



RESEARCH PAPER

Cyberbullying: Legal Challenges and Societal Impacts in the Digital Age

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ABSTRACT

Cyberbullying is a critical issue in Pakistan, exacerbated by increased internet use and social media prevalence. This study investigates cyberbullying's psychological impact on victims, such as depression, anxiety, and social isolation, and highlights gender disparities, with women facing heightened vulnerability due to societal stigmas and underreporting. Pakistan's legal response, notably the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) 2016, is analyzed, revealing challenges in enforcement and low conviction rates. The research compares Pakistan's situation to global trends, identifying shared obstacles in combating cyberbullying and advocating for international cooperation, including treaties like the Budapest Convention, to address its transnational scope. Technological solutions, like AI-driven detection, and public awareness campaigns are discussed as essential, along with parental involvement. The study concludes by calling for comprehensive legal, educational, and technological strategies to protect victims and ensure cyberbullies are held accountable.

KEYWORDS Cyberbullying, Digital Age, Legal Challenges, Pakistan, Psychological Distress, Social Media, Societal Impacts

Introduction

The term cyberbullying refers to a pervasive, insidious form of harassment instigated using digital platforms to cause psychological harm to individuals across geographical and temporal boundaries (PACER, 2022). Compared to traditional bullying, it survives and is anonymous which is bad for victims, as it strikes in private and can happen at any time (PECA, 2016). The rise of social media and other online communication tools has exacerbated the issue, enabling harmful behaviour to diffuse quickly beyond supervision (Muzaffar, et. al., 2020). Cyberbullying is not a problem ever heard of quite yet, but it is affected far and wide and has a terrible impact on mental health and societal cohesion. Severe psychological distress, including anxiety, depression and, in some cases, even suicide, were tied to cyberbullying. Its effect is that it disrupts communities, promoting fear and mistrust, especially among vulnerable groups, like women, but also minorities. The significance of preventing cyberbullying increases in the post-pandemic digital overlay with the rising incidence (UNICEF, 2024). This article critically studies the phenomenon of cyberbullying, having a close look at the way cyberbullying takes place in Pakistan. It offers a nuanced understanding of the issue, exploring the legal frameworks, societal impacts, and prevention strategies. The aim is to study what data is currently available, fill gaps in current approaches, and formulate evidence-based recommendations for combating cyberbullying in the best possible way.

Literature Review

Cyberbullying is the use of electronic communication tools to intimidate, harass, or otherwise harm an individual using electronic communication tools. Bullying is, of course, persistent and invasive, exploiting the anonymity of the Internet and the distance from its victims beyond what traditionally anticipated physical or temporal limits. Cyberbullying is different from traditional bullying as it occurs in a space far away from face-to-face interactions, so the perpetrator can be anywhere in the world and engage in harmful behaviour at any time. This, however, is a characteristic that features in a way that makes victims unable to find relief within their real and digital interactions, as the abuse can envelop every bit of their real and digital exchanges (UNICEF, 2024). Furthermore, the permanence of email content magnifies the psychological effect on victims, as items of email can be repeatedly retrieved and shared, further adding to the emotional trauma experienced (Espelage & Hong, 2017).

While both cyberbullying and traditional bullying involve fundamental ingredients of intent to harm, repetition, and power imbalance, they manifest in significantly different ways. Traditional bullying mainly consists of direct physical or verbal aggression observable by others and confined to specific places, such as schools or workplaces (Smith & Steffgen, 2013). While cyberbullying crosses such boundaries, it utilises the digital terrain to circumvent these, as cyberbullies can hide behind the darkness of the internet while travelling across this planet. Anonymity adds to the risk of consequences for the bully immediately, which often emboldens them to continue with more severe forms of harassment (Jane, 2016). In addition, cyberbullying is not bound to specific times or places, perpetuating victims through their homes and causing feelings of isolation and powerlessness (Yang et al. 2021). It is this continuous exposure that magnifies the psychological consequence, making cyberbullying more destructive than the traditional form of bullying.

