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The Role of Social Media Platforms in Facilitating Cyberbullying in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT
Interpersonal interactions have undergone significant transformation due to the proliferation of digital platforms and technology, which have emerged as the predominant modes of communication. While these advancements offer numerous advantages, they also facilitate detrimental behaviours, particularly cyberbullying. This paper investigates the extent to which social media platforms contribute to cyberbullying within higher education contexts. The increasing prevalence of cyberbullying, characterized as a digital form of harassment with unique attributes, has garnered global attention. Despite education being a fundamental right in developing countries such as India, students in urban areas continue to encounter negative experiences, including abuse, which can yield long-lasting adverse effects. This research employs a combination of qualitative and exploratory case studies to explore the dynamics of cyberbullying within higher education. The objective of this approach is to elucidate the nature, impact, and specific modalities through which social media platforms contribute to the proliferation of cyberbullying. The research scrutinizes the distinctive context of higher education, wherein the intersection of technology and social interaction may precipitate an increase in cyberbullying incidents. It will also examine the psychological and social consequences for victims, as well as the challenges associated with preventing and addressing cyberbullying within these environments.

KEYWORDS: Cyberbullying, social media, higher education, corporate accountability, social democracy, digital ethics.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, technological advancements have consistently provided new avenues for interpersonal interaction, with communication via the Internet and digital platforms emerging as the primary mode of engagement that minimizes effort. Technological developments are accelerating at an unprecedented rate, fundamentally transforming our operations in contemporary society. Emerging technologies perpetually evolve in this context, increasing opportunities to enhance interpersonal interactions. While the rapid progression of new communication technologies offers numerous benefits, these digital platforms also engender circumstances that facilitate the proliferation of undesirable behaviours, including the troubling phenomenon of cyberbullying. This represents a digital variant of harassment characterized by notable disparities in reaction, personality, format, and substance. In recent years, the practice of cyberbullying has garnered international attention due to its widespread prevalence nature (Bularca et al., 2024).

In developing nations like India, where education is a fundamental human right and only a few remote regions lack access to schooling, children in urban centres, particularly Mumbai, often face adverse experiences such as bullying in educational institutions, which can have lasting repercussions on their lives. Bullying is defined as the intentional and repeated use of words or actions against an individual or group to cause distress or jeopardize their well-being (Sharma et al. 2017). Cyberbullying is a form of harassment that occurs when one or more individuals deliberately and repeatedly inflict harm on another person through digital technologies. It can take various forms, including flaming, harassment, and cyberstalking (Willard, 2004).

This offence can be perpetrated using many social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, which not only induce behavioural and psychological changes. Still, it can also manifest the physical effects of cyberbullying. To address the rising incidence of cyberbullying, it is crucial to implement appropriate security measures. While there is no definitive method to prevent children from being bullied, several strategies can be put in place to reduce the risks of cyberbullying (Hinduja & Patchin 2010).

Cyberbullying can also be defined as the use of information and communication technologies to facilitate intentional, repeated, and hostile actions by an individual or group aimed at harming others (Belsey, 2004). According to Smith et al. (2008), "Cyberbullying is characterized as an aggressive, intentional act committed by an individual or group through electronic means, occurring repeatedly over time against a victim who is unable to defend themselves easily."

Cyberbullying constitutes the act of harassing an individual through electronic means, particularly via social media platforms, resulting in defamation, unauthorized public disclosure of private information, and the intentional infliction of emotional distress (Watts et al., 2017). This phenomenon involves the dissemination of harmful words or images through social media and various digital communication avenues with the intent to cause harm to a specific target (Washington, 2015). Such behavior is frequently manifested by individuals across social media, gaming, and messaging platforms, primarily aimed at undermining the self-esteem of the victims.

In the preceding decade, cyberbullying has emerged as a phenomenon characterized by significant socio-psychological effects on adolescents. The advancement of digital technology has resulted in increased youth engagement with social media, thereby contributing to the proliferation of cyberbullying. The escalating prevalence of technologically advanced devices has facilitated the extensive use of social media applications among the youth, presenting both advantages and disadvantages. While it enables the private sharing of posts, images, and messages among peers, it concurrently contributes to a rise in cyberbullying through the creation of fraudulent profiles on these applications (Ansary, 2020).

The phrase " cyberbullying " was initially introduced by Canadian educator Bill Belsey. It refers to the utilization of digital platforms and communication tools to inflict harm, defame, or adversely affect an individual. Such behaviour has a profound impact on the recipient, often leading to emotional distress. These actions may occur sporadically or continuously and can be perpetrated by acquaintances, strangers, or groups (Hinduja & Patchin, 2009). Cyberbullying involves the repeated dissemination of harmful or hostile messages via electronic platforms by individuals or collectives, with the intent to cause injury or distress to others. Like all forms of bullying, the primary objective is to inflict harm, provoke humiliation, and isolate the victim (Chi et al. 2020). While it bears similarities to traditional bullying, cyberbullying is characterized by aspects such as anonymity, persistence, a broader audience, and lasting consequences,

which contribute to more severe repercussions and heightened vulnerability for its victims (Tokunaga, 2010, p. 278).

