# Digital Violence in Kuwait:
## Unpacking Women's Experiences

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# Acknowledgment

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## Partners

**Produced by: The SecDev Foundation**
This Canada-based NGO works globally to promote digital resilience among vulnerable populations. Working most often with women, youth and at-risk civil society organizations, the Foundation helps people protect themselves from an evolving world of digital harms. Ultimately, that helps people build their own capacity to make life better for themselves and their communities.

**Coordinated by: Salam@**
This Foundation-supported project promotes digital resilience across the Middle East and North Africa, especially among women and youth. From 2019 to 2022, Salam@ led intensive frontline work—from training to awareness campaigns—in Algeria, Bahrain, Jordan, Kuwait, Libya, Morocco and Tunisia. The team is also now tackling the research gap on digital violence against women across the MENA region.

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# Introduction

According to the United Nations (UN), violence against women is defined as "any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual, or mental harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life" [1]. With the rapid development of technology in the digital era, technology-facilitated manifestations of violence began circulating, which explains the rise of the terms "technology-facilitated violence", "cyber violence", and "digital violence". Although technology can serve as a helpful communicative tool for women who are at risk of abuse and harm, abusers can take advantage of technology and use it as a method of controlling and monitoring victims. Digital violence, or technology-facilitated violence, is defined as a spectrum of behaviors perpetrated online, offline, and through a range of technologies, including artificial intelligence, live streaming, GPS tracking, and social media [2]. Forms of digital violence against women and girls are numerous, and new forms can be expected with further advancements in the digital world. Digital violence includes, but is not limited to, cyber stalking, non-consensual pornography, also known as 'revenge porn', gender-based slurs and harassment, such as 'slut-shaming', sharing of unsolicited explicit content, rape threats, death threats, and electronically facilitated trafficking.

Gender disproportionality extends to digital violence, where women suffer from it significantly more than men. A recent article titled *"MENA: Gender-based violence continues to devastate lives of women across the region"* by Amnesty International, shows that gender-based violence against women in its many forms, remains an issue across MENA [3]. Despite the need for further research on the impact of digital violence on women and girls, the available research suggests that the impact of online abuse is not only similar to offline abuse but can actually be worse. In other words, like real life violence, digital violence can negatively affect the victim's health and general well-being, leaving them with a sense of fear and attack on their integrity [4]. Gender-based violence against women in MENA can largely be attributed to the limited improvement on women's rights at a legislative and institutional level, in combination with faulty implementations of the law, and a toxic patriarchal system that spreads across the region, benefiting men in all social perspectives. With digital violence in particular, failure of legal enforcement can be possibly due to the non-traditional technological component of the matter, in addition to its many cybersecurity loopholes that can be exploited by the abuser [5]. Despite the increasing societal awareness and acknowledgment surrounding digital violence against women in Kuwait, the lack of data regarding victim populations creates a barrier towards addressing this challenge and finding a solution. This lack of data and lack of case reports is a possible result of several factors.

Social stigma could be one of these contributing factors owing to the internalized "victim-blaming" and "family honor" cultures experienced by women in the MENA for decades. Furthermore, women's trust and confidence in the legal system is another factor that resulted in victims having a propensity towards silence and refraining from filing a complaint. Taking into consideration the adoption of cybercrime law in Kuwait (Law No. (63) issued in 2015 on Combating Information Technology Crimes), legal inequality and policy loopholes have been repeatedly exemplified in cases where victims of digital violence turned to the law for help. Further research is needed to provide evidence on the effectiveness and feasibility of the Department of Electronic and Cyber Crime in Kuwait in response to violence acts against women and girls in the digital space. Using a Technology Facilitated Gender-Based Violence Framework as a theoretical lens, this study aims to document women's experience of digital violence in Kuwait, highlighting its psychosocial impact on the victim and the gender power dynamics that shape the experience. The urgency of the matter has flagged the importance of digging deeper into the experiences of Kuwaiti women in this area, and the repercussions that digital violence has on their lives and their wellbeing. This paper explores this issue through primary research, as well

as literature review. It will start by reviewing Gender-based violence in Kuwait. This includes the Kuwaiti cybercrime law, available data on violence against women in Kuwait, local social media campaigns, and women organizations and their support against violence. It will then proceed to discuss the methodology and demographics, including the study design and study population. Next, the results of the paper will be discussed in a detailed manner, followed by an analysis of the most important findings and associations. Finally, the paper examines the impact of digital violence from a psychological and mental health perspective.

# Gender-Based Violence in Kuwait: a Glimpse

## Kuwait's Cybercrime Law No. 63

On the 16th of June 2015, the National Assembly of Kuwait approved the Cyber Crime Law no. 63, which contains 21 articles on the regulation of online activities in Kuwait. In general, violation of these articles and committing cybercrime are punished by imprisonment and fines of variable amounts. Article (2) imposes a punishment by imprisonment for a term not exceeding six months, in addition to a 500-2000 KWD fine, in the event of illegal access to a computer or an information system or network. The punishment by imprisonment is increased for a term not exceeding two years and a 2000-5000 KWD fine, if the illegal access entails sabotage or redistribution of information. Furthermore, punishment by imprisonment for three years and a 3000-10000 KWD fine, or either one of the previous two, would be imposed if the information was of personal nature. Article (2/3) includes punishments for threat or blackmail for purposes of compelling a person to act against their will. These punishments include imprisonment for a term not exceeding three years and a 3000-10000 KWD fine, or imprisonment for a term not exceeding five years and a 5000-20000 KWD fine. Article (4) includes punishment by imprisonment for a term not exceeding two years and a 2000-5000 KWD fine, or either, digital violence incitement or assistance in the commission of acts of prostitution or debauchery.

