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## RESEARCH BRIEF:

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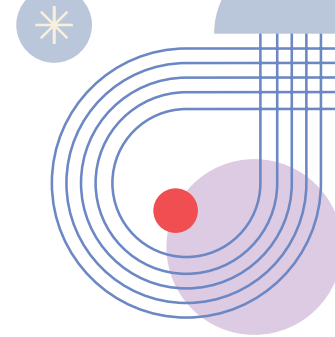
*“They say anything to women, and nothing happens.”*

# Technology-facilitated gender-based violence perpetrated by male students in higher education spaces in South Africa

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## BACKGROUND

Male-perpetrated sexual violence (SV) against women in higher education institutions (HEIs), including Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) colleges, is prevalent across South Africa. A recent study found that one in five women reported experiencing sexual violence in higher education spaces in the past year, either from a partner or a non-partner.<sup>1</sup>

While much of the existing research on SV focuses on in-person perpetration, less attention has been paid to the growing issue of technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV) by male students. The rapid expansion of social media and cellphone use has given rise to new forms of TFGBV, yet there remains little understanding of the motivations behind men's perpetration of such violence. This highlights an urgent need to explore this pressing issue within South African HEIs.

## AIM

This study explored how and why male students (ages 18-30 years) in South African HEIs perpetrate TFGBV against women students, and how these behaviours are shaped by social and digital contexts.

## METHODS

We conducted qualitative in-depth interviews with 24 male TVET college students (ages 18-30) who date women in South Africa. We recruited these students from different TVET colleges through purposive and snowball sampling strategies. We analysed data inductively using thematic analysis.<sup>2</sup> Ethical approval was granted by the South African Medical Research Council (SAMRC), the Human Research Ethics Committee, and all participants provided written consent prior to participation.

## RESULTS

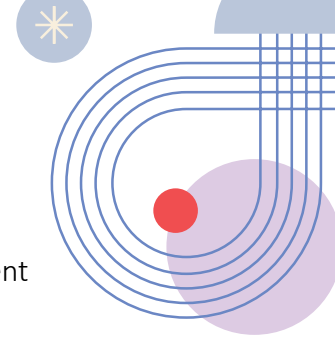
### Use of social media platforms by college students

Male college students described using social media platforms for multiple reasons: for leisure, to reduce or tackle boredom while on campus, to connect with peers, for communication and information, and for educational purposes.

*"At my college social media like Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram are usually used for things like posting pictures, and different types of content, ... I could say that phones have become one of the most important assets to people, ... social media is also used for communication, especially communication with other fellow students on different matters like tests and NSFAS [student financial aid system] issues and so on." [Lwandle]*

Social media and digital platforms were also described as an important way for men to interact with women. Some described using these platforms to find intimate partners, and also to solicit sex online because "...women students [on campus] prefer to date older, rich men" [Andile]. Similar sentiments were shared by another participant who expressed, "Most guys like women a lot, so some interactions include them pursuing or flirting with girls online. You do find those kinds of interactions, ..." [Lwandle].

Our data revealed various forms of TFGBV, including the non-consensual sharing of women's explicit images or videos after a relationship had ended, body shaming and humiliating women online, and, in male online



groups, bonding that occurs through sexualising women and sharing sexually explicit content of them. As one student commented about online spaces:

*“I would say that people do not care about gender equality on social media. Males use power over females. They say anything to women, and nothing happens. On social media gender equality does not exist. Uhm males have power over females.” [Mandla]*



Based on our interviews and analysis, we identified three main drivers of TFGBV described by the male students:

- 1) Male rejection by women – with men attempting to use the online world to reassert power and control after being rejected by women.
- 2) Disciplining of women – where women who were thought to have transgressed norms of femininity were often subjected to male perpetrated abuse.
- 3) Male bonding – much of the abusive behaviour men perpetrated was also about bonding with other men and establishing their masculinity and heterosexuality with one another.

### Male rejection by women

A key driver of male perpetrated TFGBV was men’s attempts to assert power and control over women after experiencing rejection, either when pursuing a relationship or following a breakup.