India has not been exempted from the peril of cyberbullying, which is recognized as a significant global health concern exacerbated by the detrimental use of modern technologies. The rise in cyberbullying can be attributed to widespread access to technology, affordable internet services, and the nation's initiative of a "Digital India." For most, internet connectivity, whether via computer or mobile device, is perceived as a necessity rather than an indulgence. India ranks third globally in terms of cyberbullying incidents, following only China and Singapore. A recent Microsoft Global Youth Online Behavior Survey revealed that over 53% of Indian children have encountered online bullying. The National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) reported 50,035 cybercrime incidents in India for 2020. This figure included 1,614 cases of cyberstalking, 762 instances of cyber blackmail, 84 defamation cases, 247 cases involving fraudulent profiles, and 838 occurrences of misinformation. These statistics underscore the alarming magnitude of the cyberbullying issue in India, which has undeniably surfaced as a significant threat. Within the digital domain, behaviours associated with cyberbullying are often regarded as acceptable and anticipated (Balamurugan et al. 2024).

Cyberbullying involves perpetrating cruelty against others through the dissemination of harmful content or engaging in other forms of social violence via the Internet or other digital technologies (Kaur & Saini, 2022).

Cyberbullying manifests in various forms: Flaming—digital altercations conducted through electronic messaging characterized by hostile and profane language; Harassment—persistently transmitting offensive, derogatory, and insulting communications; Denigration—disparaging an individual online by disseminating gossip or rumors to undermine their reputation or relationships; Impersonation—assuming the identity of another individual and disseminating material to jeopardize that person's safety, reputation, or interpersonal relationships; Outing—disclosing an individual's secrets or humiliating information or photographs online constitutes deception. Coaxing an individual into revealing secrets or compromising information and, thereafter, disseminating it online; Exclusion—deliberately and harshly omitting an individual from a digital community; and Cyberstalking entails persistent, severe harassment and defamation that involves threats or induces considerable fear (Hinduja and Patchin, 2015).

Numerous studies conducted in India have indicated a prevalence of cyberbullying ranging from 1.3% to 39.05% (Baruah et al., 2017; Bhat et al., 2017; Chudal et al., 2022; Doty et al., 2023; Mukherjee et al., 2019; Sharma et al., 2023). These investigations reveal significant discrepancies among their findings, attributable to variations in the conceptual definitions of cyberbullying, assessment methodologies, and sample selection strategies. Discrepancies in prevalence rates can be linked to the data collection methodologies employed and the characteristics of the analyzed samples. Presently, there is a lack of data indicating that the prevalence of cyberbullying is representative of Indian adolescents. The objective of the study was to ascertain the incidence of self-reported episodes of cyberbullying among Indian adolescents through a meta-analysis. We have examined two forms of engagement in cyberbullying: that of the perpetrator and that of the victim.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A recent analysis of a study conducted in Assam reveals significant issues concerning the intersection of technology and social harm. A report issued by UNICEF and the National Service Scheme (NSS) indicates that over 95% of Assamese youth have experienced cyberbullying and corporal punishment, resulting in

mental health challenges. Approximately 8,000 volunteers from 24 universities and educational institutions within the state participated in the survey, which was inaugurated on July 18 by Assam Governor Jagdish Mukhi. More than 60% of the surveyed youth indicated that bullying adversely affected their social relationships, while 24% reported experiencing feelings of concern, anxiety, and dread, and 17% disclosed incidents of bodily harm. The research indicated that 36% of respondents identified Facebook as the primary platform for cyberbullying, whereas 25% cited Instagram. The most prevalent method of bullying on social media (35%) is the dissemination of falsehoods, humiliating photographs, or videos (Johri & Singh 2024).

An examination of the discourse reveals the complexity of cyberbullying, highlighting its unique characteristics in contrast to traditional bullying. Although both forms aim to inflict harm, digital media enhances the scope and permanence of the damage, intensifying its effect. Scholars warn that the anonymity of online platforms may empower prospective bullies, leading to more insidious and harmful behaviours (Hinduja and Patchin, 2008). As technology increasingly integrates into students' identities and social interactions, the authors contend that it is inadequate for educational institutions to confront physical bullying solely. They underscore the critical need to incorporate technology-specific provisions in anti-bullying legislation. Neglecting this may unintentionally create a refuge for cyber bullies, enabling them to act without fear of repercussions, therefore endangering the mental and emotional well-being of kids. The imperative is evident: adapt, evolve, and remain attentive to evolving dangers (Alisha L.O., 2024).

According to research conducted by ResearchGate and ScienceDaily, individuals subjected to cyberbullying are 1.9 times more likely to consider suicide. In the year 2022, data from Stopbullying.gov indicated that victims of cyberbullying were twice as likely to contemplate suicide. Self-harming behaviour is commonly observed among these victims as a strategy to cope with their emotional distress. Reports from news outlets reveal that in November 2016, Ooshmal Ullas, a 23-year-old student of medicine at KMCT Medical College in Mukkam, Kerala, tragically ended his life by jumping, following experiences of cyberbullying stemming from a Facebook post, which led to severe spinal, leg, and cranial injuries. Upon examining the consequences of cyberbullying, it becomes crucial to establish cyber environments coupled with oversight mechanisms that provide explicit and uniform standards for constructive online behaviour (Arnon et al., 2022).

