

Scars Among Screens: Understanding the Digital Lived Experiences of Acid Attack and Burn Survivors Using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA)

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ABSTRACT

The digital experiences of individuals with acquired facial differences remain underexplored even with the transformation of the way identity is constructed and performed in social media. This qualitative study explores how acid attack and burn survivors navigate digital beauty standards, online disinhibition, and identity negotiation on social media. Drawing on a social constructionist epistemology, semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven survivors recruited through the Chhanv Foundation in India. Data were analysed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA). The analysis generated four themes: (1) *Constructing 'Authenticity,'* where survivors frame unfiltered images as a moral stance against deceptive beauty norms; (2) *Safety as Strategy,* detailing how survivors manage the "digital stare" through strict withdrawal or performative humor; (3) *The Discursive Reconstruction of Identity,* examining the tension between the empowering "warrior" label and the desire for "normality"; and (4) *Mediated Kinship,* revealing how digital communities replace traditional family structures as primary sites of care. The findings suggest that for survivors, the digital realm is a "hyper-reality" where visibility is a high-stakes negotiation of agency. The study concludes that digital interventions must pivot from safety-centric to agency-centric models to support survivors in reclaiming their narratives.

Keywords: Acid attack survivors, acquired facial difference, digital identity negotiation, online disinhibition, reflexive thematic analysis, social media

1. INTRODUCTION

Reality and identity are no longer understood as fixed biological facts but as meanings shaped through ongoing social interaction and dialogue (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Whereas earlier these meanings were largely formed through direct, face-to-face encounters (Buck, 1980), they are now increasingly constructed and displayed in digital spaces, where the self is actively curated and performed through screens (Belk, 2013). Within this digital form of selfhood, the face is

treated as a key source of validation in systems that favor uniform beauty standards, such as fairness or smoothness. Feminist scholars have long considered beauty a socially constructed "myth" that sustains power inequalities (Wolf, 1991), a man-made hierarchy intensified on social media where visible conformity to norms is rewarded with social approval and status (Chua & Chang, 2016), while nonconformity is often seen to result in adverse psychological effects, including the internalization of feelings of inadequacy (Siddiqui, 2021).

For the nonconforming body, identity negotiation in these platforms is very complex, especially for acid attack and burn survivors with visible injuries. Medically and socially distinct, acid attack and burn survivors can be linked through a shared psychosocial reality—the acquired facial difference. This shared reality is often stigmatized, leading to social isolation and a diminished sense of selfhood. Acid attacks are, at their core, a gender-based form of violence against women. They are particularly prevalent in South Asia, with India recording over 200 cases in 2022, most of which involve gender-based violence against women (National Crime Records Bureau, 2023; WHO, 2018). Survivors often undergo a sudden disruption in body image and identity, related with persistent emotional distress, social anxiety, and deep feelings of shame (Mannan et al., 2006; Mittal et al., 2020) adding to the physical trauma.

While digital platforms may appear to constitute a distinct social arena, contemporary scholarship increasingly suggests that the online world cannot be understood in isolation from offline social life. Rather than functioning as a separate domain, digitally mediated environments often reproduce and extend existing cultural norms, hierarchies, and inequalities within technologically structured interactions. Offline attitudes toward beauty, gender, and bodily differences therefore frequently travel into digital spaces, where they may become intensified through platform architectures that prioritize visibility and engagement. In this sense, the experiences of acid attack and burn survivors online should not be interpreted as isolated digital encounters but as extensions of broader societal responses to visible differences. Online interactions, therefore, often represent a continuation and, at times, amplification of the stigma, curiosity, and social surveillance that survivors encounter in everyday offline life (Boyd, 2014; Hine, 2020).

Survivors are thereby experiencing a novel form of the so-called gaze, shaped by anonymous and distant interactions described by Suler (2004) as the “online disinhibition effect.” This effect can operate in two contrasting ways: toxic disinhibition enables hostility, ridicule, and unsolicited medical commentary (Araujo et al., 2024), while benign disinhibition allows for quicker emotional closeness and supportive exchanges within online communities (Guest et al., 2025) due to the same digital distance.

