

Exploring cyber bullying and its impacts among social media users and Cyber safety awareness among people of age group 18-30 years

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Abstract- In an era witnessing rapid advancements in technology and its subsequent ways of transforming the digital spheres, technology has now become a necessity, a new way of life that has been integrated into every aspect of human life. With the immense digital capabilities and possibilities emerging with technology, people are becoming more dependent on them than ever before. However, its concerning when people only seem to enjoy the benefits it brings but choose to be unaware of the threats and perils that accompanies it. This ignorance of cyber space leaves people more susceptible and vulnerable in the cyberspace, which results in an increased rate of cybercrimes leaving a detrimental impact on the victim's mental health, self-esteem, and overall quality of life.

This research dwells into one of the most pervasive forms of cybercrime of the century, Cyberbullying. In recent times, it has emerged as a major societal concern as young adults are engaging extensively in social media for communicating as well as networking. Due to this proliferation of social media usage into most people's life and their ignorance of adopting cyber safety measures has made cyberbullying to be a major threat to the mental health and wellbeing of people. Especially in an age group of 18-30 years where cyberbullying seems pervasive and ubiquitous, its necessary to understand the dynamics of this phenomenon as well as its negative impacts in order to be equipped in cyberspaces. Cyber safety awareness is crucial to promote a safe and inclusive online environment.

Introduction:

Cyber bullying is an intentional and consistent form of bullying that happens with the usage of electronic medias and communication platforms such as social media, messaging apps, etc. Unlike conventional forms of bullying, cyberbullying can happen anonymously as it transcends all physical boundaries in turn make it more insidious and difficult to address. Cyberbullying can happen through various mediums but this particular research primarily focuses on cyberbullying that happens through social media.

Social media sites are crucial in encouraging young adults to engage in cyberbullying as these platforms offer a fertile ground, a conducive environment for people to engage in acts of harassment or bullying, frequently under the guise of anonymous or pseudonymous identity. Since social media is so widely used, incidences of cyberbullying may easily get out of control and reach a large audience, which can worsen the anguish that victims suffer.

In the light of increasing cases of cyberbullying and its deteriorating impacts on mental health of the victims, sometimes even its culmination in suicidal acts, there has been a heightened emphasis on understanding cyber safety awareness. Cyber safety awareness refers to a range of instructional programs, public awareness initiatives, and proactive measures that provide people the information they require to use the internet in a responsible and safe manner. Cyber safety awareness programs can also help lessen the negative effects of online harassment and promote a respectful and inclusive culture in online interactions by enabling young adults to identify and respond to incidents of cyberbullying. Considering the complex interplay that exists between cyberbullying, social media use, and cyber safety knowledge among young adults in the 18–30 age range, in order to understand this intricate relationship in a comprehensive manner, further study is a desperate needed. Examining the frequency, kind, and effects of cyberbullying on social media sites as well as evaluating the success of campaigns to raise awareness of cyber safety may be very helpful for legislators, educators, and mental health specialists who are trying to address this widespread problem. We can help create evidence-based tactics and treatments targeted at encouraging a safer and more welcoming online environment for young people by carrying out research in this field.

Methodology

The research has adopted a mixed method of quantitative (5 semi structured interviews) and qualitative approach (72 online surveys) to gain a deeper and a comprehensive understanding on cyber bullying and Cyber safety awareness

among people of age group 18-30 years.

This research has used purposive sampling strategy in selecting participants for interview, who have personally suffered cyberbullying across different gender identities (male, female, transgender) to ensure diversity and inclusivity of experiences and perspectives. Convenience sampling is adopted for conducting survey.

Data collection was done by Semi-Structured Interviews. Conducting five in-depth interviews with cyberbullying victims about their perspectives on cyber safety knowledge, coping strategies, and experiences. The audio recordings of the interviews will be transcribed for study.

Findings and analyses

Prevalence of cyberbullying

In the data collected in the survey regarding the prevalence and frequency of cyberbullying experiences of 72 random people belonging to the age group of 18-30 years of age, it is found that 59.7% of people have personally experienced cyberbullying. This reflects that the people using social media are prone to cyberbullying and recently the cases of cyberbullying are rising exponentially. There is a discernible increase in the people engaging on social media irrespective of age, gender, or digital literacy level.

The survey also showed that 88.9% respondents have witnessed their acquaintances being cyberbullied. This research emphasizes the pervasiveness of cyberbullying and the urgent need for effective treatments to combat it. Given the frequency of cyberbullying, it is possible that a significant number of people are suffering from detrimental consequences on their mental health and wellbeing. Cyberbullying victims may have elevated levels of anxiety, despair, and stress, lowering their overall quality of life. This demographic group is noted for its strong dependency on digital conversations and social media, and thus becoming more susceptible to online harassments and bullying. As the definition of cyberbullying is changing as new forms of cyberbullying are emerging, so is its impacts on the victim. For some victims the gravity of cyberbullying and its impact would be higher than others, which obviously takes into account certain factors like their level of cyber safety awareness, emotional maturity, attitude, whether they have a support system etc. When cyberbullying is pervasive in nature and can happen to anyone in cyber space, we can't assume that everyone will have the same impact or response towards it. Different people would have different coping mechanisms and strategies to overcome this form of bullying.