Shivashankar and Rajan (2018) highlight the urgent need for legislative progress to combat cyberbullying in India. They warn that the situation may worsen if legislative measures are not implemented. The research underscores the inadequacy of existing Indian cyber laws in effectively addressing the spectrum of cyber offences, particularly cyberbullying. The authors advocate for a proactive legal framework that anticipates and mitigates cyber risks, notably considering that young individuals are the predominant victims of these digital crimes.

There are numerous methods by which perpetrators torment their victims. The conventional (physical) harassment occurring in neutral spaces between the aggressor and the victim has evolved due to technological advancements in social media, encompassing various applications and networks, thereby transforming "traditional" harassment into a new manifestation known as cyberbullying. Cyberbullying refers to "the deliberate act of intimidation perpetrated by the aggressor against the victim via social media" (Beran and Li, 2005). This ostensibly rampant phenomenon encompasses "threatening, disparaging, misappropriating information and content, extorting, and disseminating false rumors concerning the victim targeted by the cyber aggressor" (Brydolf, 2007).

The detrimental impacts of cyberbullying are extensive, leading to adverse professional and personal outcomes, diminished motivation, physical aggression, and concealed suicidal tendencies in victims (Willard, 2006). Cyberbullying is associated with various detrimental effects, including diminished self-esteem, familial issues, academic challenges, violent behaviour, and delinquency, with the most severe consequence being the victim's suicidal tendencies (Patchin and Hinduja, 2006). Although cyberbullying produces severe adverse effects similar to those of traditional bullying, it occurs without physical interaction and frequently without the victim knowing the perpetrator's name (Willard, 2006).

The emergence of innovative communication technologies, including social networks and applications, has significantly contributed to the escalation of cyberbullying since the establishment of the first social network, Six Degrees, in 1997. This phenomenon primarily arises from the pervasive utilization of these platforms, which have fundamentally altered everyday interpersonal interactions. Social networks have fostered a hazardous environment wherein users frequently become victims of cyber aggression. In this regard, bullying via social networks is "a manifestation of aggressive behaviour orchestrated by an individual or, in certain instances, a collective, distinguished by the repeated enactment of negative behaviours directed towards individuals who are often vulnerable" (Duffy and Chan, 2018).

The rise in user numbers fosters an environment conducive to the emergence of cyberbullying behaviours, as perpetrators can readily identify vulnerable individuals by examining public profiles on social networks and media applications (Bowler et al., 2014). Regarding the manifestations of cyberbullying contingent upon the specific social network utilised, a prior study indicated that Facebook was the platform where users predominantly encountered cyberbullying, characterised by the posting of derogatory remarks or the dissemination of rumors (Baruah et al., 2017). On Instagram, cyberbullying can occur through the dissemination of indecent photographs, as well as through nasty comments, harassment, or denigration, akin to the situation on Facebook (Dewi and Seli, 2023).

OBJECTIVES

This study endeavours to examine the extent to which social media platforms assist higher education institutions in addressing the issue of cyberbullying. Additional objectives include:

- To evaluate social media companies' variations in corporate responsibility for user safety and the ethical management of digital operations.
- To investigate the potential role of social democracy in fostering ethical digital interactions and facilitating open governance.
- To find case studies on cyberbullying and analyse them.

METHODOLOGY

This paper presents a qualitative and exploratory case study analysis that describes incidents of cyberbullying within higher education and includes an extensive literature review on cyberbullying, corporate accountability, and digital ethics. The study evaluates the roles of social media platform designs, algorithmic amplification, and moderation policies while considering existing legislative frameworks and corporate policies regarding online harassment. The research culminates in evidence-based recommendations for proactive measures, such as enhanced content regulation, user education, and policy reform to minimize cyberbullying and bolster online safety in academic environments. This study utilises social democratic principles to scrutinise ethical digital governance and corporate accountability.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Social Learning Theory

Initially developed by Albert Bandura, Social Learning Theory posits that individuals acquire behaviours by observing others, thereby integrating behavioural and cognitive perspectives. The theory delineates four fundamental elements essential for observational learning: attention, retention, motor reproduction, and motivation. Contrary to behaviourists who prioritise reinforcement and punishment as the primary learning mechanisms, Bandura contended that cognitive processes are critical for human behaviour, as learning can occur independent of direct reinforcement. Social Learning Theory possesses extensive relevance, particularly within educational environments and social interactions, where it elucidates how both positive and negative behaviours are modelled and accepted (Kretchmar, 2024).