The Electronic and Cyber Crime Combating Department page in the Ministry of Interior official website provides awareness raising brochures and the legislation information on cybercrime, as well as contact information, such as social media handles and an emergency number. The awareness raising brochures include guidance on how to protect oneself and one's computer environment against cyber-attacks, payment card fraud, police ransomware, as well as guidance on protecting privacy and children from misusing the internet. These brochures lacked particulars on women's safety in the digital environment despite common reports of gender-based cybercrime against women and girls in Kuwait [6]. To this date, no data or evidence has been reported on the effectiveness and feasibility of the Department of Electronic and Cyber Crime in Kuwait in combating digital violence against women and girls [7]. In general, the law in matters of violence and harassment against women and girls in Kuwait is usually not implemented. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women has already been signed and ratified by the State of Kuwait through the Amiri decree 24/1994, making it part of its national laws. However, in practice, the data reported by Kuwait seems to be undermining reality. For instance, in Kuwait's fifth report on its implementation of the provisions of the convention, it was claimed that only 447 cases of domestic violence were filed in 2016, with only 76 of the cases ending in conviction [8]. Overall, there is a great deal of inadequacy in the laws that criminalize discrimination and violence against women. This requires decisive intervention by the State and the community in various aspects to bridge the legislative gaps in terms of women's rights in Kuwait [9, 10].

## Data on Violence Against Women in Kuwait

Data on violence against women in Kuwait are scarce, but the little available data shows that women are significantly affected by violence, including digital violence.

According to a 2018 descriptive study designed to investigate the extent of violence against women in Kuwait and the Kuwaiti society's behavior towards that issue, results showed that 53.1% of Kuwaiti women have been exposed to some form of violence in their lifetime. In addition, it has been found that physical abuse is perceived to be the most common form of violence against women (30.75%), followed by psychological abuse (25.3%) and verbal abuse (24.9%). Moreover, when looking at Kuwaiti society's perceptions of the causes of violence against women, the responses were very diverse. Most respondents thought the causes were related to addiction (71.3%) and alcohol consumption (15.4%). Other causes were psychological stresses (34%) and financial issues (23%) [11].

Narrowing the focus to digital violence, a 2017 field study consisting of 3000 participants examined cybercrime in the Kuwaiti society through quantitative and qualitative approaches. The study included Kuwaiti and non-Kuwaiti participants, male and female, above the age of 15 years old. Respectively, 80.8% and 80.0% of respondents have witnessed or heard of individuals seducing children or women, and abusing them psychologically or sexually through the internet. Moreover, 58.1% of respondents have witnessed or heard of husbands abusing their wives physically or psychologically because of internet use. The study also found that 84.1% of respondents have witnessed or heard of hate speech through the internet [12].

## Public Voices on Social Media

In a recent social media campaign (2021) that addressed violence and harassment experienced by women in Kuwait, thousands of women have stepped up to share their experience through social media using the hashtag "Lan asket", which translates to "I will not be silenced". The shared testimonies included experiences of women and girls of physical, verbal and sexual harassment. The movement was initiated to demand government policies and laws to provide women in Kuwait with proper protection against violence and harassment, as well as to establish social change. However, controversy occurred among individuals who considered the topics of harassment against women and girls to be inappropriate to share due to the strong social and cultural influences in Kuwait and MENA in general. Opposing the campaign, some of these individuals responded through social media with anti-feminist comments. Three months later, another social media movement formed in response to the news of the murder of a young Kuwaiti woman by a male acquaintance. The legal handling of the incident once again signified the issue of harassment and gender-based violence within the Kuwaiti society [13-15].

## Women's Organizations in Kuwait and Support Against Violence

Today in Kuwait, there are several women-focused non-governmental organizations (NGOs) licensed by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor, which serve to empower women in Kuwait and voice their concerns. These organizations include the Woman's Cultural and Social Society (WCSS), Soroptimist, Rawasi (National Association of Familial Security), the Girl's Club, Bayadir al-Salam (Threshing Fields of Peace), the Islamic Care Society, and the Volunteer Women's Association for Community Services. Many of these NGOs share a platform for social change, as well as a long history of activism in the field of women's rights. The Woman's Cultural and Social Society in particular played a role in the development of the project "Wracati" (My Paper) in association with the United Nations Development Programme and under the supervision of the Secretariat of the Supreme Council for

Planning and Development in Kuwait. The project Wracati aimed to empower women in Kuwait from a legal perspective by informing them of all their rights under the Kuwaiti Constitution and legislation. In addition, the project explored different modalities through which they can achieve the previously mentioned goal, which included educating women on protecting themselves against violence. Moreover, the team behind the project Wracati carried out a study on violence against women in Kuwait. The study demonstrated four types of violence, which include domestic violence, public and workplace violence, arrest and search violence, and institutional violence. Digital violence was not mentioned in the study. However, the study addressed the issue of lack of official support for women who encounter violence in general. It has been disclosed in the executive summary of the study that there are no integrated services or shelters for women exposed to violence, nor any rehabilitation programs for those who suffered from extensive psychological impacts due to traumatic experiences of violence [9].

The latter issue is thoroughly discussed in a recent publication by the Woman's Cultural and Social Society supported by the Kuwait Foundation for the Advanced Sciences (KFAS) titled "The Philosophy of Listening Centers and Shelters is a Mechanism for Protecting Women and Girls from Gender-based Violence". The publication highlighted that assisting and supporting women and girls who have been subjected to abuse is crucial to tackle all types of violence, therefore the development of listening centers is of great importance. According to the publication, listening centers are defined as centers that receive women's reports of violence incidents they experienced, all in a safe environment built around confidentiality and privacy. In addition, these listening centers will provide the women with help from specialists in various fields, such as specialists on the law and legal procedures, as well as specialists in psychology to cover their mental health needs. Moreover, these listening centers will also provide hotlines that offer the victims of abuse with access to information and support systems, all while remaining anonymous. While many women and girls are reluctant to go to police stations, disclose the violence they are experiencing with their family members, unable to get out of their current situation, or could face serious losses if they were to speak up, these hotlines would serve as safe front-line interventions for these women. The publication further describes other forms of intervention that tackle violence in all its forms, along with its psychological impact on the victim. However, it is important to note that this publication did not cover digital violence, nor any aspects related to digital violence [10].

# Methodology & Demographics

## Study Design and Data Collection Tools

To gather sufficient data with well-documented experiences, this study followed a cross-sectional design with quantitative and qualitative components. For the quantitative component, an online Arabic questionnaire composed of 33 questions was distributed through different social media platforms that are frequently used in Kuwait (Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat, WhatsApp). For the qualitative component, three of the questions of the survey required a personal self-written answer; however, only two of these questions along with their answers will be documented in this study, as the last question was aimed to collect 'other comments'. In addition, to further understand the issue of digital violence against women in Kuwait, an interview was conducted with the Women's Cultural and Social Society, the first women's society to be established in Kuwait.

