



CYBERBULLYING AND DIGITAL SAFETY IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

The digital age has revolutionized communication, shrinking the world and connecting people across far distances. However, the excessive use of technology and the internet has introduced new challenges, particularly for children and adolescents. India, a rapidly developing nation, faces an alarming rise in cyberbullying cases, mirroring global trends. The widespread adoption of smartphones, gaming platforms, and social media has made teenagers especially vulnerable to online harassment. Studies reveal that prolonged exposure to digital platforms not only affects their mental health but also disrupts their physical and social well-being. Cyberbullying, a growing menace, manifests in various forms, such as online gaming abuse, trolling, and social media harassment, often leading to depression, anxiety, and undiagnosed psychological issues among adolescents. The constant connectivity- from morning messages to hours spent scrolling through reels- has amplified the risk of such incidents. Gaming platforms too, have become breeding grounds for cyber aggression, targeting young users who are often ill-equipped to cope with such scenarios. India must prioritize addressing these escalating issues as it strides towards economic development. Awareness campaigns, mental health support systems, and robust coping mechanisms are essential to combating cyberbullying effectively. Furthermore, a coordinated governmental approach, including stringent legal frameworks and literacy initiatives, can play a pivotal role in safeguarding adolescents. By advancing digital literacy, strengthening cyber laws, and implementing effective regulatory mechanisms, India can establish a resilient legal framework to protect its youth. It is essential to uphold the rights and dignity of adolescents in an increasingly digitalizing world. Safeguarding the next generation from the pervasive threat of cyberbullying is not merely a social imperative but a legal obligation for the nation. This article delves into the causes, forms, and consequences of cyberbullying in India, emphasizing the need for a comprehensive strategy to promote digital safety. By understanding the risks and fostering resilience, India

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can ensure the well-being of its youth, empowering to navigate the digital landscape responsibly in this era of technological advancement.

INTRODUCTION

India with a population of 1.4 billion people¹, is home to the world's largest adolescent population. As per the reports of the World Census by the United Nations, 63% of the people are still backward and not urbanized. The literacy rate is still not up to the mark as compared to other developing countries.

In today's growing digitalization era, the adolescent world is undergoing a dramatic transformation. Playgrounds have been swapped by video games and online battles, while evening meetups with friends have turned into chats on social media platforms. These digital spaces offer a sense of safety to teens who shy away from in-person interactions, with many considering themselves introverts. However, this newfound social comfort online often comes at a cost. As adolescents become more extroverted in the virtual world, they unknowingly expose themselves to lurking dangers, making them easy targets for anonymous cyberbullies. What seems like heaven can quickly turn into a trap, leaving them vulnerable and unprepared for the psychological trolls of cyber harassment.

With the younger generation diving deeper into the world of social media and cyberspace, cases of cyberbullying are skyrocketing by the minute. In today's tech-driven era, where privacy is a luxury, people are more exposed than ever. Personal information is being shared across countless platforms- apps, games, online payments, and social media- leaving individuals vulnerable. From every click to every tap on a smartphone, our digital footprints grows, making it easier for misuse and exploitation to thrive.

Cyberbullying is often carried out by individuals who hide behind the cloak of anonymity, erasing their identity to torment others. This behavior is fueled by a desire to establish dominance, spread threats, or act out of anger, jealousy, and revenge- emotions that many youths today experience in overwhelming ways. Surprisingly, some educated young individuals can be even more dangerous than those less familiar with technology. With their knowledge of digital platforms, they often evade detection, making it difficult for authorities to track their offenses. For many bullies, harassment becomes a twisted form of entertainment,

¹ Worldometer 'India's population' <<https://www.worldometers.info/>>

without any consideration for the lasting psychological damage it inflicts on their innocent victims.

UNDERSTANDING CYBER BULLYING

With the increasing use of electronic devices, the physical bullying behavior of people has reached cyberspace globally known as cyberbullying. This has sparked a wake-up call for parents, teachers, educators, and all of us, demanding urgent attention to protect and guide the next generation in this digital age. 'Cyberbullying can be defined as harassing, defaming, or intimidating someone over the internet, generally using mobile phones or computers, on social media, online chat groups, or any other online platform'².