According to Social Learning Theory, individuals acquire behaviours, attitudes, and emotional responses through observation of others, particularly within social contexts, via mechanisms that include modelling, imitation, and reinforcement. Given the prevalence of cyberbullying in higher education, this concept is especially relevant, as social media platforms function as dynamic arenas where students may observe and potentially emulate behaviours. The abstract highlights how platform design, algorithmic amplification, and regulatory moderation contribute to the perpetuation of cyberbullying, which aligns with the theory's emphasis on environmental factors influencing behaviour. Key considerations include:

- **Modelling of Aggressive Behaviour:** Social media platforms frequently render violent or harmful interactions (e.g., trolling, public shaming, or viral insults) obvious through likes, shares, or trending features. Students may witness these behaviours receiving attention or social acceptance, increasing the likelihood of imitation.
- **Reinforcement Mechanisms:** Algorithms that prioritise attention-grabbing content, even if contentious or harmful, serve as positive reinforcement by signalling that such behaviours are socially acceptable or desirable. This can perpetuate a cycle of cyberbullying among students.
- **Effect on Vulnerable Populations:** The abstract emphasises the adverse effects of cyberbullying on students' mental health and academic performance. Social Learning Theory may illuminate how exposure to harmful online behaviours can lead to learned helplessness, anxiety, or retaliatory aggression among victims or bystanders.
- **Bystander Behaviour:** Students who observe incidents of cyberbullying may learn to remain passive if they perceive that intervening results in social backlash or fails to prompt consequences for the perpetrators, thereby endorsing a culture of inaction.

Various dimensions of the study can be explored, articulated, and potential solutions can be proposed for addressing cyberbullying on social media through the lens of Social Learning Theory:

- **Examining Platform Design:** This theory may guide an investigation into how platform features facilitate the modelling of cyberbullying. For example, research could assess whether public comment sections, anonymous posting, or reaction buttons (e.g., likes, laughter) foster environments where negative actions are observed and imitated. Case studies of specific platforms, such as X and Instagram, could explore the impact of design choices on user behaviour.
- **Algorithmic Amplification:** The theory can be used to clarify how algorithms facilitate cyberbullying by promoting content that provokes strong emotional reactions, such as anger or humiliation. A quantitative study, for example, could ascertain whether posts with aggressive tones gain more visibility, encouraging others to imitate such behaviours in pursuit of attention.

- **User Education Initiatives:** The concept supports developing interventions to model positive behaviours. For instance, initiatives led by social media campaigns or universities could highlight instances of students intervening in cyberbullying situations or promoting inclusive online interactions, thereby inspiring others to replicate these constructive behaviours. The abstract's focus on user education aligns with this perspective.
- **Moderation Policies:** The theory can inform recommendations for proactive content moderation within moderation frameworks. To mitigate opportunities for modelling undesirable behaviours, platforms should reduce the visibility of harmful content by downranking posts that contain abusive language. Furthermore, policies might encourage positive interactions (e.g., emphasizing supportive comments) to foster ethical digital conduct.
- **Mental Health and Academic Impacts:** The theory may provide a contextual basis for research into how exposure to cyberbullying influences students' emotional and academic outcomes. Surveys or interviews could explore whether students who witness persistent online harassment internalise these behaviours, potentially leading to stress, diminished self-esteem, or disengagement from academic activities.
- **Social Responsibility and Ethical Practices:** The notion can assist in advocating for corporate accountability by linking individual behaviours to broader societal standards. Social media companies may be encouraged to create environments that reflect ethical interactions, thereby aligning with the principles of social responsibility that emphasize collective well-being and equitable digital spaces.

Framing Theory

The theory, titled Frame Analysis, was initially proposed by Goffman. He asserted that individuals perceive their surroundings through their fundamental framework. This framework is considered essential as the user assumes it. Its utility as a framework is independent of other frameworks. Goffman asserts two divisions among basic frameworks: natural and social. Both facilitate individuals in the interpretation of data. To promote the comprehension of their experiences within a broader societal framework. The distinction between the two is functional (Goffman, 1974).

Framing Theory holds that audience perception and interpretation of information are shaped by its presentation—or "framing." This theory is pertinent in the context of cyberbullying on social media in higher education since social media platforms impact how cyberbullying is interpreted and handled using their policies, algorithms, and public messages. Framing Theory is especially relevant given the emphasis in the abstract on corporate responsibility, legal frameworks, and the balance between free expression and user protection, since it underlines the importance platforms play in shaping the narrative around cyberbullying. Important elements are:

- **Platform Policies as Frames:** Social media firms' moderation rules and public pronouncements frame cyberbullying as either a major ethical concern, a minor annoyance, or an unavoidable outcome of free speech. These frames shape user impressions and actions, as well as public and legislative reactions.
- **Algorithmic Framing:** Algorithms that prioritise certain kinds of material, such as sensational or polarising messages, portray cyberbullying as normal or acceptable, hence perhaps desensitising people to its consequences. This corresponds to the criticism of algorithmic amplification in the abstract.
- **Cultural and Social Narratives:** The manner in which cyberbullying is represented on social media significantly impacts cultural perceptions within higher education institutions. For example, students

may perceive cyberbullying as a low-priority issue if platforms minimize incidents or fail to take appropriate action, thereby decreasing the likelihood of reporting or intervention.