## Study Population and Participants

This study focused on females, 13 years old and older, living in Kuwait who may or may not have experienced digital violence in its different forms. 132 questionnaires were filled by participants who use the internet on a regular basis. However, the data analyzed will only cover the 129 participants who have at least one social media account. Instagram (66.7%), Snapchat (54.3%) and Twitter (56.6%) were the top three favorite social media platforms among the participants in this questionnaire.

## Data Analysis

SPSS software was used to analyze the data. This is mainly a descriptive study, however, Chi-square test for bivariate analysis was also performed looking for associations between Cyber violence and different sociodemographic and social media-related variables.

# Results

## Demographic Variables

In Table 1, the frequency and percentages of participants in different demographic factors stratified by digital violence were presented. The total number of participants aged 13-17 was 3 (2.3%), and only one of them experienced digital violence. The total number of participants aged 18-30 was 77(59.7%), making up the majority of the sample, and 42 (54.5%) of them were subjected to digital violence. The total number of participants aged 31-40 was 25 (19.4%), and 13 (52%) of them were subjected to digital violence. The total number of participants aged above 40 years old was 24 (18.6%), and 8 (33.3%) of them were subjected to digital violence. No significant association was observed between the age of participants and the frequency of digital violence. As for the level of education, out of the 13 (10.1%) participants with a Master's or a PhD degree, 8 (61.5%) of them were subjected to digital violence. Out of the 103 (79.8%) participants with a high school or bachelor's degree, 51 (49.5%) of them were subjected to digital violence. Lastly, out of the 13 (10.1%) participants without a high school degree, 8 (61.5%) of them were subjected to digital violence. With regards to social status, the total number of single participants was 76 (58.9%), and 41 (53.9%) of them were subjected to digital violence. The total number of married participants was 32 (24.8%), and 11 (34.4%) of them were subjected to digital violence. Finally, the total number of divorced or widowed participants was 21 (16.3%), and 12 (57.1%) of them were subjected to digital violence.

## Digital Safety Awareness

In Table 2, digital safety awareness and its association to digital violence was investigated. Sixty-one (47.3%) of the participants believed they know how to protect their account and information on social media. However, almost half of those 61 (49.2%) respondents were already subjected to digital violence. This percentage was slightly lower among those who believed that they did not have enough information on how to protect their account. This relationship was however not statistically significant. Furthermore, out of the total number of 18 (14%) participants who have received training on digital safety, 12 (66.7%) of them were subjected to digital violence. On the other hand, out of the 111 (86%) participants who have not received training on digital safety, 52 (46.8%) of them were subjected to digital violence. As the previous results indicate, interestingly, participants who received training on digital safety were actually subjected to digital violence with higher frequency than those who have not received any training. While this correlation is unexpected, it suggests that those who were trained on digital safety and are therefore aware of digital risks, may be better able to identify and understand digital violence and all its components. Participants who have not received training or were not exposed to knowledge about it, may simply be unable to recognize it, and therefore report that they have not been subjected to digital violence.

As for the use of a strong password and 2-step verification, 87 (67.4%) of the participants reported that they protect their information using a strong password, while 64 (49.6%) also use 2-step verification. Out of the participants who protect their information using a strong password, 48 (55.2%) were subjected to digital violence, and out of those who additionally use 2-step verification, 34 (53.1%) were subjected to digital violence. With regards to sharing personal information on social media, out of the 62 (48.1%) participants who did not share their personal information on social media, 25 of them were subjected to digital violence (40.3%). The previous findings conclude that the lowest percentage of digital violence was observed among participants who did not share their personal information on social media. However, the kind of unshared personal information was not specified in the questionnaire. Finally, a total of 62 (48.1%) participants are aware of the criminalization of cybercrime in Kuwaiti law.

## Frequency and Source

As demonstrated in Table 3, 64 out of 129 (49.6%) participants were reportedly bullied on the internet. Out of these participants, 29 (45.3%) were subjected to digital violence more than four times. With reference to the source of the digital violence, 36 (59%) of the participants reported that it was from someone unknown to them. Whereas in the case of 17 (27.9%) of the participants, the attack was from someone known to them on social media.

## Emotional Reactions

Out of those who experienced digital violence, 50 (78.1%) did not ask for help after they were subjected to the attack. Moreover, 26 (41.3%) of the participants were blamed for the digital violence incidents. Fear, depression, and feelings of isolation were the most common feelings experienced during the moment of the attack. Fear was an emotional reaction of 31 (24%) of the participants. Depression and feelings of isolation were each reported equally in 21 (16.3%) of the cases. In addition, 6 (4.7%) of the participants experienced thoughts of self-harm.

## Responses to Qualitative Questions

For the first qualitative question, "*If you use a fake name for social media, what is your reason?"* a total of 22 written responses were received, but only 17 were documented and analyzed in this study due to their coherence and relevance. Many of these responses justified the use of a fake with the anonymity that comes along with it. This preference of remaining unknown was attributed to wanting to keep family members and relatives away from their social media accounts and avoid conflict. In addition, some of the responses state that using a fake name can allow them to express their feelings, ideas and views comfortably without feeling restricted. This finding is of particular interest as it suggests that anonymity gives these girls and women freedom of expression. This is possibly related to the gender expectations of women within a relatively traditional, patriarchal culture. It is safe to say that women in Kuwait have the ability to voice their opinions; however, limitations to their voice can be expected. Detailed answers are found in Table 4.

For the second qualitative question, "*How can you describe your experience? What was the form of violence, how did it continue, and how did it make you feel?"* a total of 34 responses were received, and 33 were documented and analyzed in this study due to their coherence and relevance. Verbal harassment was reported in 9 (27.2%) of the responses. Sexual harassment through the use of explicit language and media was reported in 4 (12.1%) of the responses. Threats and blackmail were also mentioned in 4 (12.1%) of the responses. Fear was reported in 7 (21.2%) of the responses. Anxiety was reported in 3 (9%) of the responses. Annoyance was reported in 3 (9%) of the responses. Feelings of sadness or depression were reported in 3 (9%) of the responses as well. Other feelings mentioned once include lack of confidence (1%), distrust in people (1%), discomfort (1%), anger (1%), and even self-harm (1%). Detailed answers are found in Table 4.