Forms and Tactics

The tactics employed in cyberbullying are diverse and often complex, taking advantage of the various functionalities offered by digital platforms. These tactics can be categorized into several forms, each with distinct methods and consequences for the victim.

Cyberbullying often involves impersonation, such as the creation of a fake online profile or the unauthorized use of a victim's identity to post malicious content or contact other people in their name. By using this tactic, an attacker can severely damage a victim's reputation and relationships, in that others would believe the harmful actions or statements stemming from the victim (Plunkett, 2019). Apart from destroying the victim's credibility, impersonation also intrudes on the victim's personal space because the perpetrator can take over their digital identity. This type of cyberbullying takes advantage of the social bonds formed with our friends online, persuading them that they've trusted us and finding the emotional distress to carry forward into the real world (Blakemore & Frith, 2005). Cyberstalking consists of repeated and unneeded digital surveillance or surveillance of a victim's online behaviour. But this tactic can also lead to more direct forms of harassment, including sending threatening messages or spreading false information to bring harm to the victim's reputation (National Crime Prevention Council, 2009). Cyberstalking may instil fear and vulnerability within the victim due to awareness that the perpetrator is constantly scrutinizing the victim's online presence. Because cyberstalking is so invasive, it can have significant psychological effects, such as anxiety, paranoia, and depression for victims, who have

to live in fear of harassment (Macnish, 2017). The anonymity provided by the internet aggravates the victim's capacity to precisely discern and survey a stalker for action, which further exacerbates the cycle of a stalker (Mondal, et al, 2020).

Trolling is the intentional provocation of victims through inflammatory or offensive comments meant to elicit emotional responses or disrupt online conversations (Phillips, 2015). Trolls often target public forums or social media platforms, where their actions can be witnessed by a wide audience, amplifying the victim's humiliation. Trolling is typically characterized by its impersonal nature, with perpetrators often engaging in this behaviour for entertainment rather than personal vendettas (IMAM, 2024). Yet, the impact on victims can go as far as creating emotional distress and reluctance to join online communities (Moreno et al., 2019). However, an outing involves exposing a victim's private or sensitive information, sometimes with the intent to publicly shame or humiliate the victim (Willard, 2007). This tactic violates the victim's rights to privacy and public blight, exposing the victim to public judgment and possible ostracism. The ripple effect of an outing is far-reaching, especially if the shared information is stuck online forever (Livingstone & Blum-Ross, 2020). The diverse and complex nature of cyberbullying calls for prevention and intervention that incorporates multiple approaches. To develop strategies that protect victims and hold perpetrators accountable for cyberbullying, it is important to understand the unique characteristics and methods of cyberbullying.

Global Overview

Across the globe, cyberbullying, the use of digital platforms to harass or intimidate individuals, has become an escalating problem. However, this phenomenon transcends geographic and cultural boundaries with unique challenges across regions. With the growing case of cyberbullying numerous studies have been done about the complex interaction of cultural, social and technological factors.

Out of the two largest digital markets in the world, India and the United States (US) are also among the most troubling when it comes to cyberbullying. Surprisingly, in India, cyberbullying is prominent, and estimates suggest that about 85% of the children have been either involved in or been victimized by cyberbullying, which is far higher than the global average (Cook, 2024). The reason for this surge is partly due to increasing internet penetration and usage of smartphones, permitting the occurrence and anonymity of cyberbullying (Kaur & Saini, 2023). In India, social stigma particularly around speaking of mental health and bullying continues to make the impact much worse and many deserve to be supported more. The US, however, like most other industrial countries, has more developed legal frameworks and public awareness campaigns, yet suffers from a high rate of cyberbullying. The figures also reveal that roughly 73% of American students have been cyberbullied, and a lot of them have suffered cyberbullying in the preceding month (Cyberbullying Research Center, 2024). The continuation of cyberbullying in the US is associated with the widespread use of social media among teens and the relatively inexpensive anonymity of the Internet. Additionally, we see that the US has seen an increasing trend of cyberbullying that cross over race, gender, and sexual orientation (Hinduja & Patchin, 2018).