- **Power Dynamics and Corporate Accountability:** Criticism directed towards how influential institutions, such as social media companies, manipulate narratives to serve their own interests, frequently prioritizing profit over user safety, aligns with the abstract's emphasis on social democracy. This framing may lead to the marginalization of victims' voices and potentially jeopardize ethical governance.

Framing Theory may be used to examine how social media channels influence views of cyberbullying and to suggest ways to reframe the problem to support ethical behaviour and user protection:

- **Examining Platform Narratives:** The theory can direct a qualitative study of how platforms construct cyberbullying using their community guidelines, public pronouncements, or reactions to high-profile events. Studies may look at how cyberbullying is framed on sites like X, which stresses free speech, vs others with more rigorous moderation, such as LinkedIn, to gauge their influence on user behaviour.
- **Algorithmic Framing:** The theory can be applied to investigate how algorithms frame cyberbullying by highlighting particular material. Examining whether platforms prioritise inflammatory posts over neutral or positive ones, a content analysis could support a narrative that cyberbullying is a typical feature of online engagement. This underlines the abstract's demand for improved moderation.
- **Legislative and Corporate Accountability:** Framing Theory may offer recommendations for legislative frameworks that necessitate platforms to adopt distinct and victim-centered framing. Policies can mandate public disclosure regarding moderation outcomes and instances of cyberbullying, thereby transforming platforms from neutral intermediaries into accountable stewards of digital environments.
- **User Education and Advocacy:** The approach advocates for the reclassification of cyberbullying as a significant ethical issue within the realm of higher education. It is proposed that universities and platforms collaborate on initiatives that highlight the human impact of cyberbullying, such as through the use of victim narratives or mental health statistics. This effort aims to transition the narrative from mere "online drama" to an integral public health concern. This aligns with the focus on user education as articulated in the abstract.
- **Balancing Free Expression and Protection:** This idea can help case studies investigate how platforms frame the conflict between free expression and user safety. Studies might examine how platforms handle contentious situations like public shaming and whether their framing prioritises business interests over student welfare, hence guiding suggestions for fair policies.
- **Social Democracy and Digital Ethics:** Framing theory can help the abstract investigate social democracy by supporting frames that prioritise group responsibility and equity. To create inclusive digital environments, platforms could be motivated to use "pro-social" framing, such as stressing community standards or restorative justice.

By examining individual, platform, and social dimensions of cyberbullying, both Social Learning Theory and Framing Theory contribute to the objectives of the study:

- **Individual Behaviour:** Social Learning Theory offers a psychological perspective for interpreting user activities by explaining how pupils learn and reproduce cyberbullying behaviours through

observation and reinforcement. Framing Theory balances this by revealing how platforms affect users' views of these activities, guiding whether they consider cyberbullying acceptable or detrimental.

- **Platform Dynamics:** While Framing Theory questions how platforms' policies and content prioritisation shape the narrative around cyberbullying, influencing moderation efficacy, Social Learning Theory emphasises how design and algorithms produce settings favourable to modelling harmful behaviours.
- **Corporate Responsibility:** Both perspectives underscore the importance of platforms taking proactive measures. Framing Theory advocates for the perception of cyberbullying as a collective obligation of both businesses and society, aligning with the calls for increased governmental transparency. Social Learning Theory proposes solutions that exemplify appropriate behaviours, such as through educational initiatives or moderation efforts.
- **Social Democracy and Digital Ethics:** Social Learning Theory advocates for creating digital environments that foster ethical behaviour, thereby supporting equitable online communities. Framing Theory aligns with the principles of social democracy by emphasizing the imperative for platforms to implement frames that prioritize user safety and collective well-being, consequently facilitating ethical and legislative reforms.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In-Depth Exploration of Cyber Law and Cyberbullying Cases

This comprehensive analysis, grounded in extensive research, interviews, and legal documents, scrutinizes pivotal cases related to cyber law transgressions and cyberbullying. A nuanced examination accompanies each case to elucidate the legal, social, and technological implications.

- **Shreya Singhal vs. Union of India**

In November 2012, two women in Mumbai were detained for posting critical remarks on Facebook concerning the city's shutdown to mourn the death of Shiv Sena leader Bal Thackeray. They were charged under Section 66A of the Information Technology Act, which criminalized the transmission of "offensive," "menacing," or "grossly offensive" online content; their arrests ignited a firestorm of public criticism. The ambiguous phrasing of the law raised concerns regarding its potential to suppress free expression.

Shreya Singhal, a young law student, filed a public interest litigation in the Supreme Court, contending that the vague and overly broad language of Section 66A violated constitutional protections of free speech. Justices J Chelameswar and Rohinton Fali Nariman presided over the case. The government defended the provision as a necessary tool to combat hate speech and misinformation, while the petitioners countered that it silenced legitimate dissent and criticism. As public pressure mounted and similar petitions emerged, the court demanded a formal response from the government.