**Table 1: Demographic variables vs. digital violence**

| DEMOGRAPHIC VARIABLES | TOTAL | | Not subjected to digital violence | | Subjected to digital violence | | $\chi^2$ (*p*) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | N | % | N | % | N | % | |
| **AGE** | | | | | | | |
| 13 - 17 | 3 | 2.3 | 2 | 66.7 | 1 | 33.3 | 3.719 (0.308) |
| 18 - 30 | 77 | 59.7 | 35 | 45.5 | 42 | 54.5 | |
| 31 - 40 | 25 | 19.4 | 12 | 48.0 | 13 | 52 | |
| > 41 | 24 | 18.6 | 16 | 66.7 | 8 | 33.3 | |
| **EDUCATION** | | | | | | | |
| Less than High School | 13 | 10.1 | 8 | 61.5 | 5 | 38.5 | 1.373 (0.525) |
| Highschool or Bachelor | 103 | 79.8 | 52 | 50.5 | 51 | 49.5 | |
| Master or PhD | 13 | 10.1 | 5 | 38.5 | 8 | 61.5 | |
| **SOCIAL STATUS** | | | | | | | |
| Single | 76 | 58.9 | 35 | 46.1 | 41 | 53.9 | 3.990 (0.148) |
| Married | 32 | 24.8 | 21 | 65.6 | 11 | 34.4 | |
| Divorced/Widow | 21 | 16.3 | 9 | 42.9 | 12 | 57.1 | |
| **GOVERNATE AREA** | | | | | | | |
| Ahmadi | 20 | 15.5 | 10 | 50.0 | 10 | 50.0 | 3.553 (0.625) |
| Jahra | 10 | 7.8 | 5 | 50.0 | 5 | 50.0 | |
| Capital city | 39 | 30.2 | 24 | 61.5 | 15 | 38.5 | |
| Farwaniyah | 14 | 10.9 | 7 | 50.0 | 7 | 50.0 | |
| Near me | 31 | 24.0 | 13 | 41.9 | 18 | 58.1 | |
| Mubarak | 15 | 11.6 | 6 | 40.0 | 9 | 60.0 | |

**Table 2: Social media and its usage vs. digital violence**

| SOCIAL MEDIA-RELATED QUESTIONS | TOTAL | | Not subjected to digital violence | | Subjected to digital violence | | $\chi^2$ ($p$) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | N | % | N | % | N | % | |
| **Do you use your real name or a fake name on social media?** | | | | | | | |
| Real Name | 108 | 83.7 | 55 | 50.9 | 53 | 49.1 | 0.077 (0.816) |
| Fake Name | 21 | 16.3 | 10 | 47.6 | 11 | 52.4 | |
| **Do you know how to protect your account and information on social media?** | | | | | | | |
| No | 14 | 10.9 | 8 | 57.1 | 6 | 42.9 | 0.398 (0.878) |
| Probably | 54 | 41.9 | 26 | 48.1 | 28 | 51.9 | |
| Yes | 61 | 47.3 | 31 | 50.8 | 30 | 49.2 | |
| **Do you find difficulty in protecting your personal information on the internet?** | | | | | | | |
| No | 69 | 53.5 | 33 | 47.8 | 36 | 52.2 | 0.463 (0.820) |
| Sometimes | 51 | 39.5 | 27 | 52.9 | 24 | 47.1 | |
| Yes | 9 | 7 | 5 | 55.6 | 4 | 44.4 | |
| **Did you receive any training on digital safety?** | | | | | | | |
| No | 111 | 86 | 59 | 53.2 | 52 | 46.8 | 2.473 (0.135) |
| Yes | 18 | 14 | 6 | 33.3 | 12 | 66.7 | |
| **How do you protect your information?** | | | | | | | |
| Strong Password | 87 | 67.4 | 39 | 44.8 | 48 | 55.2 | 3.329 (0.091) |
| 2-step Verification | 64 | 49.6 | 30 | 46.9 | 34 | 53.1 | 0.627 (0.483) |
| Not sharing any personal information | 62 | 48.1 | 37 | 59.7 | 25 | 40.3 | 4.121 (0.042) |
| I don't add people I don't know | 63 | 48.8 | 35 | 55.6 | 28 | 44.4 | 1.316 (0.251) |
| I don't think there is a reason to protect the data | 3 | 2.3 | 1 | 33.3 | 2 | 66.7 | 0.357 (0.619) |
| I take the information on how to protect my accounts from trusted sources | 20 | 15.5 | 11 | 55 | 9 | 45 | 0.201 (0.809) |

| SOCIAL MEDIA-RELATED QUESTIONS | TOTAL | | Not subjected to digital violence | | Subjected to digital violence | | $\chi^2$ ($p$) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | N | % | N | % | N | % | |
| **What is your favorite social media app?** | | | | | | | |
| Facebook | 4 | 3.1 | 2 | 50 | 2 | 50 | 0.000 (0.987) |
| Instagram | 86 | 66.7 | 46 | 53.5 | 40 | 46.5 | 0.992 (0.319) |
| Snapchat | 70 | 54.3 | 31 | 44.3 | 39 | 55.7 | 2.280 (0.131) |
| Twitter | 73 | 56.6 | 34 | 46.6 | 39 | 53.4 | 0.978 (0.323) |
| TikTok | 34 | 26.4 | 18 | 52.9 | 16 | 47.1 | 0.120 (0.729) |
| LinkedIn | 6 | 4.7 | 2 | 33.3 | 4 | 66.7 | 0.732 (0.392) |
| WhatsApp | 57 | 44.2 | 26 | 45.6 | 31 | 54.4 | 0.931 (0.335) |
| **Do you know that the Kuwaiti law criminalizes and punishes cyber bullying?** | | | | | | | |
| No | 67 | 51.9 | 34 | 50.7 | 33 | 49.3 | 0.007 (0.933) |
| Yes | 62 | 48.1 | 31 | 50 | 31 | 50 | |
| **Do you know what official departments you can go to if you become subjected to cyber bullying?** | | | | | | | |
| No | 9 | 7 | 3 | 33.3 | 6 | 66.7 | 3.564 (0.168) |
| Probably | 8 | 6.2 | 2 | 25 | 6 | 75 | |
| Yes | 112 | 86.8 | 60 | 53.6 | 52 | 46.4 | |