To fully understand the complicated nature of the digital negotiation, it is also key to place the survivor in the larger cultural landscape within which they operate. In the Indian context, the female face is understood not only as an aesthetic feature but also as a symbolic site of family honor (*izzat*) and a key asset within the marriage economy. Sociological work on the Indian family indicates that women’s identities are frequently defined through relational roles such as daughter, wife, and mother, with physical appearance closely monitored as an indicator of familial status and respectability (Gopalakrishnan et al., 2024). An acid attack, therefore, functions as more than a bodily injury; it produces a form of “social death” (Bramstedt, 2018) by disrupting the survivor’s socially sanctioned routes to recognition and personhood. Crucially, this disruption is not confined to physical spaces; rather, the digital and physical domains exist in a state of “recursive co-constitution” (Jurgenson, 2026). The offline stigma of the “damaged” body fundamentally shapes how a survivor navigates digital visibility, while the validation or hostility received online flows back to impact their offline recovery and self-esteem. In this sense, the digital realm acts as a techno-social extension of the survivor’s physical reality, where the body is constantly renegotiated through the screen. Thus, while trying to voice themselves in digital spaces, survivors are often troubled by the cultural fears around the public visibility of

the so-called damaged female body in addition to the platform algorithms. The combination of deep-rooted stigma and increased digital visibility creates a unique space for negotiating identity, where even the seemingly simple act of capturing and distributing a selfie becomes a significant statement of declaration for existence and individuality.

Social media, despite the existing issues, can also operate as spaces of resistance, as the survivors are increasingly utilizing these digital platforms to counter narrow ideals of “victimhood” by sharing personal narratives. Survivors can also form seemingly unlikely, alternative networks of care and belonging, helping them reclaim agency (Vasquez et al., 2025; Face Equality International, 2021). Existing research predominantly focuses on the trauma and therapeutic recovery of survivors. However, contemporary social reintegration—a primary rehabilitation goal—is inseparable from social media. Consequently, there is a substantial knowledge gap concerning survivors’ daily digital lives. Specifically, we lack understanding of how they actively renegotiate identity, manage visibility and privacy, and reclaim agency within algorithm-driven environments that are fundamentally structured to marginalize them.

To adequately address these gaps, an in-depth qualitative exploration capturing the digital experiences of burn and acid-attack survivors is pivotal. The present study therefore focuses on exploring the lived digital realities of these survivors. It seeks to examine how contemporary beauty standards and algorithm-driven aesthetic norms are perceived and navigated, how online disinhibition is encountered in the form of hostility or unsolicited engagement, and how identity is actively constructed within these spaces. In addition, the study investigates the ways in which survivors negotiate tensions between privacy and visibility and how participation in online communities supports resilience

and the development of alternative networks of belonging.

2. METHODS

2.1 Research Design

The research employed a qualitative research design that was supported by a social constructionist epistemology in which significant emphasis was placed on social interactions, culture, and language in the effort to interpret lived experiences. Since the study is set under the topic of how acid attack and burn survivors negotiate complex digital beauty ideals, Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) was chosen as the research methodology (Braun & Clarke, 2019) because, unlike other methods, RTA considers the researcher as part of the meaning-making process, which is particularly relevant to this study as it explores the subjective and ambiguous digital lived experiences of this population (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

2.2 Participants and Setting

Seven adult participants were recruited as a part of the research; these participants were survivors of acid attack or burn injuries who were approached and selected in coordination with the Chhanv Foundation (Noida, India), a non-profit organization aimed at the rehabilitation of survivors of acid attacks. The demographic characteristics of the participants are presented in Table 1. The design thus followed purposive sampling. In order to focus on identity rupture and reconstruction processes, the inclusion criteria included age (18 years and above), history of acid or visible burns, and active social media usage. People with inborn facial disabilities and those who were not active on the Internet were omitted.