Cyberbullying trends vary in European countries like Belgium, Sweden, and the United Kingdom (UK) due to their specific social and digital landscapes. For instance, the cyberbullying prevalence rate is close to 25% among Belgium youth. The fact that digital communication has become part of daily life and that moderating online interactions in a multilingual society is a challenge helps explain this relatively high

rate. Despite educational campaigns aimed at combatting cyberbullying by the Belgian government, the data suggest that more targeted interventions are needed (Michael, 2024).

In Sweden, the reported prevalence is 23%. Preventing cyberbullying has become a priority for the Swedish approach, which puts a particular emphasis on prevention via education and literacy within schools. While all of these efforts are made it's still a persistent problem, especially among younger people. According to the Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention, social media platforms have played a tremendous role in fostering cyberbullying and it is hard to regulate such content, which falls on a thin line between free speech and harassment (Iotti et al., 2022). Likewise, the UK has similar challenges as 18% of youth report experiences of cyberbullying. While the UK's blend of legislative and psychological methods has been promising in tackling cyberbullying and has brought us this far, cyberbullying, especially cyberbullying related to socio-economic status and online hate speech, remains a topical issue. The UK's Office for National Statistics found that cyberbullying incidents are being underreported which can muddy the waters when seeking to know how bad an issue it is (Office for National Statistics, 2024).

About 19% of people in Australia have admitted to being victims of cyberbullying. The reason for this rate is that a country that has become overly reliant on the use of social media and the internet in a country that it is digitally permeating all aspects of personal and professional life. In response, the Australian government has put forth a suite of initiatives around online safety, including the eSafety Commissioner, which works to take down harmful content and offer support to victims (eSafety Commissioner, 2024). Yet, such measures are mostly reactive and have very little preventive impact. Similar challenges are faced by Canada, with cyberbullying in the country at around 20%. The Canadian approach to cyberbullying has been built upon mental health and well-being and completely understandably so as severe psychological effects caused by cyberbullying are sometimes even debilitating. Despite these efforts, digital platforms still provide anonymity which remains a significant barrier to effective enforcement and prevention strategies (Canadian Centre for Child Protection, 2014). Due to China's tightly controlled internet, it is a special case in reporting its cyberbullying rate at 17%. Although the government puts tight regulations in place to monitor and censor online material, cyberbullying is still an issue. Cyberbullying has persisted in China due to pressure to conform to the norms of societal expectations and the competitive nature of online interactions among young people (Zhou, 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic has had an impact on cyberbullying trends around the world. With a shift to online education and the growing reliance on digital platforms to facilitate social interactions, cyberbullying has become a bigger issue. Cyberbullying is increasing much more in many countries like those discussed above, due to the pandemic. The development of this trend can be attributed to the increased time spent online, the stress and anxiety of the pandemic, as well as the lack of supervision in virtual environments (Sorrentino et al., 2023).

Material and Methods

This study employs a qualitative data to directly approach the complex issue of cyberbullying in Pakistan. Multiple methods of data integration through primary and secondary sources methodologies are used to build a comprehensive analysis of the phenomenon from legal, social and media perspectives. Secondary data comprise

articles, Legal documents (PECA 2016, international conventions), media reports, social media discussions, existing literature and government/NGO reports; with the source putting out this primary qualitative data being the district offices. This multi-method approach offers a holistic take on cyberbullying in Pakistan by underscoring the dire need for legal reforms, gender-sensitive responses, and technological innovations to foster a safer digital space. It is important, as it wholeheartedly examines the legal, societal, and gender-based limitations of cyberbullying in Pakistan, and offers insight into the psychological ramifications it brings. It suggests boundaries on the use of the existing frameworks PECA 2016 and calls for legal reforms and strengthened enforcement. In addition to technological advancements and public strategies for awareness, the research also proposes these as essential tools to create a safer digital environment.