**Table 3: Experiencing digital violence**

| DIGITAL VIOLENCE RELATED QUESTIONS | N | % |
|---|---|---|
| **Have you been subjected to bullying or violence through the internet?** | | |
| No | 65 | 50.4 |
| Probably | 20 | 15.5 |
| Yes | 44 | 34.1 |
| **How many times have you been bullied through the internet?** | | |
| One time | 12 | 18.8 |
| Two times | 9 | 14.1 |
| Three times | 12 | 18.8 |
| Four times or more | 29 | 45.3 |
| **How much time do you spend on social media?** | | |
| 1 -3 hours | 22 | 34.9 |
| 4 - 6 hours | 26 | 41.3 |
| > 6 hours | 15 | 23.8 |
| **Did you ask for help after you've been bullied?** | | |
| No | 50 | 78.1 |
| Yes | 14 | 21.9 |
| **Who bullied you?** | | |
| Co-worker | 1 | 1.6 |
| Schoolmate (male) | 2 | 3.3 |
| Schoolmate (female) | 1 | 1.6 |
| Close to family (male) | 1 | 1.6 |
| Close to family (female) | 2 | 3.3 |
| Someone I know in social media | 17 | 27.9 |
| Someone I don't know | 36 | 59 |
| Friend (male) | 1 | 1.6 |
| **Were you blamed for being bullied?** | | |
| No | 37 | 58.7 |
| Yes | 26 | 41.3 |
| **On what social media platform have you been bullied?** | | |
| Facebook | 8 | 6.2 |
| Instagram | 35 | 27.1 |
| Snapchat | 18 | 14 |
| Twitter | 36 | 27.9 |
| TikTok | 4 | 3.1 |
| LinkedIn | 3 | 2.3 |
| WhatsApp | 11 | 8.5 |
| **How did you manage the situation after you've been bullied?** | | |
| Report the account on the app | 28 | 21.7 |
| I went to the nearest security authority | 3 | 2.3 |
| I contacted the criminal himself and asked him/her to stop it | 17 | 13.2 |
| I told my mother | 5 | 3.9 |
| I told my sister | 9 | 7.0 |
| I told my brother | 3 | 2.3 |
| I told my aunt | 1 | 0.8 |
| I told my uncle | 2 | 1.6 |
| I told my relatives (cousins/uncles) | 1 | 0.8 |
| I told my relatives (cousins/aunts) | 1 | 0.8 |
| I told my friends | 22 | 17.1 |
| I did nothing out of fear for consequences | 13 | 10.1 |
| I did nothing because there was no reason to do so | 5 | 3.9 |
| I did not pay any attention to the matter | 16 | 12.4 |
| I did not know what to do | 10 | 7.8 |

| DIGITAL VIOLENCE RELATED QUESTIONS | N | % |
|---|---|---|
| **What did you do after you've been bullied?** | | |
| I closed all social media accounts | 10 | 7.8 |
| I stopped communicating with everyone outside family | 3 | 2.3 |
| I continued using social media but with caution | 30 | 23.3 |
| I did not change any of my personal practices in social media | 25 | 19.4 |
| I told my friends about the situation so that they would be careful | 17 | 13.2 |
| I posted the situation publicly so I warn other girls | 4 | 3.1 |
| **How did you feel during the moment when you were bullied?** | | |
| Insomnia | 14 | 10.9 |
| Fear | 31 | 24 |
| Fatigue and eating disorder | 7 | 5.4 |
| Depression | 21 | 16.3 |
| Isolation | 21 | 16.3 |
| Avoiding social media | 14 | 10.9 |
| Thoughts about self-harm | 6 | 4.7 |
| **In your opinion, what was the motive of the person who bullied you?** | | |
| I don't know | 1 | 0.8 |
| Blackmail from Ex-husband | 1 | 0.8 |
| Difference of Opinion | 23 | 17.8 |
| Defamation | 0 | 0 |
| Entertainment | 34 | 26.4 |
| Harassment | 33 | 25.6 |
| Hate | 16 | 12.4 |
| Blackmail (Financial or Sexual) | 26 | 20.2 |
| Revenge | 10 | 7.8 |
| Insult for rehabilitation | 1 | 0.8 |

**Table 4: Qualitative Questions**

| If you use a fake name for social media, what is your reason? |
|---|
| "To protect my privacy. I'm not allowed to give out my full name because of custom and traditions." |
| "There is no need to share my name, a fake one is better." |
| "I don't want anyone to know me." |
| "It's not exactly fake, it's just my initials so my distant relatives don't find my account." |
| "Because many invaded my privacy when I used to put my real name." |
| "If an electronic issue happens, I don't want anyone to know me." |
| "Privacy" |
| "My brother doesn't allow me to use my real name." |
| "Because Twitter is not allowed in my house, and if I put my name on Instagram or whatever it's also not allowed, so my relatives and my brother's and dad's friends don't find my account." |
| "So I can write comfortably." |
| "No reason." |
| "Because it's a fake account." |
| "So I can write freely without anyone commenting on my words and ending up as the talk of the season." |
| "More freedom in writing and expressing my feelings, especially feelings of sadness and frustration." |
| "Because I don't want anyone to know me." |
| "To avoid getting bullied." |
| "I have opinions that the society doesn't like." |
| **How can you describe your experience? What was the form of violence, how did it continue, and how did it make you feel?** |
| "Anxiety and loss of confidence and sometimes fear of others." |
| "It didn't continue, it was an incident and I deleted the guy." |
| "I avoided social media for a while." |
| "Bullying, sexual slurs, sexual slurs and defamation, cursing my family, explicit photos. I felt anxious, scared, depressed, nervous and sad." |
| "I didn't know those who would comment on every post I upload, I used to just block them and pay them no mind because I didn't know them, but there was also constructive criticism but in a rude way." |
| "The constant stalking used to annoy me, and it continued for months." |
| "I received a message with swearing and claiming that I'm a homosexual and I am not.. After this incident I started doubting myself and whether I'm really homosexual, and this started when I was 12 years old and now I am 20 years old.. there is no homosexuality behind my relationships, but inside myself I feel that way because of that message." |
| "It didn't affect me in a big way because he was a coward behind a screen and he couldn't do anything, he verbally harassed me only because I opposed his opinion, and he acted out in a barbaric and disgusting manner, and he used to throw a sexist comment in all of his responses, it was a sensitive political subject." |
| "Feeling of failure." |
| "It was harassment by sending me private messages, it was very annoying, and the idea of being harassed made me feel uncomfortable." |