Adolescents who lack essential knowledge about the safe use of digital platforms often find themselves caught in the web of danger. By unknowingly exposing personal information online, they become easy targets for aggressive cyberbullies. This vulnerability paves the way for stalking, trolling, harassment, and an ever-growing list of emerging cybercrimes that prey on their innocence and trust.

DECODING THE MOTIVES OF CYBER ATTACKERS

The main reasons teens face cyberbullying often revolve around their appearance, academic performance, religion, caste, race, or sexuality. Bullies use social media to humiliate and defame them, tarnishing their growing reputation and creating rifts with their families. For some, cyberbullying becomes a way to pass time or escape boredom. Instead of facing their victims directly, they hide behind screens, using cruel words and actions to boost their ego. Many victims are powerless to prove their innocence or understand why they are targeted. Jealousy, revenge, and the need to dominate often drive classmates or so-called friends to engage in such acts, causing lasting harm to a teen's self-esteem, relationships, and budding career.

² Vijayrani M- 'silent screams a narrative review of cyberbullying among indian adolescent' (2024) CUREUS open access publication <<https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/>>

DIFFERENT TYPES OF CYBERBULLYING

With advancing technology, cyberbullies continue to find harmful ways to target teens, aiming to embarrass, defame, and emotionally damage them. Here are some common forms of cyberbullying:

- **Flaming/Roasting:** Sending harsh, vulgar, and furious messages privately or in group chats to humiliate the target.
- **Harassment:** Repeatedly sending unwanted messages, often in direct messages or comments, particularly targeting girls, creating an unsafe and threatening cyberspace.
- **Cyberstalking:** Excessive online tracking of someone's personal information, hobbies, and private details, leading to a breach of privacy and insecurity.
- **Denigration:** Posting harmful or offensive content about someone, spreading false information to damage their reputation publicly.
- **Masquerading:** Pretending to be someone else online to spread harmful messages or post denigrating content in the victim's name.
- **Impersonation:** Creating fake profiles or pretending to be the victim to share unfavorable or harmful information under their name, tarnishing their reputation.
- **Sexting:** Sharing or posting someone's indecent photos without their knowledge to defame or ruin their life, often leading to irreparable emotional harm.
- **Trolling:** A common form of social media bullying where attackers post provocative or harmful content targeting victims to embarrass or intimidate them. Even public figures like influencers or content creators are frequent targets, as trolling often uses memes and other "entertainment material" to disguise bullying as humor. This trend has made cyberspace increasingly unsafe, affecting everyone from school-going students to celebrities.
- **Trickery:** Many introverted teens fall prey to attackers who gain their trust online by pretending to be friendly. These attackers gather personal information by making the victim feel comfortable, only to later exploit their trust by sharing this information with unidentified third parties. This manipulation highlights the danger of forming online relationships without adequate social awareness or safety knowledge.

- **Outing and Doxing:** Sharing someone's private, sensitive, or embarrassing information such as personal messages or images, without their consent to humiliate them.
- **Exclusion:** Deliberately leaving someone out of online groups or communities, targeting them socially and emotionally.

THE IMPACT OF BEING CYBERBULLIED

The impact of cyberbullying can be deeply harmful, leaving victims with shattered self-esteem and a growing sense of isolation. As the emotional wound builds, they begin to withdraw from both the digital world and real-life interactions. What once might have been a soft, trusting personality turns clouded with negativity and trust issues.

Physically, the toll of constant cyberbullying can lead to persistent headaches, anxiety, stress even sleepless nights, fueling a cycle of poor health. Some victims may even lose their appetite, further damaging their well-being. The trauma of extreme bullying can be so overwhelming that for some it becomes unbearable with thoughts of suicide stemming from a feeling of hopelessness and the belief that their defamed life and personality have no future.