The principle of information power was used to steer the study (Malterud et al., 2016). This method indicates that, when the respondents have much relevant and experience-rich informa-

tion that conforms to the research purpose, very few respondents are adequate. The sample size was discussed as sufficient, and it was a detailed and idiographic qualitative analysis due to the specificity of the sample and the thoroughness in the engagement process.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Participant ID	Age (In years)	Gender	Type of Injury
P1	30	Male	Acid Attack
P2	Not Disclosed	Female	Burn Injury
P3	27	Female	Acid Attack
P4	19	Female	Acid Attack
P5	30	Female	Acid Attack
P6	Not Disclosed	Female	Acid Attack
P7	30	Female	Acid Attack

Note: Age was not disclosed by two participants (P2, P6)

3. DATA COLLECTION

The semi-structured interviews were conducted as the only method of gathering data in the months of December and January 2025. The interviews were conducted in the personal areas of the partnering NGO to make the participants feel as comfortable as possible. The semi-structured interview guide included 15 open-ended questions that were formulated based on the review of literature referring to digital self-presentation and stigma with specific consideration of the beauty standards, online hostility, and community support. The interviews were recorded on audiotapes to maximize the fidelity to transcription, and the

interviews lasted between 30 and 45 minutes. Field notes were also taken to include nonverbal expressions and contextual cues to keep the researcher's reflexivity at bay and also to provide a better understanding of the latent aspect of analysis.

3.1 Procedure

Following ethical approval, participants were contacted at the Chhanv Foundation. Interviews were carried out in English or Hindi, depending on the preference of the participants, after the informed consent was obtained. Putting strict ethical protection in place, a process consent model was implemented that permitted the participants to refuse to answer the questions or to leave the study during any point without any fines. Moreover, a distress management plan was created alongside the in-house counsellor of the organization to contain any possible psychological discomfort so that the well-being of the participants was considered more than the aim of data collection.

3.2 Data Analysis

The six steps of reflexive thematic analysis suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006; 2022) were used to analyze the data. It was an inductive analysis, meaning that the data drove the analysis, and latent, focusing on the analysis of underlying conceptual meanings rather than a mere description. The researchers initially got acquainted with data by transcribing audio recordings word-to-word and listening to them repeatedly. The systematic coding has been initially used on the whole dataset to address the surface (semantic) meanings and latent (underlying) meanings. Instead of considering themes as objects that were to be found, the codes were proactively clustered to produce patterns of shared meanings, which resulted in the formation of candidate themes (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The provisional themes were then compared to coded

segments and the data set as a whole to determine the coherence and internal consistency. After such a review, every theme was narrowed down to bring out its main organizing idea and was then given a name.

A reflexive journal was kept through the analytic process to note the assumptions that the researchers made during the analytic process, especially in the area of resilience and victimhood. This reflexivity served as a methodological protection mechanism, as it served to make sure that the final analysis was based on the lived realities of the participants instead of being constructed by the researchers based on their prior assumptions (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

3.3 Researchers' Reflexivity

The researchers are aware of the fact that their own position influenced the analysis in accordance with the standard of RTA quality. The study was initiated with a clinical psychology angle with therapeutic redressing of appearance anxiety, but the trend changed when it was noted that the normalization of dark humor in the social media outlets was specifically directed at marginalized groups of people. Once it became clear that digital hostility was a structural, rather than merely an individual, problem, particularly for those who do not conform, especially during a time when the world was obsessed with ideas of aesthetic perfectionism, the paradigm of the research shifted to a sociotechnical one. This reflexivity played a key role in keeping the analysis from pathologizing the reactions of the survivors, enabling the researchers to interpret their online activities (blocking or humour) on the contrary as advanced modes of resistance, but not as avoidance. Moreover, the male researchers who were interviewing female survivors were highly conscious of the gendered power relationships involved in the interview space. Cases of protective impulse—the need to salvage the situation by intervening when

the participants experienced acute pain—were identified and recorded in the reflective journal. It was essential not to give in to this impulse. The researchers had to make the deliberate act of stepping aside so that the silence could work, so that the participants could describe their non-linear paths out of their own free will without anyone else trying to make them follow a redemptive arc. This uneasiness was fruitful, as it enabled a critical distancing from the societal tendency to imagine survivors as "cured" rather than as vulnerable, struggling people. Such reflexivity helped ensure that, at the end, the themes did not simply reflect clinical optimism regarding the survivor's recovery but rather acknowledged their unresolved, challenging reality.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 The Construction of the Authenticity: The Moral Hierarchy of the Unfiltered Body

The participants of this project build the predominant digital aesthetic of flawlessness with the help of active deconstruction of the indicated. Survivors in a digital environment are conditioned to view filters not as a means of aesthetics but as an infringement on morality ("fraud" and "misguide") (Hussain et al., 2025). This act stands antithetical to what Grieger et al. (2025) refer to as "digital vulnerability"; under the pressure to align with the expectations imposed by AI, the participants make their visible scars symbols of so-called radical honesty.