In 2015, the Supreme Court delivered a landmark ruling, striking down Section 66A as unconstitutional, stating that it had a chilling effect on free speech. This decision reshaped India's digital legal landscape, emphasizing the need for precise legislation to address online harms without infringing on fundamental rights.

The Shreya Singhal case underscores the tension between regulating online content and preserving freedom of expression. The vague terminology of Section 66A enabled misuse, stifling dissent under the guise of curbing offensive speech. This ruling highlights the importance of crafting narrowly tailored laws to address digital harms such as hate speech while safeguarding open discourse. As pivotal players in this ecosystem, social media platforms must refine their content moderation policies, engage with regulators

and civil society, and prioritize transparency to balance user autonomy with harm prevention. The case prompts broader inquiries regarding global best practices in cyber governance, urging stakeholders to cultivate a digital environment that respects rights and adapts to technological shifts.

- **Ritika Sharma's Cyberstalking Ordeal**

Ritika Sharma (pseudonym), a student at a prestigious university in Delhi, encountered cyberstalking after establishing a friendship with a Facebook user who claimed to be "Rohit Sinha," a businessman. After disclosing personal information, including her phone number, address, and class schedule, Ritika realised the individual's identity was fabricated. When she declined his attempts to coerce her into an out-of-town meeting, the harassment intensified, with Sinha issuing threats. Following her decision to block him on platforms such as WhatsApp, Instagram, and Facebook, Ritika and her brother reported the incident to the police, who initiated charges under the Information Technology Act and the Indian Penal Code.

Ritika's case illuminates the vulnerabilities faced by young digital natives in an era characterized by widespread social media usage. Her trust in what appeared to be a legitimate online acquaintance highlights significant gaps in digital literacy and online safety education. A thorough analysis of her interactions could elucidate whether inexperience or a lack of awareness contributed to her victimization. The psychological repercussions—fear, anxiety, and potential disruptions to her academic pursuits—underscore the necessity for robust support systems for victims, which should include counselling, legal aid, and community resources. Proactive prevention measures, such as mandatory digital safety curricula in schools and public awareness campaigns, are essential to equip youth with the skills to identify and evade cyber predators. Policymakers must strengthen legal frameworks and enhance law enforcement training to effectively address cyberstalking, ensuring swift justice and the protection of victims.

- **Ritu Kohli: India's First Cyberstalking Case**

In 2001, Ritu Kohli became the victim of India's first documented cyberstalking incident. Manish Kathuria impersonated her on the chat platform www.mirc.com, posting offensive messages, sharing her phone number, and urging others to contact her. This led to a barrage of harassing calls from across India and abroad, causing significant distress. Kohli reported the incident to the Delhi police, who charged Kathuria under Section 509 of the Indian Penal Code for insulting a woman's modesty. The law's lack of provisions for online offences exposed significant legislative gaps, prompting calls for reform.

Ritu Kohli's case marked a turning point in India's approach to cybercrime, revealing the inadequacy of existing laws to address digital harassment. The absence of cyber-specific provisions in Section 509 underscored the need for legislation that explicitly defines and penalises online stalking. This incident catalyzed discussions on victim-centric legal reforms and highlighted the challenges of prosecuting cybercrimes in their nascent stages. It also emphasized the importance of public awareness and law enforcement training to recognize and address digital offences. The case remains foundational for advocating stronger cyber laws and protections for online victims.

- **Bois Locker Room Controversy**

In 2020, the "Bois Locker Room," an Instagram group comprising teenage boys aged 16 to 18, garnered notoriety following the release of screenshots that revealed their discussions regarding the sexual assault of minors and the dissemination of non-consensual photographs of female classmates, some as young as 14 years. The group's objectifying and misogynistic dialogues elicited widespread outrage when shared publicly. Members deleted their accounts and issued threats to hack or expose individuals who disseminated the conversations. A new account, "Bois Locker Room 2.0," emerged, perpetuating the same

behaviours. The Delhi Commission for Women demanded immediate arrests, the filing of a First Information Report (FIR), and a comprehensive investigation.

The Bois Locker Room incident unveiled profound issues related to misogyny, cyberbullying, and the influence of social media in exacerbating harmful behaviors. Some defended the actions of the boys as youthful indiscretion, but the content contravened laws concerning sexual harassment and information technology. The protections afforded to minors under the Juvenile Justice Act complicated the prosecution process and raised pertinent questions regarding accountability for young offenders. Beyond the legal implications, the case underscores systemic challenges, including entrenched gender stereotypes, toxic masculinity, and insufficient education regarding respectful online conduct. Educational institutions and communities must prioritize digital citizenship initiatives to cultivate empathy and accountability. Furthermore, social media platforms should reinforce content moderation and collaborate with authorities to mitigate the presence of harmful groups, thereby ensuring safer digital environments.

- **Amanda Todd's Tragic Story**

In September 2012, Canadian teenager Amanda Todd posted a YouTube video, "My Story: Struggling, bullying, suicide, and self-harm," using flashcards to describe her experiences with cyberbullying and blackmail. After being manipulated into exposing herself on a video chat in seventh grade, an unknown individual circulated the images, leading to relentless harassment across schools and online platforms. Despite her efforts to escape, the perpetrator continued targeting her, creating fake profiles to perpetuate the abuse. In October 2012, Amanda died by suicide, weeks after her video garnered global attention.

