
Sarahah in Bangladesh: A Study on Anonymity and Social Media in Developing Countries

Fayika Farhat Nova

1st year PhD Student
Marquette University
Milwaukee, WI, USA
fayikafarhat.nova@marquette.edu

Md. Rashidujjaman Rifat

1st Year PhD Student
University of Toronto,
Toronto, ON, CA
rifat@cs.toronto.edu

Pratyasha Saha

4th Year Undergrad Student
University of Dhaka,
Dhaka, Bangladesh
pratyasha.saha1195@gmail.com

Syed Ishtiaque Ahmed

Asst. Professor,
University of Toronto,
Toronto, ON, CA
ishtiaque@cs.toronto.edu

Shion Guha

Asst. Professor.
Marquette University
Milwaukee, WI, USA
shion.guha@marquette.edu

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Abstract

In this study, we have addressed two important aspects of anonymity in anonymous social application from the standpoint of a developing country- Bangladesh. First, this study has analyzed the data collected from the users of an anonymous application Sarahah in Bangladesh to explain the context of preferable anonymous audience and its dynamic functionalities in communication. Second, this study sheds light on how anonymous application works as a trigger of online harassment, specifically toward the females in a developing country like Bangladesh.

Author Keywords

Anonymity; Social Media; Anonymous Application; Sarahah; Harassment;

ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous;

Introduction

Social media communication has become a significant part of human life. Though the traditional communication often requires two people knowing each

other, now with the growth of internet, people care a lot about their privacy (for different purposes) online and prefer to be unidentified by hiding any traceable identifier [10]. Anonymity in a communication can be defined as “*unlinkability between the initiator and responder, where these two entities cannot be identified as communicating with each other*” [18]. Anonymity allows people to participate in unconventional conversations, which may be scrutinized under traditional circumstances, without any fear [5]. There are multiple online anonymous applications in the market right now and the one of the most recent and popular ones is Sarahah. Sarahah is a semi-anonymous social media application that allows its users to receive messages from others anonymously. It is regarded as a semi-anonymous application, because while the sender knows the identity of the receiver, the same is not true for the receiver. *Sarahah*, roughly means “honesty” in Arabic, was originally designed to receive feedback from the buyers in a commercial setting [14]. It was released in 2017 in US, and according to BBC News (August, 2017), now this app has almost 300 million users worldwide [13]. Sarahah’s popularity has not only surfaced within the US or the western territories, but also spread to many low and middle-income countries which are also known as “developing countries” [17]. Despite this popularity, since Sarahah is a comparatively new application, very little research has been done on its use (and abuse). More specifically, to our knowledge, no empirical study has been conducted on Sarahah targeting the socio-cultural context of a developing country. According to a previous research done in ICTD, in issues related to privacy and technology, development context always gets ignored by most of the researchers [1].

In our study, we are interested to explore anonymity in the context of a developing country to identify the importance of socio-cultural differences in this regard. From our study, we have seen that, in Bangladesh, anonymity can operate as a blurred notion - as in Sarahah, people could even identify the senders in many cases. Also, cyberbullying and harassment are common phenomena on this application those mostly depend on the social construction of gender role.

Background

Communities like CHI and CSCW have a long history of working on anonymity, and privacy [7, 12]. Anonymity can either bring out the kindness and generosity out of people, or can lead to some illegal, harmful, and mischievous acts [10]. People use the protection of anonymity to reduce the social risks of discussing unpopular opinions and tabooed topics [10]. When the traditional social media communication becomes “mainstream”, and goes under scrutiny, people search for a new platform with an exclusive audience and control [3], and the need for anonymity arises. In response, Ask.fm, Whisper, Secret, Yik Yak (now defunct) and many such applications have started providing their users with an anonymous platform for communication [3, 9]. It has been well-reported that violence, aggression, trolling, hostile commenting, deception, and cyberbullying are more common to people who are in disguise on these platforms [5, 12]. For example, in one study, people on Ask.fm were found to be more negative than the people on some other social media apps (like Instagram) [11]. Nine suicides are thought to be linked with this negativity of Ask.fm [9]. As the victims were distressed enough to commit suicide. it can be assumed that audience plays an important role in anonymous applications. Content

shared to and by certain audiences can create strong feelings of regrets [19] and embarrassment [15]. Hence, it is important to define the target audience through the concept of anonymity to identify its adversarial effects like harassment on the users. Such issues are even more important for developing countries where use of Sarahah has become viral and yet, due to weak legal and support infrastructures [1] [2], there is no scaffolding mechanisms for the victims. Based on previous work in anonymity and present data collected from development context, we seek to find answers to the following questions:

RQ1. How does audience management affect the notion of anonymity in applications like Sarahah?

RQ2. How are negative behaviors (cyberbullying, harassment etc.) mediated by anonymity in Sarahah?

Method

We conducted a mixed-methods study by conducting an online survey and a set of semi-structured interviews in Dhaka, Bangladesh. We circulated the survey questionnaire before the interview in order to collect general information about the impression of anonymity among the users in that country. The survey was designed to obtain insights from a user perspective. The survey was open to all anonymous applications to get better understanding about the concepts of anonymity among the users. The questions of the interviews, on the other hand, were designed to understand the individual insights and opinions. As this is a work in progress, for data analysis, we performed basic mathematical calculations (getting total and individual percentages). Both the survey and the interviews were conducted in Bengali and translated and transcribed by Bengali speaking members of our team.

QUESTIONS	PROPORTIONS
APP USAGE	Sarahah (51.41%) Ask.fm (42.25%)
PREFERRED AUDIENCE	Known people (56.92%) Unknown people interested in me (23.85%)
HARASSMENT	Yes (42%) No (42%)
REACTION TO HARASSMENT	Direct communication (39.29%) Block (23.81%)

Figure 1: Initial Survey Insights

Participants

The survey was participated by 289 anonymous Bangladeshi participants among whom 97 disclosed their gender. Of these 97 participants, 55 were male and 42 were female. They were selected from the extended mutual social networks and their identifications were not collected as well during the interviews. Using a snowball sampling method [8], we conducted 12 interviewees (3 females, 9 males) with participants from Dhaka, Bangladesh, who had some past experiences of using Sarahah.

Initial Findings

We started with initial, descriptive statistics on the data collected through the survey that are presented in Figure 1. We present below some of our initial findings.

Levels of anonymity

From the survey, it was evident that our participants were much more familiar with using Sarahah (51.4%) than other anonymous applications. Most survey participants (around 88%) as well as all of the interviewees have said that they got introduced to these anonymous applications through Facebook when their friends asked for their anonymous participation through those applications. Hence, it is often expected that the messages that come through Sarahah are not entirely coming from anonymous source, but from the Facebook contacts. In other words, in Sarahah, the senders often have a connection to the receivers over a different social network.

Social ties are important to understand the use of Sarahah in Bangladesh. From both survey and interviews, we have observed that the participants are influenced by their social media network while using

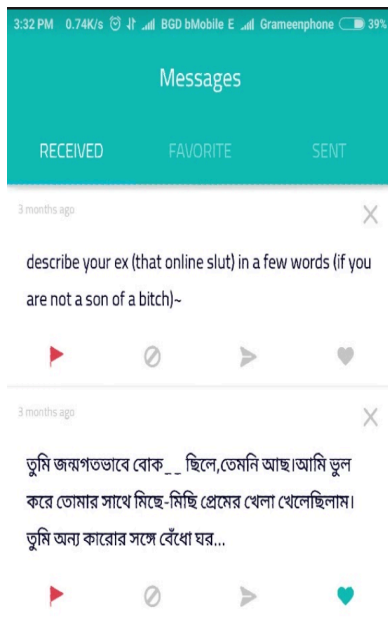


Figure 2: Exemplar Screenshot depicting aggressive content

Sarahah. In 5.22% cases, our participants were influenced by their friends who were already using the application and felt contemplated to join their friends and be anonymous regardless of any necessity. Scholars opine that if any behavior is practiced multiple times through a social tie, the possibility of adopting the behavior increases [4]. This theory may explain such behavior.