4.1.1 The Filter as Moral Transgression

The participants described the use of beauty filters as not a harmless option, but they saw it as an unethical act. In the case of Participant 1, the algorithmic aesthetic is untrustworthy in nature and equates the optical illusion of filters with the financial deception of cybercrime, implying that it is a fraud against the spectator to filter his/her face:

"That is not right. That is a misguide. ... 70% is wrong, 30% is right, of social media. ... It is cyber fraud. ... This AI has come. AI is causing a lot of damage to people." (Participant 1)

In a similar fashion, Participant 5 grounded this rejection on a spiritual foundation. The scarred body is a reality that is ordained by God to her. To filter or censor this reality is to venture an insult to the Creator. This is consistent with the fact that personal narratives enable survivors to oppose the objectification of their medical condition, as Vasquez et al. (2025) note; the opposition, in this case, is theological. That face, made by God, damaged to whatever extent, is true to something that the filter that man makes can never have:

"Whatever the reality is, you should show that. ... I feel that it is made by God. If a person says that it is a dark colour, or it is black... then there is no one in the world to say that. A person made by God will remain the same." (Participant 5)

4.1.2 Unveiling as a Subversion

In turn, the act of posting an unedited photo can be interpreted as a political practice of unveiling. This sub-theme emphasizes the fact that the digital world provides survivors with an opportunity to rebel against the patriarchal demands of the physical world, where the family tends to coerce the survivor to conceal or disguise himself or herself in order to maintain izzat (honor). Participant 2 referred to her original, unedited post not as a vanity project, but as a war against the silence her family had imposed on her:

"And I used to cover my face with a dupatta... I stopped covering my face from that day. And I started posting my

current photo... I used to fight with my family. You can fight with society. But it's very difficult to fight with family." (Participant 2)

Nevertheless, this unsolicited pledge of radical honesty is very costly. By not concealing their scars, the survivors emerge out of shadow and right into the frame of the digital stare and must negotiate their safety with constant deliberations.

4.2 Safety as Strategy: To deal with the Digital Stare by Withdrawal or Performance

While the aim is authenticity, the routine effort is safety. The internet is a space of excessive gawking, what Macgregor (1990) referred to as the stare in physical locations as magnified by the "persistence and searchable" nature of online archives (Boyd, 2014). To cope with this, the participants adapted two entirely different and even opposite strategies: the fortress and the stage.

4.2.1 The Fortress - Safety by Hiding

To some, the only way that one could be safe was by retreating completely. Participant 4 represents the fortress strategy, which can be interpreted as toxic disinhibition, as described by Suler (2004). She foresees the violence of the unknown gaze (bad people) even before it takes place. Her plan is proactive: she builds a virtual wall, blocking strangers and limiting her presence to prevent the psychological harm of appearance-based cyberstalking.

"I feel that I am not safe. Not even a girl or an adult is safe. ... People comment on my posts. Most of them are bad people. They follow someone. They think it's easy to talk to such people. That's why I don't do it." (Participant 4)

4.2.2 The Stage - Safety by Humour

In a sharp contrast to Participant 4, Participant 3 interrupts the victim narrative by creating the

so-called stage. She takes the gaze in a new form, using humor instead of being afraid of it. By turning the stalker into a source of entertainment among her friends, she exercises a sophisticated form of emotional control. She demystifies the threat and turns the possible trauma into social capital. This sub-theme presents before us the fact that the concept of being safe is not only about escaping danger but also about taking charge of the story:

"A boy has been stalking me... So, I took a screenshot. And I sent it to all my friends. And made everyone entertained... I laugh. I never demotivate." (Participant 3)

Although these safety measures control the gaze of the audience, the external and internal struggle of defining self is another aspect that the survivors have to come to terms with. After the fortress is constructed or the scene is set, one still wonders who is behind the screen- a 'Hero' or simply a normal person?

4.3 The Discursive Reconstruction of Identity: Mobilizing the Warrior Label

This theme delves into how the label assigned to victims and survivors is a complex matter. It was discovered that most of them were personally taking up terms such as Warrior, fighter to demolish the deficit model, yet this was interrupted by a disparate voice that was critical and saw the labelling as a curse.