Amanda Todd's case is a stark reminder of the devastating consequences of cyberbullying and the systemic failures that exacerbate victims' suffering. Societal tendencies to trivialize online abuse or blame victims deepen their isolation, while social media's anonymity empowers perpetrators to act without consequence. Algorithms that amplify harmful content and inadequate content moderation further endanger users. This tragedy sparked global calls for stronger cyberbullying laws, enhanced platform accountability, and comprehensive digital literacy education. Schools must integrate online safety training, teaching youth to navigate digital spaces responsibly. Social media companies should adopt proactive measures, such as stricter content policies and real-time monitoring, to prevent harassment and support vulnerable users. Amanda's story demands sustained action to transform awareness into systemic change.

Prevalence and Institutional Role in Cyberbullying

The investigation into cyberbullying within higher education institutions in India reveals its alarming prevalence and multifaceted impact. A comprehensive survey conducted among 220 students, predominantly aged between 17 and 24, found that 53.6% had experienced cyberbullying, with males (55.24%) being slightly more likely to perpetrate it compared to females (51.30%) (Pooja and Vats, 2023). Individuals with disabilities were disproportionately affected, with 80% reporting victimisation. The most prevalent forms of cyberbullying included insulting messages (63.6%), the sharing of embarrassing photos or videos (62.3%), and exclusion from online groups (21.8%). Physical appearance and religion emerged as primary triggers; however, many victims remained unaware of the specific reasons for their targeting.

Demographic analysis indicated that students spending over four hours daily on social media faced higher victimisation rates, while parental guidance was associated with reduced incidents. No significant correlation was found between residential area and parental education levels. The psychological and academic toll was substantial: 70% of victims reported feelings of anger, 43% experienced depression, and 33% felt lonely or helpless, contributing to decreased concentration and absenteeism. Responses to

cyberbullying varied, with 62% choosing to ignore messages, 25% retaliating, 27% seeking online advice, 40% saving evidence, and 79% blocking perpetrators.

Institutionally, support was inadequate, as 68.2% of institutions lacked awareness programs, and 68.6% of students were unaware of anti-bullying policies. A notable 69.5% perceived their institutions' responses as insufficient, highlighting a gap in educational frameworks. Social media platforms were identified as key facilitators of cyberbullying due to features such as anonymity, algorithmic amplification of harmful content, and the ease of creating fake accounts. Despite corporate anti-bullying policies, high rates of cyberbullying—42% on Instagram and 37% on Facebook—suggest enforcement gaps (Pooja and Vats, 2023). India's legal framework, including the Information Technology Act and the Indian Penal Code, addresses cyberbullying; however, enforcement remains weak, with a reported 25% conviction rate for cyberstalking in 2018.

The pervasive nature of cyberbullying within Indian higher education mirrors global phenomena, where digital platforms have intensified harassment within academic environments (Djuraskovic, 2023). The reported prevalence rate of 53.6% emphasizes the urgency of addressing this concern, particularly for marginalized groups such as individuals with disabilities, who encounter increased risks stemming from societal stigma. The prevalence of insults and humiliating content as methods of cyberbullying illustrates the ease with which offenders exploit platform functionalities, including anonymous accounts on applications like Sarahah, where 20% of messages were identified as harmful. The algorithmic amplification of such content further exacerbates its dissemination, raising ethical dilemmas regarding platform designs that prioritize engagement over user safety.

Psychological and Social Media Repercussions

The psychological effects—manifesting as anger, depression, and loneliness—are corroborated by findings from international research, including a 2017 study focusing on undergraduate students, wherein 57% reported that cyberbullying adversely impacted their emotional and academic progress (Peled, 2019). Within the Indian context, these ramifications are intensified by cultural elements, including stigma surrounding mental health, which may discourage students from seeking assistance. The academic repercussions, such as diminished concentration and increased absenteeism, underline the detrimental role of cyberbullying in undermining educational achievements, potentially contributing to elevated dropout rates, a significant concern in higher education worldwide.

Corporate accountability remains a contentious topic. The anti-bullying policies enacted by social media platforms, such as Facebook's Community Standards, comprise reporting mechanisms and content removal procedures; however, consistently high rates of cyberbullying indicate a predominantly reactive rather than proactive stance. Incidents such as that of V M Athira in 2023, where cyberbullying culminated in suicide, highlight the human cost associated with insufficient moderation (Khetan, 2024). It is imperative for platforms to invest in advanced AI-driven moderation technologies and to curtail anonymity options to deter offenders, while simultaneously providing easily accessible support resources for victims, including counselling services integrated within their platforms.