It engages in a thorough content analysis of the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) 2016 and similar regulatory frameworks to assess specific provisions and gaps in responding to cyberbullying. PECA is scrutinized based on how legal text, policy and report complement and mask enforcement challenges, including lower conviction rates. Overall, the analysis compares Pakistan's legal approach and an international legal framework like the Budapest Convention to determine how Pakistan has aligned or deviated from the global standards. A study of news articles with a thematic analysis was conducted to understand how the media in Pakistan is framing cyberbullying. The study then compares local media coverage to international media narratives on cyberbullying, pointing out some parallels, as well as differences particularly by gender, and sociocultural blame. The media sources chosen to represent a broad range of possible perspectives include mainstream news outlets, social networking (Twitter, Facebook) and online blogs. The research analyzes the intersection of cyberbullying and gender dynamics through an examination of reported cases and media portrayals, with particular emphasis on underreporting and social responses to female victims.

Results and Discussion

Cyberbullying in Pakistan

With the proliferation of cyberspace technology, cyberbullying in Pakistan has profoundly changed. Cyberbullying in the digital space in Pakistan is a thriving problem on the anonymity of the internet. The surge in internet penetration and the ineffectiveness of legal frameworks to combat this issue increased cyberbullying incidences after 2018. Cyberbullying in Pakistan is thought to have evolved from physical bullying towards more suffocating, covert online harassment. It's part of a broader global reality that digital platforms have become stages for psychological and emotional bullying - beyond physical bounds. This has further compounded the problem with the increased usage of social media by younger age populations taking to these platforms to inflict harm, with perpetrators escaping immediate retribution through the use of these platforms (Digital Rights Foundation, 2024).

The number of cyberbullying incidents surged dramatically in Pakistan after 2018, a concomitant with the country's steep rise in digital literacy and internet access. The Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) 2016 held particular importance for Pakistan when it was introduced because the law attempts to track down cybercrime, but then its implementation has been plagued with problems. But while this legal framework has been set up, cyberbullying incidents have escalated as a gap arises between legislation and enforcement (PECA, 2016). Part of the reason for the rise is that

electronic devices have become easier to access and social media platforms are more popular, allowing people to more readily find one another to cyberbully. Also, a lack of digital awareness within the general populace has left many internet users under threat of online harassment. Although the PECA 2016 is thorough in its coverage, the lacklustre enforcement and delayed judicial processes have not proven effective enough to curtail the rise of such incidents (Pakistan Telecommunication Authority, 2023).

Social media has been both an enabler and a means to fight against cyberbullying in Pakistan. On the one hand, these platforms become a refuge for cyberbullies to go unnoticed to increase their impact. However, social media has also been utilized as a means of exposing and rallying support against cyberbullying (IMAM, 2024). With the widespread use of Facebook, Twitter, Instagram etc, cyberbullying has become rampant with these platforms for the quick dissemination of harmful content and the capability of harassment on a bigger scale (Rafi, 2019). And for social media companies present in Pakistan, the response has been inconsistent. There are certain efforts to introduce reporting mechanisms and content moderation policy but they never really tackle the problem thoroughly. The compound problem is worsened by the fact that global policies are not always aligned with the relevant socio-cultural context of the region (Saleem et al., 2021).

High-Profile Cases

When discussing cyberbullying in Pakistan, these are some of the high-profile cases that have brought a lot of attention to this issue. It is significant to note these cases not only because of the prevalence of cyberbullying but also their ramifications in addressing the incidence of cyberbullying effectively.

The case of Fatima Aamir is a glaring instance of how cyberbullying in Pakistan can have dire consequences. She suffered at the hands of an online stalker who, for four years, subjected her to a relentless campaign of rape and murder threats. The threats were very serious, but authorities did not take action until it became a public case when the perpetrator was arrested (Haq & Zarkoon, 2023). This case underscores the critical role of public and media attention in prompting law enforcement agencies to act. It also highlights the inadequacies in the current legal framework, which often fails to provide timely protection to victims of cyberbullying (Digital Rights Foundation, 2024). Additionally, the cases of Meesha Shafi and Bina Shah are illustrations of the epidemic proportions of cyberbullying in Pakistan, especially against those women speaking out against social and cultural taboos. After a prominent singer Meesha Shafi publicly accused fellow artists of sexual harassment, she was subjected to a harsh backlash online. Such online abuse was not limited to the manifestation of societal misogyny but reflected in the challenging nature with whom the women used to assert their rights in a patriarchal society. (Meera Shafi vs. Federation of Pakistan et al, 2021). Bina Shah, an author and journalist, was likewise targeted through a fake Twitter profile, one which was used to run her contacts ragged and smudge her reputation. In these cases, women were exposed to cyberbullying for silencing and intimidation (Qureshi et al., 2020).