*“In most instances, a guy will pursue a lady online, and the lady might not be interested. Other guys don’t deal well with rejection, so their natural response is ‘violence’, the guy would then insult the woman to the point where he says negative things about her body and looks. Those are the types of abuse women face on social media. In some cases, a guy will share pictures of his ex-girlfriend, speaking negatively about her, mentioning humiliating things about their sex life.” [Viwe]*

Participants spoke about male students who, when rejected, would spread rumors about women online, with some posting nudes — sexually explicit or intimate images and videos of women, often shared without their consent — of their former partners as retaliation for relationship breakdown: *“You find a guy would say [online], ‘she [ex-girlfriend] is cold in bed’ which are bad words and words that humiliate.” [Mandla]*

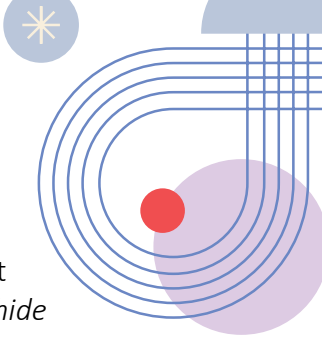
Similarly:

*“...a post I saw that I remember from the top of my head, a guy posted a girl he used to be in a relationship with, the girl dumped him. After she dumped him, the guy started posting pictures of the girl and making negative remarks about her, even to the point of commenting about her private parts and shaming her.” [Viwe]*

### Disciplining of women

Male participants frequently discussed making negative, insulting, and abusive comments towards women online. These behaviours were often carried out to discipline women who they felt had transgressed “feminine norms” of respectability. For example, women who posted pictures of themselves online were described as “selling themselves”:

*“Someone may comment on my comment saying, ‘girls post such pictures so that men can lust over them’ ... others are straight forward negative; girls being accused of selling themselves through the pictures they post.” [Viwe]*



The anonymity of social media platforms was key in enabling this behaviour. One participant said: “... They [men] use the advantage that the girl can’t actually see them, so they kind of hide behind their profile.” [Langa]

### Digital platforms as spaces for male bonding

Participants also described how the shaming, sexualisation and stigmatisation of women online were not only about asserting male power and control over women, but also about bonding with other young men. According to the men we interviewed, online group chats became spaces in which male students talked about women’s bodies and sex to affirm their masculinity and heterosexuality to other men.

The young men described several ways in which online communication was used to establish themselves as ‘successful’ heterosexual young men. Sharing of nudes of women was a common bonding activity among some college male students:

*“There are a few things I have witnessed, ... Firstly, it’s the main one where a girl sends her nudes to her boyfriend or a boy she’s flirting with, then he shows them to other boys around school or in the community. It has also happened that some have taken videos while having sex, ... but the boy later shows us the videos as a group of guys and boasts about how he had sex with that girl...”* [Langa]

The importance of who the audience was when sharing nude photos was highlighted:

*“I think it is wrong to share it [sexually explicit photos of their intimate partners] with a certain audience, maybe you can share it with your friends or people you trust. I may not necessarily say that it is entirely wrong because it is something that is common amongst guys, but the audience you are sharing it with is very important.”* [Lwandle]

Group chats also became spaces where men bet on who could have sex with different women, reinforcing misogynistic behaviours and the sexualisation of their female peers:

*“We make bets as guys on whether you will get the girl or not. Since no one likes losing, you apply pressure on the girl on social media so you can get her, without realising that she is no longer comfortable.”* [Viwe]

### Gender-equitable and anti-violence male students

Some men we interviewed actively contested male perpetrated TFGBV, emphasising the important role men can play in creating gender equitable online spaces:

*“It is unfortunate that they [women] should be doing anything to avoid sexual violence online, they should be able to post anything they want to post and are comfortable with posting without having to think twice about it. I think for me the question should be, ‘what is it that men can do to allow women a safe space to post freely on social media.’ ”* [Viwe]

A few men demonstrated empathy towards women subjected to TFGBV, recognising the pain it caused: *“Talking badly about women [online] like that can lead them to lose confidence, even consider suicide, or fall into worse situations.”* [Buntu]. Some men also spoke about how they wanted to disrupt and challenge their male friend’s behaviour online towards women: *“In my circle of friends, it [bullying of women online] has not happened, but if it does, I am certain I would call them to order, I believe women should be respected.”* [Viwe]



## Implications for Policy, Research, and Practice

Findings from this study highlight TFGBV in South African HEIs is deeply connected to wider patterns of male dominance, control over women<sup>3</sup> and peer bonding between men.<sup>4</sup> Online spaces have become extensions of campus environments where gendered hierarchies are both reinforced and contested. These insights underscore the urgent need for coordinated action across research, institutional policy, and practice to build safer, more equitable, and respectful digital environments in HEIs. \*

Notably, some men also reflected critically on how different digital platforms create the conditions that enables this abuse, while other platforms may limit it. Despite the high prevalence of TFGBV among male students in HEIs, some male students expressed gender-equitable attitudes, were keen to disrupt and challenge misogynistic abuse, and actively wanted to create more respectful online spaces.