Legal Framework of India

From a legal perspective, India's framework, notably the Information Technology Act's Sections 66C and 67, along with the Indian Penal Code's Sections 499 and 507, provides avenues for recourse; however, low conviction rates and underreporting hinder overall effectiveness (Sharma, 2023). The 2015 annulment

of Section 66A due to its vagueness further complicates enforcement efforts, leading to calls for the establishment of specific anti-cyberbullying legislation. Recent discussions in 2024 indicate a need for more precise definitions and increased penalties to discourage offenders, in conjunction with public awareness initiatives to empower victims to pursue legal remedies (Tinku, 2024).

RECOMMENDATIONS

Collaborative Initiatives: Institutionally, the lack of awareness programs and policies in 68.2% of higher education institutions constitutes a significant shortcoming. Universities must enforce mandatory anti-bullying training, accessible counselling services, and unambiguous reporting mechanisms to assist students. Collaborative initiatives with social media platforms could bolster digital literacy programs, equipping students with the skills to navigate online environments safely. The absence of such initiatives contributes to the 68.6% of students unaware of reporting options, thereby perpetuating a cycle of silence and distress.

Educational reforms related to Cyberbullying: Addressing cyberbullying necessitates a multi-stakeholder approach. Social media platforms should prioritize user safety through proactive moderation and culturally sensitive policies tailored to India's diverse linguistic and social landscape. Legislative reforms should focus on enhancing enforcement mechanisms and clearly defining cyberbullying to facilitate effective prosecutions. Educational institutions must cultivate secure environments through awareness programs and support systems, while societal efforts should advocate for digital ethics to diminish the normalization of online harassment. These collective endeavours are crucial to mitigating the impact of cyberbullying and establishing safer digital contexts for students in Indian higher education, aligning with the principles of social democracy that underscore ethical governance and user protection.

Addressing Cyberbullying as a Sensitive Issue in Educational Settings: This study shines a light on how common cyberbullying is among college students. These students, who are training to become media professionals, aren't just at risk of facing online harassment themselves—they may also, unintentionally, contribute to toxic online spaces. That's why it's so essential to weave lessons about cyberbullying and digital ethics into their education. Doing so can help shape journalists who are not only aware of online harms but also ready to report on them responsibly and work to reduce their impact.

Social media is a huge part of student life, yet many journalism programs—both in India and around the world—don't have dedicated courses on staying safe online, fostering respectful digital spaces, or understanding how algorithms can spread harmful content. This leaves students unprepared for the real-world challenges they'll face, such as navigating content moderation, making sense of engagement metrics, or holding platforms accountable, all of which are key aspects of today's media world. By incorporating cyberbullying education into the curriculum, colleges can equip students with the tools to address these issues with confidence, drawing on insights about media regulations, audience behaviour, and ethical reporting in online spaces.

So, how can this be done? One way is through classes that blend communication law, media literacy, and even a bit of social psychology to give students a well-rounded view. Hands-on activities—like practising how to cover a cyberbullying story, analysing real-world ethical dilemmas, or critiquing social media platform policies—can make these lessons stick. Teachers need support too, so they can be ready to guide students through the rapidly changing digital world. Colleges should also support this initiative with clear policies, encouraging journalism programs to take the lead in fostering a culture of digital respect, media responsibility, and robust online communities.

Instead of treating cyberbullying as just a problem of bad behaviour, educators can turn it into a key part of what students learn. This approach can set a new standard for how online safety is taught and practiced in schools. It's about preparing students to handle the ethical challenges of working in media today, especially when social platforms can be both powerful tools for sharing stories and sources of harm. By connecting what is taught in the classroom with the broader context of digital governance, we can help future journalists create a safer, more responsible online world.

CONCLUSION

This research elucidates the diverse and pervasive nature of cyberbullying within higher education, particularly in India, where social media platforms exacerbate and facilitate harmful behaviours. The study revealed that cyberbullying is intensified by inadequate moderation measures, algorithmic amplification, and platform design, which adversely impact students' mental health, academic performance, and overall well-being. The incidents involving the Bois Locker Room, Shreya Singhal, and Ritika Sharma illustrate the intricate legal, social, and technological challenges associated with tackling cyberbullying. Further tragedies, such as that of Amanda Todd, underscore the significant human cost of inaction.

Collaboration among multiple stakeholders is imperative to mitigate the effects of cyberbullying. The safety of users should take precedence over engagement-driven algorithms on social media. It is crucial that these algorithms restrict harmful content, diminish anonymity, and help victims. To foster secure educational environments, higher education institutions ought to mandate anti-bullying training, offer accessible counseling services, and implement precise reporting mechanisms. To deter perpetrators, legislation must clearly define cyberbullying and reinforce enforcement measures. Cultural attitudes can be transformed, and online harassment can be diminished through initiatives promoting digital literacy and ethical standards.

Stakeholders can cultivate inclusive and equitable digital ecosystems through social democracy, emphasizing ethical governance and collective accountability. This research contributes to the discourse on corporate responsibility and digital ethics by proposing comprehensive reforms designed to safeguard students and ensure that social media platforms empower rather than harm. Ongoing legal, institutional, and social efforts are crucial for translating information into actionable change to protect the well-being of college students and beyond.

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