The emotional scars are often visible in their behavior. Victims find it hard to trust anyone again, and their personal relationships suffer. Fear and anxiety make them withdrawn, leaving them isolated and unable to share their feelings. They avoid social gatherings, not wanting to face the world or risk further humiliation. This loneliness often spirals into depression, a silent killer that goes unnoticed because it can be hidden behind a smile. Depression is one of the most dangerous mental health conditions, and far too often, we overlook it, failing to see how deeply someone may be suffering. Left unchecked, it can lead to tragic outcomes, such as self-harm or even suicide.

HOW CAN WE PREVENT CYBERBULLYING

In today's world, where the internet is deeply woven into every aspect of our lives, cyberbullying spreads faster than law enforcement can catch and act on it. With everyone carrying a phone and the digital world at their fingertips, prevention must begin early at home and in schools.

The youth growing up in a world where smartphones are the basic electronic toy for them at a very early age and navigating the internet comes naturally to them. Without proper knowledge,

they can easily fall into the unsafe corners of the digital world. Proper guidance about the right and wrong use of the internet is essential to ensure digital safety.

For Parents

- Monitoring their online activity by keeping an eye on what the child is doing online without being overly strict or invasive. Balance is key.
- Being approachable by shifting from a strict parenting approach to a friendly one, so your child feels comfortable sharing their experiences good or bad.
- Teaching internet safety by guiding them on how to identify and avoid harmful content or interactions online.
- Staying informed by being aware of your child's life, both online and offline, as cyberbullies often act in person but carry out their attacks in the virtual space.

For Schools

- Where schools already teach computers as a subject, they need to educate them about the good and bad sides of the Internet too.
- Kids need to learn how to stay safe online, recognize signs of cyberbullying, and understand different ways in which it can happen to them or already they are experiencing cyberbullying, by educating them they can at least protect themselves.
- Focusing on creating a supportive environment for the students to feel safe to share their experiences. Teachers should keep a personal eye on the behavior of students and encourage open conversations with them.
- Seminars, workshops, and other awareness activities conducted at the school level by cyber experts, counselors, and psychologists can help students understand the real online world in a relatable way. This would create a sense of being heard, supported, and more confident.

For Students

- Keeping 2 phone numbers, one for personal use and the other for public purposes and not share them casually.

- Updating passwords, creating a strong one, always enabling 2- 2-factor authentication for enhanced security.
- By avoiding connecting to free wifi networks in public places as by doing such acts they are compromising their privacy.
- Block suspicious accounts, fake profiles, and unknown numbers to stop unwanted interactions.
- Don't panic or respond impulsively to harassing messages instead save them as evidence for filing a complaint.
- Not sharing personal details online by avoiding oversharing with strangers, no matter how friendly they seem.
- Conducting regular security checks on social media accounts.

Legal Protection against Cyberbullying

Information Technology Act, 2000 (IT Act) revised in 2008

- Section 67
- Section 66A
- Section 66D
- Section 66E

Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS), 2023

- Section 78 - Stalking
- Section 351 - Criminal Intimidation
- Section 356 - Defamation

The Protection of Children from Sexual Offenses (POCSO) Act, 2012

Cyber Crime Prevention against Women and Children (CCPWC) scheme³

³ GOI, 'Ministry of Home Affairs', <<https://www.mha.gov.in/>>

Indian Cyber Crime Coordination Center Scheme⁴

National Database on Sexual Offenders (NDSO)

CONCLUSION

As the mental health of adolescents suffers the most due to cyberbullying, it is essential for the individual and the legal system to adopt new laws and personal safety measures. As technology advances day by day, this state highlights the urgent need for effective prevention strategies. A clear message should be in the minds of cyber attackers that cybercrime at any cost wouldn't be tolerated.

India has the largest population of adolescents, it creates a necessity to empower young minds with awareness, confidence, and courage to exercise their rights to report the incidents of cyberbullying. Remaining silent would encourage the cyber attackers where unintentionally we would be contributing a little. Change starts with self-awareness and taking personal responsibility, then encouraging others to do the same, By doing such acts we create a safe and more supportive digital environment for us and every other citizen and the growing youth.

⁴ GOI, 'Ministry of Home Affairs' <<https://i4c.mha.gov.in/>>