4.3.1 Claiming Equivalence ("No Less Than")

To most respondents, the term "hero" has a certain role; it purports to be equivalent to the able-bodied world. Participant 6 draws upon the term in order to justify that survival demands equal or more labor than ordeal life. By using the term "warrior," she seeks the social approval that is usually reserved for the normative beauty, as put forward by Chua and Chang (2016). The brand is a means of tapping into authority:

"Sir, we are struggling so much; are we any less than a hero? ... Look at an ordinary person; what can he do to you? ... The one who is going up from this level, we are still much better than him... We are no less than any power." (Participant 6)

4.3.2 The Counter-Narrative of Normality

However, a strong counter-narrative came out of Participant 3, who was an example of a deviant case in the data. She held that any special designation, such as a positive one like "fighter," is used to render the survivor another. Her opposition reflects the 'politics of heroism'; it is as dehumanizing as having to go into the closet. She opposes the "supercrip" discourse that is usually imposed on disabled bodies, requesting that the radical right be mundane.

"See, I am neither a survivor nor a warrior. I am a normal person like you. And I want you not to give me any special name. Treat me like you... I just want to live a normal life. (Participant 3)

Eventually, the battle for personal identity is not an empty space. Stigmatizing labels are commonly rejected with the help of a new sense of belonging when the virtual ties of the virtual world substitute the broken kinship bonds of the physical home.

4.4 Mediated Kinship: The Digital Construction of 'Chosen Family'

Lastly, the online world was created by individuals as the main location of emotional reality. This theme touches on the binary of offline is real and online is virtual, as the survivors engage the Benign Disinhibition (Suler, 2004) of the internet in place of ruptured biological families.

4.4.1 The Digital Lifeline

Participant 2 clearly defined the online community as her saviour, the support of strangers in opposition to the psychological abuse by her own family. In this case, the online world offers the so-called social support, a key factor in psychological adaptation (Zuchelli, 2023), which the physical home did not provide. The internet is not a tool; it is a lifeline.

"When an outsider who lives very far from you... His support... So online communities gave more support... because it was the turning point of my life. This is given by social media." (Participant 2)

4.4.2 Intimacy at a Distance

Participant 5 posed a theory of intimacy at a distance, which implied that proximity may spawn judgment, whereas distance, such as on the Internet, may foster care. The screen is some sort of filter that lets one be emotionally connected without the imminent danger of the stare (Macgregor, 1990). This sub-theme implies that in the case of stigmatized bodies, distance is a precondition of intimacy.

"In fact, I mean, there are a lot of my followers who, on my birthday, they live somewhere else, but they send me gifts... In offline, people say that we are out here... maybe those people say that it is better from a distance." (Participant 5)

4.5 Synthesizing the Digital Survivor Experience

The results of this reflexive thematic analysis show that the victims of acid attacks and burns are not helpless consumers of online aggression and are not seeking support on the Internet. Instead, we can see them as active constructors of an online life that demands negotiation, which

is time-consuming and laborious constantly. Through the combination of the four themes, which are authenticity, safety, identity, and kinship, we believe that the digital space serves as a hyper-reality to the survivors, and it is a zone where the stakes of visibility and agency are greater and more unstable than in the real world.

4.5.1 The Paradox of Hyper-Visibility and Disinhibition

A paradox emerges between Theme 1 (Authenticity) and Theme 2 (Safety): the moral imperative to remain authentic (unfiltered) makes survivors vulnerable to a predatory gaze. This observation complicates John Suler's (2004) concept of the "Online Disinhibition Effect." Although disinhibition is traditionally used to justify the toxicity of trolls (as is the case in the "Fortress" strategy), the concept can also be considered as contributing to a specific type of radical vulnerability in survivors. The digital screen offers a kind of protective buffer enabling participants such as Participants 2 and 6 to continue with their acts of unveiling, which were approved by the society of the physical villages. Thus, social media is not only a means of communication but also an instrument of the self (Foucault, 1988), which allows the creation of a survivor identity, which goes beyond the stigma of the place. Nevertheless, this agency comes at a cost; it is bought with the daily emotional work of handling the so-called digital sphere, which means that the survivors will have to be their own content moderators to preserve their mental well-being.