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| "Threats and blackmail from a girl that claims to stand with human rights, she mocked me. Another problem happened because one of my relatives commented under a picture of mine with sensitive personal information." |
| "Threats and bullying and swearing.. I felt scared and unsafe and I lost my trust in people." |
| "The first incident happened when I was 12 years old from a person on Instagram that I didn't know, and I didn't know why people who send pornographic pictures to people they don't know. I saw a page that posts beautiful photos about the Victorian Era and classic cars, and these are things that I like a lot, so I asked him where can I find similar photos and then he gave me the name of a website that turned out to be a website for pornography. When I joined Twitter at 15 years old, a similar thing happened again." |
| "It was mostly comments from my family, and my mother used to comment on what I post on Instagram and what I write on Twitter, it made me angry so I blocked her and my brother." |
| "It was the worst experience and I learned a lot from it." |
| "Violation in every way because my page is popular, I feel miserable." |
| "Anxious" |
| "Threats to share my private pictures, in the beginning I was scared, but I overcame the situation thank God." |
| "It was a very tough experience for me, I lived in a state of fear and crying and wanting to commit suicide." |
| "Fear to the extent of doing some of the things that wanted just so he would stop threatening me, and I regret giving him what he wanted." |
| "Very bad, and it continued for a long time because there is no end to these kind of problems." |
| "I closed my account because I've been going through stuff and I've become very sensitive and unable to bear any negative comment thrown at me so I sat down crying and became depressed (I have depression and I'm being treated for it, and the account was to entertain myself and share my experience and raise awareness but the negative comment shook me) I tried to forget and I closed the account the same instant, and the comment that was directed to me was irrational, I just commented my opinion on a post and people agreed with me except for that one girl who said something that really hurt me." |
| "Most of it was sexual harassment or a relative would find my account and verbally harass me." |
| "Significant self-harm" |
| "Extreme fear" |
| "I don't know." |
| "Messages with swearing, messages with explicit photos of male genitalia and invitations for sexual intercourse, messages with verbal harassment and pressuring into starting a relationship." |
| "It was alright, a period and it passed by." |
| "It wasn't a violation that impacted me because I believe that they're sick with no cure." |
| "A girl bullied me an made rumours about me because of information that I shared about myself in my account." |
| "I received comments that included swearing and threats because of where I stand on a particular matter, I though about informing the department of cyber crime and opening a legal case but I hesitated and didn't find it to be beneficial. I let annoyed for a while but with time I stopped paying it any attention." |
| "I felt disgusted, and I blocked the person." |
| "Painful and tiring. Violation of my privacy." |

# Analysis

## Association Between Level of Education/Employment and Digital Violence

Due to the small sample size and the descriptive nature of the study, no statistically significant associations were observed between the findings. Nevertheless, several interesting insights can be obtained. The link between education and likelihood to experience digital violence has not been conclusive in our study, or in other studies, particularly because many social factors come into play. On one hand, lower levels of education/work can disempower women, which can be seen as an advantage for offenders. On the other hand, higher levels of education and career advancement may be seen as threatening to the patriarchal status quo, and therefore may trigger more violence against women.

The former scenario, which highlights education as a protective factor against abuse, has been demonstrated in a 2003 study conducted by T. Lane. The study stated that risk factors for emotional and physical abuse differ between women, and that education is one of the risk factors associated with physical abuse in particular. The results of the study showed that limited education can predict physical violence, in contrast to respondents who had at least a high school diploma, where the odds of physical violence were reduced. However, it is worth mentioning that this study looked into abuse in general and was not solely digital violence-focused [16].

As mentioned above, our results in Kuwait are in line with the notion that the education level of women can be examined as a factor that increases the susceptibility of being exposed to violence. From this angle, culture, traditional gender roles and patriarchy come into play. Because of the economic and societal status that education can bring to a woman, an offender in a gender-discriminative and patriarchal environment can perceive this education as a threat. In addition, the possibility of women rising from a subordinate status to a higher status within society and disrupting the traditional male-dominant hierarchical system can even precipitate violent actions against women [17]. This association between higher levels of education and status within society and violence can be exemplified when Kuwait's Ministry of Justice and the Supreme Judicial Council in 2012 announced that female law graduates can now be accepted as prosecutors, with a fatwa from the Sharia Fatwa Board at the Ministry of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs supporting their decision. Of those women who completed the Judicial College Program, 22 of them were assigned as public prosecutors. Years later in 2020, eight Kuwaiti women have been approved to become judges. Though marked as historical events and considered as steps towards women empowerment, controversy occurred, and antifeminist backlash was seen online through different forms of social media. Using the Sharia law and religion as a basis for their arguments, those opposed to the role of women as judges claimed that such a position is incompatible with a woman's nature due to her emotional frailty. Others argued that male judges preside over specific legal matters, also using Sharia law and religion as a basis [18, 19].

An assistant professor in Kuwait University sparked online outrage after light had been shed on her Women and Gender Studies Research Unit. Established in 2019, the Women and Gender Studies Research Unit is a non-fundable, voluntary, educational unit that aims to build an academic group dedicated to gender studies in Kuwait. Although gender studies is an established academic field in other major universities, a large portion of the conservative Kuwaiti society were not happy. They claimed that such a field should not be taught at a public, government-supported university, as it "ruins our girls!". The latter words were one of the many comments that the professor behind this unit has received through online social media platforms, primarily Twitter, as she is the head of the

unit. The unit was not met with opposition immediately, in fact, it has received positive feedback at the beginning. The backlash occurred months later, when the head of the unit found out through her students that people were attacking the unit on Twitter, namely targeting the gender part of the unit. People were claiming that the topic of sex was being taught on campus. The latter was based on the inaccurate extraction of the word sex from gender. In Arabic terms, الجندرية/ or الجندر/ translates into gender. In return, the Arabic translation of gender is جنس, or sex. Another captious attempt to attack the unit was based on yet another false extraction of the word Chandra, the Hindu god of the Moon, from the Arabic term for Gender, الجندرية/ or الجندر/, which is pronounced as 'jan-dar' or 'jan-dar-iyah". The matters escalated to the point where a parliament member of the National Assembly, the unicameral legislator of Kuwait, began directing parliamentary questions toward the Minister of Education regarding the unit. The latter incident put the head of the unit under the spotlight, and as a result, the entire experience left her with a heavy psychological impact. The online hate became personal, targeting her, as well as her family and colleagues.