Cyberbullying in Pakistan is gendered as women face much more experience of online harassment than men. Similar to the physical world, the digital space mirrors the strong embedded gender inequalities in Pakistani society (IMAM, 2024). Gendered abuse directed at women, especially those in public positions like journalists, activists and entertainers, is meant to discredit them and prevent them from freely participating in public discourse. Female journalists in Pakistan are one of the most vulnerable groups to cyberbullying. Research shows that nine out of ten female journalists have

been exposed to some form of online harassment and that matters greatly in their personal and professional lives (Jamil, 2020). That harassment can involve threats of violence, sexual assault and character assassination, terrorising victims in body and mind and poisoning press freedom by silencing critics. In the context of cyberbullying in Pakistan, women and trans people are significantly underreported. Many shy away from doing so because of the stigma of being a victim of online harassment, and lack of trust in law enforcement agencies. The fear of retaliation and the potential for further victimization online also deter victims from going for help. However, this underreporting of cyberbullying skews the true prevalence of cyberbullying and hinders attempts to devise remedies to combat it (Sohail & Durrani, 2023).

Psychological and Social Impacts

Cyberbullying has profound and multifaceted psychological consequences on victims. The development of depression and anxiety is one of the most pervasive. The experience of perpetual and inescapable online harassment is felt as profound as a sense of hopelessness and despair by victims. This is not similar to other forms of bullying but cyberbullying which does not have a fixed period or places in which victims feel anxious and helpless (UNICEF, 2024). It also provides anonymity, empowering the perpetrators and making the attacks more vicious and the damage more severe. The fact that victims are anonymous complicates the server, prompting victims to feel isolated as they struggle to discover and confront their tormentors (Mishna et al., 2010). Because this harassment is so pervasive, it can be very frightening and hypervigilant, the hallmark behaviour of anxiety disorders. In more severe cases, the high frequency of cyberbullying leads its victims to suicidal ideation. The constant exposure to derogatory comments, threats, and public humiliation that are often associated with cyberbullying can make someone turn to self-harm as a way to cope with their emotional pain (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010). A correlation between cyberbullying and suicidal thoughts is well documented – studies show that victims are much more likely to contemplate suicide than those who aren't (Hinduja & Patchin, 2022). So, the psychological toll of cyberbullying goes far beyond the immediate emotional distress and may be life-long and result in tragic consequences.

However, cyberbullying has its impact on the victim extending to his or her family and the surrounding community. The emotional burden often falls on victims' families, in the case of cyberbullying. This constant watching of a loved one being abused through the 'internet' can result in feelings of helplessness, anger and fear in the family (O'Brien & Moules, 2010). Familia, these emotions can strain familial relationships as parents and siblings try to help others who are becoming distressed. However, due to the pervasive nature of online harassment families are unable to adequately protect their loved ones and the family as a whole increasingly feels under threat and anxious (Digital Rights Foundation, 2024). Moreover, victims of cyberbullying can also suffer from social isolation within their families. Being a victim carries with it a stigma – and for the persecuted, this can lead not only to social withdrawal but also to their family members who can feel embarrassed or ashamed by the situation (Pew Research Center, 2021). The isolation is exacerbated by the community's ability to simply scapegoat and exclude victims and their families. If cyberbullying is not understood or is minimised, then victims and their families may be reluctant to seek help out of fear of being judged or further victimisation (World Health Organization, 2020).