4.5.2 The Gendered Geography of Digital Safety

In addition, the results of Theme 4 (Mediated Kinship) should be interpreted in the context of the very Indian-specific gendered geography of digital safety. As it is mentioned in the Introduction, the Indian patriarchal society fre-

quently suppresses women, particularly with disfigurements, into the hidden realm of home to hide the shame of the family (Gopalakrishnan et al., 2024). In this research, it is observed that the smartphone breaks this containment. In the case of Participant 3, the digital space is a third place that comes around the gatekeeping of fathers and husbands. In contrast to the material village, where her mangled face identifies her as a broken property, the virtual world makes her an active subject of speech. We would recommend digital literacy be not only a skill but also a subversive weapon of liberation for the survivors of the Indian acid attack and an essential change in the balance of power of the traditional joint family.

4.5.3 The Politics of Heroism: The Trap of the Digital Supercrip

Theme 3, The Warrior Label, gives invaluable detail to the literature on identity labels. Although the former studies state that the label of a survivor facilitates resilience (Papendick & Bohner, 2017), the expression of the critical difference expressed by Participant 3 shows that to others, heroism could be a trap. The conflict between the self-identification of the heroism of Participant 6 and the demand of the normalcy of Participant 3 is congruent with the critical disability studies that criticize the supercrip narrative, in which only special disabled people are appreciated. We understand the digital warrior figure as a frequent performative requirement of the type of armor that the survivors should adopt to be involved in the digital economy of attention. Being normal is not visible in an algorithmic environment, which favors high-arousal emotions (inspiration or shock). Therefore, the resilience that is noticed on the Internet does not necessarily imply internal psychological adaptation but a survival mechanism in the digital environment that is needed to transform trauma into social capital.

4.6 Clinical and Social Implications

The research findings imply that clinical and social interventions must shift beyond the concept of a safety-first model (teaching survivors to hide/block) to an agency-first model. Clinicians must understand that posting a selfie is not merely vanity but a treatment of exposure therapy against the stare of society. In addition, NGOs and campaigns should be mindful of foisting the hero narrative. As demonstrated by Participant 3, even the well-intended warrior campaigns may have the inadvertent impact on the survivors, who simply wish to be perceived as normal. The systems of support have to approve the wish to be special and the wish to be ordinary so that a middle ground identity is provided, which does not involve having to act all the time.

In the context of social media, these results create the need to reckon with social media itself. The case of the so-called algorithmic exclusion, in which participants report that the current content moderation systems are not effective, shows a design flaw in the current content moderation systems that often confuse graphical injury and the so-called violative content. We urgently need algorithmic justice in which platforms develop their computer vision algorithms to differentiate between non-normative bodies and gratuitous gore. To find a balance between the digital safety tools meant to safeguard users and the population that could most easily be harmed by this balance, platforms should collaborate with the survivor communities to design these moderation policies together. Until algorithms are trained to perceive the scarred face as an acceptable variant of the human form, but not a policy violation, the survivors will remain second-class citizens in the digital square.

4.7 Reflexivity and Methodological Integrity

In accordance with the ideals of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2024), we consider the quality of such research as sit-

uational and not generalized by the concept of generalizability. The produced insights are contextual to the utmost, based on the digital-cultural intersectionality of Indian survivors in 2025-2026. We were also consciously considering our positionality through the analysis. The normalcy narrative shared by Participant 3 challenged the initial assumption that resilience is inherently and exclusively a positive construct. This necessitated a reflexive turn—a turn away from searching after the “signs of strength” into analyzing the politics of labels. Such a turn was what made sure that the analysis did not simply prove the already existing discourses of empowerment but instead made manifest the untidy, conflicting reality of the lived experience of the survivors.

5. CONCLUSION

For acid attack and burn survivors, identity is actively reshaped in digital spaces rather than merely reflected from offline life. These platforms become contested arenas precisely because offline marginalization pushes survivors to seek new forms of recognition and control. Instead of being positioned as passive targets of a digital gaze, survivors deliberately choose when to appear, when to retreat, and how to perform resilience in ways that serve their own narratives. Because algorithmic culture rewards polished perfection, survivors disrupt it by foregrounding scars as signs of honesty rather than deficiency. In this reversal, vulnerability is not imposed upon them but is used strategically to claim moral credibility and authorship over their stories.