When asked to describe the online hate, the head of the unit said, "some hate was sent to me through private messages on Twitter, other times I was mentioned in a hateful tweet. These messages and tweets included insults and profanity. They even accused me of blasphemy and 'kufr', which means disbelieving in God as per Islam, despite the fact that I am a practicing Muslim. Amid the backlash that I received, I experienced 'indirect bullying' from some of my colleagues who were supposedly feminists. They were telling me that I shouldn't have used the word 'gender' when naming the unit, and that the mention of women was sufficient. I couldn't help but sense a tone of gloating behind their words. They even told me that the ideologies behind my unit would not succeed or take me anywhere. I considered this disguised bullying." The response from her colleagues reflects the infiltration of the victim-blaming mentality even in a supposedly open-minded and educated facility. Moreover, the head of the unit expressed her frustration with the sexism that was rooted in these attacks. She said, "some of my other female Kuwaiti colleagues from the Arabic department and English department who gave lectures in the unit were also targeted in these attacks. Their names in particular ended up trending in hashtags on Twitter, despite there being other international, non-Kuwaiti doctors who also gave lectures at the unit. This made me realize how bullying in our society is conditioned and selective as if it is only meant to target Kuwaiti women. I realized that just like my ideas, I am rejected in the general and academic society in Kuwait." Her frustration with the sexist nature of this attack is no surprise. In fact, one of the respondents to the questionnaire shared the following, "he used to throw a sexist comment in all of his responses, it was a sensitive political subject," when asked to describe her digital violence experience (table 4). Because of this digital violence experience, unfortunately, the head of the unit found herself leaning toward the long-term idea of investing her educational expertise abroad [20].

## Association Between Digital Safety Awareness and Digital Violence

Questions in Table 2 investigate digital literacy among the surveyed individuals in general, and digital safety in particular. Digital literacy refers to a set of skills required to achieve digital competence, which in return refers to the confident and critical use of information and communication technology (e.g., social media) for different purposes. Digital competence exhibits a dual nature, a technical ability to operate programs and the ability to use digital media safely [21].

The association between digital safety awareness and digital violence has been investigated in several studies. Some papers found that digital safety can aid in the prevention of digital violence if understood and implemented [22]. A recent article published in 2020, proposed a cyberbullying conceptual framework that can be used as a tool to investigate cyberbullying. It suggests that within the school environment, the role and responsibility of the teacher in teaching digital safety is a key element in the prevention of digital violence [23].

Other papers found that people with more training on digital safety are more likely to be subjected to digital violence as they are more likely to identify it. For example, in a recent study that examined user click rates and demographics among undergraduates, it has been found that those who have greater phishing knowledge are more susceptible to phishing scams. The authors explained that one of the possible reasons behind this finding is that the user's phishing awareness might have increased with the continuous falling for phishing scams [24]. Our data suggest the same pattern.

Lack of digital safety knowledge and practice in MENA region is not surprising. In fact, it is confirmed by a study published in 2016 that examined cybersecurity awareness within educational environments in the MENA. The study aimed to analyze the level of information security awareness among academics within educational environments and its associated risks and overall impact on the institutions and the personal lives of the participants. The results of the study showed that the participants did not have the necessary knowledge on the importance of cyber security. The study also highlighted that without training programs on digital safety and awareness, negative consequences are expected on IT systems as well as on the users' personal security [25].

## Association Between Protection of Personal Information and Digital Violence

### *Account Protection*

Information shared through technology in general, and online social networks in particular, can spread very fast. This almost instantly puts the confidential data of users at risk and makes them vulnerable to digital violence. Therefore, data protection and privacy should be inquired from various aspects. This includes using a strong password, additional two-factor authentication, phishing awareness, hacking awareness, and general cyber security awareness [26]. In a 2012 national survey of anti-violence support workers in Canada, it was found that 98% of perpetrators used technology to intimidate their victims or threaten them. Moreover, 72% of the perpetrators hacked the emails and social media accounts of the women and girls they targeted, 61% hacked into computers to extract information, and 31% installed computer monitoring software or hardware on the target's computer [27].

Password breaches are one of the most common information security failures. Weak passwords, such as commonly used passwords, put the user in a vulnerable position for digital violence. Considering the previous points, carefully selecting a strong password is necessary to decrease the possibility of digital violence [28]. In addition, it has been found that awareness of information security threats has a significant positive impact on the strength of passwords [29]. According to the 2021 Verizon Data Breach Investigations Report (DBIR), over 80% of hacking-related breaches were related to password issues, such as weak passwords and/or stolen passwords [30].

Though using a strong password is crucial to avoid digital violence, depending on this method alone is an inefficient protection measure, especially with the continuous evolvement of cybersecurity risks. Two-step verification, otherwise known as two-factor authentication, or multi-factor authentication is a method for verifying the identity of the user logging onto a system. It has been proposed that changing passwords regularly and using multiple factor authentication will further contribute to the user's security [31, 32]. According to Microsoft, multi-factor authentication can block over 99.9% of account compromise attacks [33].

Phishing is a common type of digital violence that usually aims to steal sensitive data, such as credit card information, or to install a virus on the target's device for the purpose of fraudulent activities.

This type of digital violence comes in the form of counterfeit communications disguised as a legitimate and trustworthy source [34]. Social media phishing is a subtype of phishing that refers to an attack carried out through social media platforms, such as Instagram. A phishing attack on Instagram can end up with the attacker gaining complete control over the target's Instagram account. This allows the attacker to pose as the real user behind the Instagram page and expand the scope of digital violence by communicating with the target's friends and followers and requesting their personal information [35]. It has also been reported in the 2021 Verizon Data Breach Investigations Report (DBIR) that the top three types of data that are compromised in a phishing attack are credentials (passwords, usernames, pin numbers), personal data (name, address, email address) and medical records (treatment information, insurance claims) [30].