Often, as the problem of cyberbullying worsens, cultural attitudes towards its victims and those who perpetrate it worsen as well. In many societies, a tendency exists

to blame the victim, for not being resilient enough or somehow provoking the bullying (Bauman et al., 2013). Particularly in cultures where issues of mental health and online harassment haven't been widely discussed or understood, mental health victims are often blamed. They further contribute to stigmatizing victims, who may feel that they cannot seek support or speak out about their experiences. This inability to understand and empathize with such abusers will only reinforce the psychological damage done by cyberbullying creating a vicious cycle beginning with abuse then isolation and then mental distress (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2014). Additionally, the cultural stigmatization of mental health issues in many societies implies that cyberbullying victims may be reluctant to seek help for the psychological consequences of their victimization (Livingstone & Bulger, 2014). Fear of being labelled as weak or ostracized further is often a driver behind this reluctance. As such, the combination of cyberbullying and broader cultural stigmas directed towards mental health creates a multifaceted hurdle for victims to overcome, not only to be given a chance to recover but also to untangle themselves from the vicious cycle of a bullying situation (Hellfeldt et al., 2019).

Legal Framework and Law Enforcement in Pakistan

In the case of cyberbullying and the issue of cybercrime, PECA 2016 is a pillar in Pakistan's legal response to a growing problem. PECA was enacted to combat increasing acts of online abuse, presenting a legal framework for crimes constituting digital abuse (PECA, 2016). It seeks to control online behaviour, maintain the citizens' rights, and impose consequences on the offenders. The state is aware that cyber harassment lives as a constantly evolving concept in the digital age, and it is only natural that this had to be addressed by the state, as they learned that cyber harassment affects people like women and minors deeply (Johansson & Englund, 2021).

Cyberbullying is handled in detail under some of the sections of the PECA which are related to offences causing invasion of privacy, defamation, and the transmission of harmful content. For example, Section 21, punishes the offence of 'offences against the dignity of a natural person' which includes creating and disseminating information that tarnishes another person's reputation or privacy (PECA 2016 s 21). This section could be used in the form of cyberbullying including online harassment, sending intimate photos without consent, defamation and so on. Section 22 of PECA extends protection to minors by criminalizing the dissemination of explicit images or content that includes children, which is a key aspect of cyberbullying that abuses minors (PECA 2016, s 22). Additionally, Section 24 deals with cyberstalking, penalizing individuals who use electronic means to harass or intimidate others, thereby covering another dimension of cyberbullying (PECA 2016, s 24). These provisions notwithstanding, the enforcement of such laws is a daunting task. PECA is often questioned about its effectiveness in curbing cyberbullying, given the complexities and limitations associated with prosecuting such cases and the limitations of the legal and enforcement structure.

PECA has many obstacles, which prevent it from working effectively against cyberbullying. Low conviction rates in cyberbullying cases are one of the primary challenges. Despite thousands of complaints filed yearly, the number of successful prosecutions is severely disproportionate. The discrepancy illustrates a huge discrepancy between what the law intended and what it became. PECA's low conviction rates are a problem, a really big problem that undermines its utility. There are piles of complaints lodged, but most just never become formal charges and very few end up with convictions. For example, 27,867 complaints were made in 2018–2024,

and only 67 convictions were secured (Kamboyo, 2024). Various reasons account for this low rate of conviction including the lack of strong evidence, procedural delays, and identification issues concerning anonymous perpetrators. Due to the internet's ability to confer anonymity to some who would otherwise struggle to be heard, cyberbullying can often be carried out safely while law enforcement agencies are hampered by a lack of evidence to quell the accusations.

The need to collect admissible evidence in cyberbullying cases remains a significant barrier to effective prosecution. Ephemeral digital evidence is also easily alterable or deleted, making it difficult to preserve in a form that is acceptable in court. Moreover, the technical expertise of law enforcement officers worsens the task of collecting and presenting digital evidence (Kamran et al., 2019). The issue is further compounded by the fact that cyberbullying so often crosses national borders, and thus needs international cooperation, something which is rare because of jurisdictional complexities. Additionally, cyberbullying offences giving rise to a conviction require the highest level of procedural detail. A second barrier is the judiciary's limited understanding of cybercrime and digital evidence, in particular, many judges lack the training necessary to understand the nuances of such accusations leading to procedural dismissals or acquittals on technical grounds (Usman, 2017).

The Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) has been the main arm that is used for the implementation of PECA and has traditionally been responsible for the enforcement of cybercrime in Pakistan. But as cybercrime cases become more complex and bigger, the wedge that will address these issues is the establishment of a National Cyber Crime Investigation Agency (NCCIA) with more specialized expertise to deal with them. The NCCIA's mission includes investigating high-profile cyberbullying acts, taking cybersecurity steps and working with international bodies to fight cybercrimes spanning borders. The setting up of the NCCIA marks a strategic shift towards a more specialized and technologically capable response to cybercrime (Sahoutara, 2022). Yet, the overlap between the FIA and NCCIA's jurisdiction can result in bureaucratic inefficiency and jurisdictional disputes, which delay cyberbullying cases.

There are Cyber Crime Reporting Centers (CCRCs) across Pakistan to help report and investigate cyberbullying and other cybercrimes. These centres are aimed to be the prime points of contact for victims who can lodge their complaints and efficiently get support. However, the CCRCs have proven to be instrumental in raising public awareness about cyberbullying, as in 2023 alone there have been over 134,669 complaints. While reporting on CCRCs has increased, several factors impede their effectiveness. The centres are usually understaffed and under-resourced and may have limited access to new forensic tools required in complex cybercrime investigations (Abbas, 2023). Additionally, their lack of public awareness about what they are and what services they offer limits their utility. The operational challenges of these CCRCs currently limit their ability to have a crucial role in the battle against cyberbullying.

Combating Strategies

Prevention and awareness heading the efforts in countering cyberbullying are no longer effects, but very potent strategies. Fostering such a culture of responsibility and vigilance online is why such initiatives are so important. Promoting awareness of the risks of online interactions and the importance of digital citizenship is a vital component of awareness campaigns, but these are especially important when dealing with young people. Research suggests that the best way to prevent cyberbullying is through comprehensive education on this topic (Hinduja & Patchin, 2014). In most of

these campaigns, several different media platforms are used to have a larger reach to normalize the conversations around the issue and spur the reporting of incidents. Embedding digital literacy and responsible internet use in early educational institutions such as schools and educational institutions is a key way to mitigate cyberbullying. Instead of responding to cyberbullying incidents, schools have an opportunity to proactively prevent such behaviour through well-developed educational programs focused on empathy, ethical behaviour in the cyber world and the consequences of cyber harassment. In addition, schools should implement clear policies for reports and resolutions of cyberbullying, ensuring that both the perpetrators and the victims are appropriately supported and intervened (Agatston et al., 2012). In addition, educators need to be trained to identify any sign of cyberbullying and to respond to it in a way that deters any form of bullying.

Preventing cyberbullying depends a lot on the involvement of parents. Parents should be well equipped with knowledge and tools to monitor the activities of their children on the internet, set limits and engage in open discussions with children related to the dangers of the internet (Mesch, 2009). Building trusting relationships with kids, means when they ever face harassment on the internet, they will be confident to report to their parents. Further, children do not only need to be educated on online safety, parents must be educated about the new digital trends and risks as well to educate their children. It is this dual approach that ensures that family strategy against cyberbullying is cohesive. Technology companies have a huge responsibility to help fight cyberbullying, as their tools are where a large amount of this harassment happens. To create safer online environments, these companies need to proactively develop robust policies, employ advanced detection technologies, and provide superior user support systems (Boyd, 2014). Clear and enforceable community guidelines, along with easy-to-use tools that help to report and block abusive behaviour, are vital. On top of that, these companies must cooperate with law enforcement and advocacy groups to be part of a larger battle against cyberbullying.