As these dynamics show, digital support efforts should be reoriented. A narrow emphasis on protection is insufficient, since visibility, despite its risks, becomes one of the few available routes through which a self, damaged by offline violence, can be reclaimed. What remains to be examined is whether identities forged online retain their force beyond the screen,

and whether the authority gained as a “digital warrior” reshapes survivors’ standing within their everyday social worlds.

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Conflict of interest

The authors hereby declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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SUPPLEMENTARY DATA

Table 2: RTA Table

RTA Coding Table				
Theme	Central Concept	Organizing	Sub-themes	Verbatim Excerpt
Theme 1: Constructing 'Authenticity': The Moral Hierarchy of the Unfiltered Body	The "Truth" of the Scar vs. The "Lie" of the Filter. Survivors do not just "prefer" natural photos; they construct a moral hierarchy where the scarred body represents "radical honesty" and the filtered body represents "deception." "No filter" becomes a political stance against the "fake" digital standard.		1.1 The Filter as Moral Transgression Filters are framed as ethical violations ("misguides," "fraud," or insults to divine creation). 1.2 Unveiling as Resistance Posting the raw, scarred face is constructed as an active rebellion against patriarchal demands to hide.	"That is not right. That is a misguide. ... 70% is wrong, 30% is right... This AI has come. AI is causing a lot of damage to people." (Participant 1) "Whatever the reality is, you should show that... A person made by God will remain the same. ... we have nothing to do with the world." (Participant 5)
Theme 2: Safety as Strategy: Managing the Digital Stare through Withdrawal or Performance	Safety is not a guarantee; it is an active job. Survivors experience the internet as a place of intense staring ("the digital stare"). They manage this threat by adopting specific safety strategies: either building a "Fortress" to keep people out or building a "Stage" to control the audience through humor and confidence.		2.1 The Fortress: Safety through Hiding Safety is achieved by viewing visibility as dangerous ("bad people") and strictly blocking strangers to protect oneself. 2.2 The Stage: Safety through Humor Safety is achieved by refusing to be scared—turning stalkers into "entertainment" or laughing at trolls to strip them of their power.	"I feel that I am not safe... Most of them are bad people... They think it's easy to talk to such people. That's why I don't do it." (Participant 4) "A boy has been stalking me... So I took a screenshot. And I sent it to all my friends. And made everyone entertained... I laugh. I never demotivate." (Participant 3) "If we want our posts to be such that people don't comment, then only people won't comment... If you are doing good, you won't get bad comments." (Participant 7)

Contd...RTA Table

RTA Coding Table				
Theme	Central Concept	Organizing	Sub-themes	Verbatim Excerpt
Theme 3: The Discursive Reconstruction of Identity: Mobilizing the 'Warrior' Label against Victimhood	Refusing the 'Deficit' of Victimhood. Participants appropriate labels like "Warrior" to dismantle the "deficit model" of the victim. They use these terms to claim parity ("no less than") with the able-bodied world. This is contested by a desire for "Normality."		3.1 Claiming Equivalence ("No Less Than") The "Hero" label argues that survival requires labor equal to or greater than "ordinary" life. 3.2 The Counter-Narrative of Normality A divergent narrative where the "Warrior" label is rejected because it prevents the survivor from being treated as a "normal person."	"Sir, we are struggling so much, are we any less than a hero?... The one who is going up from this level, we are still much better than him... It gives power, but we are no less than any power." (Participant 6) "See, I am neither a survivor nor a warrior. I am a normal person like you... Treat me like you... I just want to live a normal life." (Participant 3)
Theme 4: Mediated Kinship: The Digital Construction of 'Chosen Family'	The Digital as the 'Real' Site of Care. The online world is constructed as the primary infrastructure of care, replacing biological families who are often framed as sources of silence or trauma. Intimacy is paradoxically safer when mediated by distance.		4.1 The Digital Lifeline The internet provides the permission to speak and exist ("openness") that the physical village or family denied. 4.2 Intimacy at a Distance Physical proximity is linked to judgment; digital distance is linked to genuine support ("gifts vs. excuses").	"So online communities gave more support. ... Because the turning point of my life. This is given by social media." (Participant 2) "In our village... You are not allowed to talk so much... Now that I have come here... I have started keeping my words. So I came here and changed things. Using social media." (Participant 3) "In offline, people say that we are out here... maybe those people say that it is better from a distance, less from the front." (Participant 5)