Identity management and disclosure

The idea of anonymity among our participants also adds an interesting dimension to this study. Although Sarahah is supposed to be an anonymous application, and basically anybody can talk to anybody through Sarahah, all our interviewees have said that they only want to be connected with their known contacts through Sarahah. 56.92% survey participants have also said the same. This perception of anonymity contradicts how anonymity is defined traditionally [10]. To our participants, anonymity is often just a lack of visibility, as opposed to be truly anonymous. Social traditions like *Don't talk to strangers* [6] may explain such behavioral trait. This leads us to the question: do people really stay anonymous on Sarahah? 65.79% of the participants and all the interviewees have reported that they could sometimes guess their senders on Sarahah. Since the Sarahah link is usually shared on existing social media, it is expected that only the existing social contacts will respond. Socio-cultural context and social ties between the receiver and sender contribute toward the identity disclosure, too. The strategies include matching one's writing style, particularly the use of languages, words, verbs, etc. (42.59%). While mentioning a post sent by an anonymous sender, one interviewee said it was easier for him to identify the sender, as he knew who would explicitly use such slang

words in the given context with him. Although Sarahah was the communicating platform here, the condition of anonymity was absent there.

Similar association is also seen in case of strong negative social ties. One of our interviewees shared with us a screen shot [Figure 2], the first post used offensive language like "slut" and "son of a bitch" to ask about his ex-girlfriend. While indicating strong negative association with the sender, the interviewee said, (from his past encounters) he could identify the sender right away because only one person would call him and his ex in that way. This resonates a similar behavioral trait that we have discussed earlier regarding a positive social tie. This supports the notion that the stronger a social tie is, the chances of self-disclosure are higher [12]. Although Sarahah is an anonymous application, true anonymity is not what many users seek here.

Negativity and harassment

Anonymity often promotes online negativity [20]. In our survey, 51.61% of participants mentioned that they faced various kinds of harassment through Sarahah, and among them female victims are 68.75% and male victims are 31.25%. The harassing messages included sharing offensive undesirable comments, sexual desires etc. For example, according to a female interviewee, she had received an anonymous message in Sarahah asking about her breast size and whether she wanted to be sexually touched by the sender. 9 out of our 9 male interviewees also mentioned that they knew at least one woman who was harassed through Sarahah. Such findings support the existing literature on harassment over anonymous social network. However, in places like Bangladesh, where women are furthered

marginalized, such harassment may push them toward stopping using this app and even using internet altogether.

How the victims responded to those harassments is also an interesting factor perceived in our study. In the survey, only 39.29% of our participants said they protested harassment using Facebook. While 50% of our male participants could do this, only 27.5% of our female participants could do the same. However, those brave female participants reported that after their protesting the harassing posts the level of harassment only increased. As the senders were often hidden in their existing social media network, their protests only worked as a symbol of success for the harassers. One of our female interviewees shared her experience of online harassment saying how one sender explicitly described the sexual activities he wished to perform with her. Instead of giving a strict answer or protesting, she deleted her own account in fear of being even more harassed in future. Unaccountability perceived through anonymity can trigger negative behaviors like cyber-bullying. Researchers have coined the term *deindividuation* to define acts where negative behaviors increase because of the anonymity [5]. Deindividuation is a psychological state where an individual becomes a part of an unknown crowd and displays antinormative and disinhibited behavior [5, 16]. Some researchers coined it as *cyberdisinhibition* when this kind of behavioral happens online [21]. In Bangladesh, when the anonymity through Sarahah only makes the harasser hidden among a known crowd, the impact of harassment only takes a new level of disgust, as our interviewees opined.

Conclusion

This ongoing project has already revealed some interesting information around how anonymous applications function in developing contexts, specifically Bangladesh, and how that adds to the existing challenges of negativity and harassment in anonymous social networks. We believe that this project will further unfold many lessons that will be interesting to communities studying ICTD, privacy, security, social network, and HCI in general.

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