Another great advancement in detecting and preventing cyberbullying involves the application of artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning. In real-time, AI can process huge amounts of data and identify abusive language, threats and harassment. The training of machine learning models to recognize context-specific indicators of cyberbullying can result in more accurate detection on multiple platforms and languages (Reynolds et al., 2011). But there are ethical concerns towards the deployment of AI in such a context especially when it comes to privacy and false positives. To avoid undermining user trust, these systems must be designed with transparency and accountability. The availability and accessibility of reporting mechanisms influence the effectiveness of anti-cyberbullying strategies. For cyberbullying reports to be fast and effective, platforms have to simplify this process so that reports can be submitted by users in a swift, straightforward manner. It includes giving clear instructions and support to the victims and giving feedback about the actions taken upon the reports from the victims. Improving these mechanisms also means refining the algorithms used to automatically flag abusive content, to reduce the burden on humans moderating and increase the total efficiency of response (Smith et al., 2008).

Mitigating the long-term psychological impact of cyberbullying requires effective support systems for victims of this harassment. Those affected should be given full access to counselling services, both online and offline. Professionals trained in handling cyberbullying cases should staff these services and be able to offer victims the required emotional support while offering practical advice on how to manage and

return from the abuse. Additionally, peer support groups can be a valuable resource, with a community of people experiencing similar things and having mutual understanding and encouragement (Slonje & Smith, 2008). Crucial to preventing victims from facing these challenges on their own is establishing and promoting these support networks.

The Need for International Cooperation

Given the digital age, cyberbullying knows no borders, so we must work together internationally to tackle it. Due to its borderless nature, cyberbullying often places perpetrators and victims in different jurisdictions making enforcement and prosecution more difficult. International cooperation is therefore essential to harmonise legal frameworks, to exchange best practices, and to enhance the capabilities of law enforcement agencies throughout the world (Council of Europe, 2001). Countries lack a coordinated approach to combat cross-border cyberbullying, making victims more vulnerable and the culprits free to evade blame. Prevention of cyberbullying requires global partnerships, enabling the sharing of knowledge, resources and technological advancements. Countries could work together to develop standardized protocols for the reporting, investigating and prosecuting of cyberbullying cases. Partnerships with international organizations including INTERPOL and the United Nations can also help generate global awareness campaigns and educational programs to instil a culture of digital responsibility and empathy between countries (INTERPOL, n.d.). Mitigating the effect of cyberbullying, these are a crucial initiative to ensure a coordinated global response.

The Budapest Convention on Cybercrime is an important first step towards multilateral cooperation to combat cybercrime, including cyberbullying. Also, the first international treaty to treat Internet and computer crime, it is a comprehensive legal framework allowing member states to criminalize types of cybercrimes, to share evidence and to cooperate in cross-border investigations (Council of Europe, 2001, art 2). However, the Convention is criticised for being too Western-centric and for some countries, including Pakistan, refusing to ratify it. This hesitancy prevents the global fight against cyberbullying, leaving non-participating countries without the tools to take part in active international collaboration. First and foremost, due to jurisdictional reasons and different legal standards, cross-border cyberbullying has special features. Issues of deconflicted investigation and prosecution across borders are complicated by variations in cybercrime laws, data protection regulations and evidentiary requirements (Wicki Bircher, 2020). In addition, the anonymity provided by the internet compounds the challenge as people cannot be identified and brought to book. However, such disparities in laws and procedures are costly, often preventing international cooperation (Sumadinata, 2023).

Conclusions

This study elucidates the pervasive and insidious nature of cyberbullying, highlighting its escalation in Pakistan and across the globe. The findings underscore the psychological distress and social isolation experienced by victims, often exacerbated by inadequate legal frameworks and enforcement challenges. Despite the implementation of the PECA 2016, the low conviction rates and barriers in evidence collection reflect the systemic issues within the judicial process.

Recommendations

A multi-faceted approach, integrating technological advancements, such as AI-driven detection systems, with robust legal reforms is recommended. Strengthening the capacity of law enforcement agencies, particularly in digital forensics, is crucial to improving the prosecution of cyberbullying cases. Public awareness campaigns must be intensified, targeting schools, parents, and the broader community for a culture of digital safety and empathy. A collaborative effort between governments, tech companies, and international bodies to address the cross-border nature of cyberbullying and adoption of international treaties, such as the Budapest Convention, is essential to enhance global cooperation in combating cybercrime.

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