### *Online Self-Disclosure*

Sharing personal information through social media about oneself increases privacy concerns and can be used and exploited by others in the form of digital violence. MENA is an attractive target for cybercrime, due to the high internet penetration growth rate in many countries and limited awareness on cybersecurity, or digital safety [36, 37]. Despite the risk of privacy violations that is often accompanied with social media use, users continue to disclose personal information. However, it is worth mentioning that advising women not to share personal information or even personal photos can come off as victim-blaming. As with other forms of abuse, this victim-blaming attitude can marginalize the victim and discourage them from coming forward and speaking up.

In a 2016 case study of young adults in Kuwait that explored the needs and motives behind the use of Instagram, voluntary disclosure of personal information, or self-disclosure, was connected to the use of the app. To measure self-disclosure, amount, depth, honesty and positive valence were employed as dimensions. The study found that females showed higher levels of self-disclosure in three dimensions: amount, honesty and positive valence. Based on these dimensions, females were more likely to post photos of themselves (amount), more likely to tell the truth about themselves in posted photos (honesty), and more likely to show other people photos that mirror positive approaches to life (positive valence). On the other hand, males showed higher levels of self-disclosure than women only in the depth dimension, which refers to the level of intimate and personal photos shared by the Instagram user [38].

Moreover, an annual study of media use in the Middle East across six countries, revealed that nine in ten social media users share personal content. Another finding revealed that women spend almost equal time socializing with friends online as they do in socializing with friends face-to-face (48% vs 52%). Men on the other hand, spend more time socializing face-to-face, rather than virtually [39].

In MENA cultures, where public space is inherently owned and occupied by men, it is not surprising to see women, in specific subcultures of the MENA region, resorting to social media for socialization. It provides them with space to share their opinions and their lives. The findings from the abovementioned studies indicate that technology-mediated information disclosure is perceptible in the Arab world, and even possibly more evident in women. While social media can be a good socialization tool, and can help women and girls make the connections and participate in the public sphere, it is important to follow digital safety best practices, and be aware of the risks. This includes strong protection of one's accounts, which is clearly not being adopted as evident from the survey results, but also a host of other digital safety practices to ensure that the information a woman shares, is only received by the person/people with whom she intends to share.

# Impact of Digital Violence

## Fear

Fear is an emotional reaction common among victims of digital violence, and abuse in general. It also influences the victim's decision when it comes to reporting the incident. In a study of cyberbullying on social media platforms among university students in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), fear was associated with the reluctance of students to report cyberbullying. Fear of getting in trouble and fear of victim-blaming were reported as reasons to choose silence over reporting the digital violence incident [40]. Similar findings were also reported in another study on the perceptions and experiences of female Emirati university students on cyberbullying [41]. Looking back at Table 3, 78.1% of the sample did not ask for help after being subjected to digital violence. The reason behind that decision and whether fear was an influence, was not explored. Further studies are needed to explore the latter. Within the MENA region, social, cultural and religious constraints can possibly discourage victims of digital violence, and abuse in general, from seeking help. This is especially evident in women and girls of the MENA region, where fear of social stigma tends to override the need for protection, and women tend to be blamed [42]. The last point is exemplified in Table 3, where 26 (41.3%) of the cases reported being blamed for the digital violence incident. People tend to be victimized even though they are the victim. The latter is especially true in women across MENA. We see it across the board, such as in cases of sexual assault and rape, where somehow, she is at fault because of what she wore. Unfortunately, in some cases, the victim would even end up forced to marry her rapist [43].

## Depression and Isolation

In a cross-sectional study that investigated the effect of cyberbullying victimization on feelings of depression among college students in Kuwait University, it was found that cyber-victimization is a significant positive predictor of depression, i.e., the likelihood of becoming depressed is increased in those who are subjected to cyberbullying, or digital violence [44]. Similar findings were found in another cross-sectional study that investigated the prevalence and relationship between cyberbullying, cyber-victimization, and depression symptoms among Qatar University students. The results showed that approximately 50% of the students scored a ten or higher in the Patient Health Questionnaire-9 (PHQ-9), which indicates symptoms of depression [45]. With regards to isolation, research shows that victims of digital violence become further isolated. If only 17% of the survey participants sought support from family and friends, as the results of our study show, then feeling isolated is expected. As already discussed above, this is possibly related to the fear of social stigma and its impact on women and girls in Arab cultures [34]. Moreover, it is noteworthy to mention that depression and isolation can be experienced collectively, or one after the other. Research shows that depression, along with other mental health risks, is associated with isolation [46]. The relationship between depression, isolation, and cyber-bullying may not be causative as much as it is correlation. Victims of digital violence who already struggle with their self-image. i.e., have a lower image of themselves, could take what has been said to them as indicative of who they are. This can further exacerbate their depression. On the other hand, victims of digital violence with a more intact sense of self to begin with, are less likely to be affected by the digital violence. Moreover, feelings of isolation can stem from depression. When people experience digital violence, they may feel like they are the only ones being bullied, which is unrealistic [43].

### Self-Harm

Although the number of cases reporting thoughts of self-harm were only 6 (4.7%) (Table 3), it should still be taken into account and investigated as it is associated with a high suicide risk [47]. Research shows that victims of digital violence can have poor psychological and behavioral outcomes. This includes self-harm and suicide. In a recent study of factors affecting cyber violence behavior among Saudi youth, the link between digital violence and suicide was investigated. It has been found that cyber violence might lead to suicide [48].

## Conclusion

Gender-based violence in general, and digital violence in particular in Kuwait and the Arab world as a whole, has particular importance when it comes to the wellbeing of women and girls. The legal system in Kuwait lacks proper intervention strategies for dealing with matters of digital violence against women and girls. In addition, it is recommended for women-focused NGOs in Kuwait to take action against digital violence, focusing on its prevention by raising awareness on digital safety and security. Although no significant associations were obtained from the results of the questionnaire, it is safe to say that digital violence is not uncommon in the population of women and girls in Kuwait. Level of education, digital safety awareness, and protection of personal information in a digital environment were explored at different levels as factors that can increase the likelihood of encountering digital violence. Moreover, the emotional reactions towards experiencing digital violence and the following psychological impact should be taken into consideration while investigating digital violence. Further research on the impact of digital violence on women and girls in Kuwait is encouraged.

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