissal of older women's experiences. Patriarchal norms and limited awareness can discourage women from reporting harassment.^[51]

Recommendations for strengthening legal and social responses

To address the challenges faced by ageing women

in the face of online harassment, a crucial step is to strengthen existing legal frameworks. Given the Information Technology Act, 2000, which already provides some provisions related to cybercrime, it is recommended to amend this act to specifically address online harassment against ageing women. This would ensure that the law is aligned with the evolving nature of online threats and provides tailored protection for this vulnerable group. Secondly, public awareness campaigns should be launched to educate individuals about their rights and the legal remedies available to them in case of online harassment. This would encourage victims to report abuse and seek justice. Law enforcement officials and judges should also receive training on gender-based violence, cybercrime, and the specific challenges faced by ageing women to enhance their understanding of the issues and improve their ability to investigate and prosecute cases effectively. Thirdly, the cybercrime reporting portal should be made more accessible and user-friendly, and its effectiveness should be regularly monitored and improved. Collaboration with social media platforms and other online platforms is also essential to address online harassment. Platforms should be encouraged to adopt stronger measures to prevent and mitigate abuse, such as implementing robust reporting mechanisms and improving content moderation. Finally, efforts should be made to challenge cultural and social attitudes towards ageing and women's sexuality. This could involve promoting gender equality and challenging harmful stereotypes through public education campaigns, media representation, and community engagement. By implementing these recommendations, India can strengthen its legal and social framework to protect ageing women from online harassment and ensure that they can live with dignity and respect in the digital age.

Conclusion

The digital age, while fostering connectivity, has also amplified ageist and sexist narratives, particularly against ageing women who assert their sexuality. This research draws parallels between online stigmatization and historical witch-hunting, highlighting how online platforms perpetuate harmful stereotypes. Ageing women face public shaming, harassment, and ridicule due to the intersection of age, gender, and sexuality, with hashtags, memes, and viral content accelerating

their marginalization. While India's legal frameworks provide some protection, they are inadequate in addressing the gendered and ageist abuse prevalent online. The study recommends amending the Information Technology Act, 2000, raising public awareness, enhancing law enforcement training, and strengthening cyber crime reporting mechanisms. A collaborative effort with online platforms is essential to create an inclusive space where ageing women can express their sexuality without fear of persecution.

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