### For research:

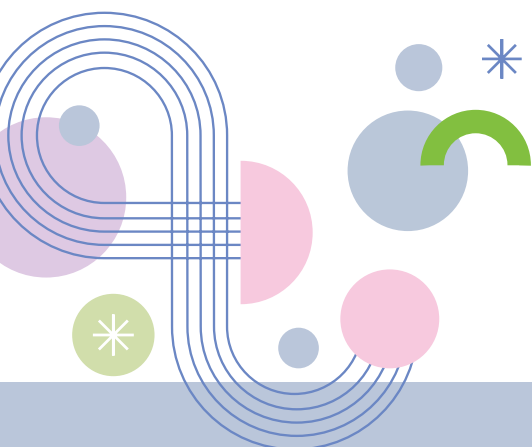
- **Deepen understanding of digital dynamics:** Further research should explore how specific digital platforms shape or constrain TFGBV, identifying the platform features that enable or limit abuse.
- **Evaluate interventions:** Longitudinal and mixed-method studies are needed to assess the impact of gender-transformative and peer-focused interventions on reducing TFGBV.
- **Document positive masculinities:** More studies are needed on men who resist or challenge misogynistic behaviours online, to understand how gender-equitable attitudes can be fostered and scaled within HEIs.

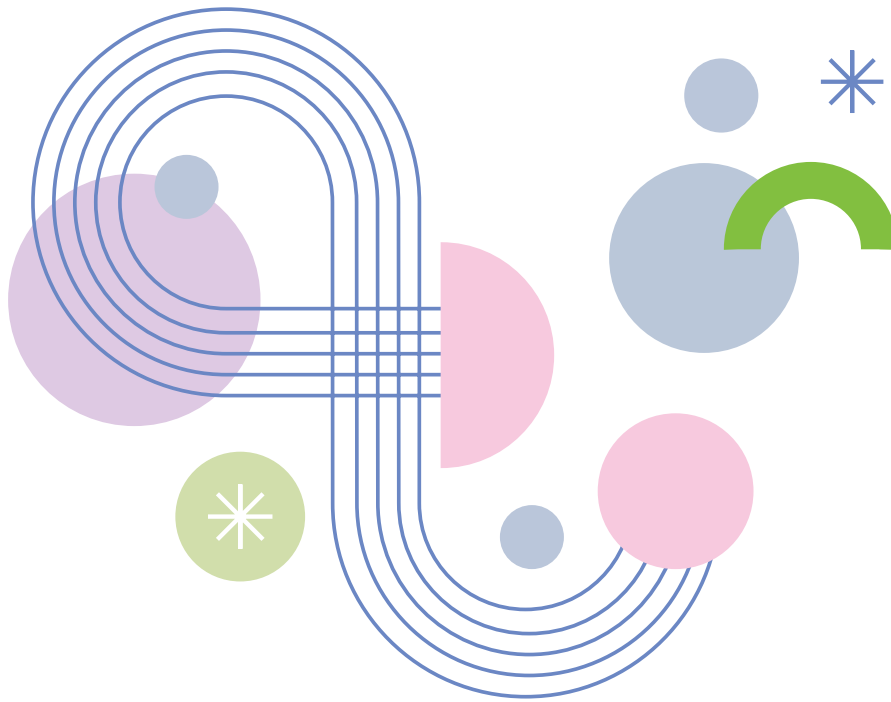
### For policy:

- **Develop comprehensive institutional frameworks:** HEIs should adopt clear, enforceable policies addressing TFGBV, with explicit definitions, prevention strategies, and digital conduct guidelines.
- **Engage digital platform providers:** Policymakers and HEIs should collaborate with social media and tech companies to tackle structural drivers of TFGBV, such as anonymity and the sharing of non-consensual intimate content.
- **Embed accountability mechanisms:** Policies must include transparent procedures for reporting, investigating, and sanctioning online abuse, ensuring survivor-centred responses.

### For practice:

- **Implement gender-transformative programmes:** Evidence-based initiatives that address male power, misogyny, and sexual entitlement are vital for shifting harmful norms and promoting empathy and respect online.
- **Work with male peer groups:** Interventions should target male peer dynamics on campus, fostering positive role modelling, allyship, and accountability among men.





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