We cannot generalize the impact or gravity of cyberbullying or cannot create one size fit solution that is universally acceptable and adoptable, as everyone who is vulnerable to cyberbullying would experience it differently and respond to it differently.

When these cases are frequently occurring, and when people are not aware of its serious negative impacts on the victim, this can be considered trivial and could be easily discarded or ignored. Hence it is important for social media users to be aware of the gravity and its heightened risk of mental and psychological impacts on the victim. It would allow us to be mindful of their online behavior, in order to give support and to stand up against cyberbullying and online harassment.

The issue of cyberbullying is extremely pervasive in nature. Cyber space has no boundaries or demarcations to prevent the dissemination of any information or to track the misconducts, as anyone can attack under the guise of anonymity or through fake account. It is easily accessible, and can reach a huge audience globally within a speck of a second. The possibility of an accelerated dissemination of information and the increasing cases of bullying in cyber realm makes the act of cyberbullying more devastating and manipulative to the victim.

Anonymity offers more power and convenience in bullying in online spaces. In the survey it's evident that the perpetrators of cyberbullying typically used fake personas to conceal their actions. The anonymity in these fake personas allows cyberbullies to hide their identities and avoid taking accountability for their acts. Because they may behave with impunity, offenders could feel more confident to act more aggressively or maliciously online. The pervasiveness of online harassment and intimidation is made worse by the proliferation of fake personas in cyberbullying.

Cyberbullies may launch repeated, and more intense attacks on their victims without thinking about the repercussions or responsibility, which would continue the cycle of abuse and victimization. The use of fake identities in cyberbullying undermines internet safety and trust. Thus, the victims begin to worry that they could unintentionally communicate with a cyberbully who is hiding behind a false identity, they may start to avoid communicating online with others resulting in social isolation. The possibility of fruitful social connections and teamwork in digital environments is compromised by this breakdown of trust.

The interview responses reflect the pervasiveness of a particular form of cyberbullying namely sexual cyberbullying in which more females irrespective of their age, fall as victims. Perpetrators may post personal images or videos of victims, morphed with an intent to distribute sexually explicit content with the intent to humiliate or degrade them. This data indicates a worrying trend of increased sexual cyberbullying against women as most of the female respondents reported encountering sexual harassment, unwelcome sexual approaches, offensive sexual messages, remarks, or photographs through social media platforms, online forums, and messaging applications. This form of

cyberbullying would negatively impact their mental wellbeing as it makes them feel uncomfortable, helpless, traumatized, threatened, have their privacy invaded and violated. The data revealed instances in which women were targeted for the sharing of explicit sexual information without their consent. Perpetrators may post personal images or videos of victims, distribute sexually explicit content with the goal to humiliate or degrade them. Sexual cyberbullying is not just limited to female population but also is increasing among individuals belonging to the queer community.

Thus, defining that **cyberbullying is collectively organized attacking strategy in the cyber space to destroy and degrade an individual from progressing, which is extremely inhumane and manipulative in nature. It's indeed a violation of Human Rights.** Be it any form of cyberbullying when experienced has a derogatory effect on the mental, social, psychological, emotional and physical spheres of the lives of an individual. The findings emphasize the need of advocacy and awareness-raising activities in combating sexual cyberbullying and promoting a culture of respect and consent online. Education initiatives, community support networks, and legislative reforms can all help to address the underlying causes of sexual cyberbullying and provide assistance to victims.

The anonymity in the cyberbullying implies that the offenders made a conscious attempt to avoid accountability and hide their identities. People may feel more comfortable engaging in more severe kinds of abuse and harassment since they are less likely to be held accountable for their conduct when they are anonymous. Since the participant accounted that it was an organized group assault, this degree of organization points more towards a planned and systematic campaign of harassment than that of an individual abuse instance. The participant's encounter with online abuse serves as a sobering reminder of the difficulties LGBTQ+ activists and advocates confront in promoting their visibility and rights. The frequency of hate speech and cyberbullying on the internet can hinder activism and make those involved in advocacy activity more vulnerable and emotionally drained.

Impact of cyberbullying

Being bullied affects a person in different levels;

Societal Familial Individual

At an individual level the impacts are far reaching and severe. It affects the victim's mental and psychological health detrimentally even if the person affected has no previous history of mental illness. Youngsters or even adults who actively engage in social media, when faced with cyberbullying unexpectedly, it might lead to more serious mental health issues like post-traumatic stress disorder and even chronic depression. They would experience conditions like insomnia, loss of confidence, anger, increased stress and anxiety, isolation, body image issues, feeling of helplessness. Young girls who have experienced sexual cyberbullying become extremely self-conscious of their body leading to several mental health issues. The survey also showed that cyberbullying happened in social media mostly in the form of fake profile. The anonymity in cyber space can make the bullying more intense and invasive, as bullies feel emboldened to act without any immediate repercussions. A victim's sense of helplessness is increased by the bully's anonymity as they are unable to identify or confront their harasser. This psychological effect can take many different forms, such as sadness, anxiety, and a diminished feeling of self-worth. An extreme consequence of cyberbullying that leads to tragic outcome would include self-harming tendencies and instances of suicide. This scenario highlights the dire need for adopting a robust support system, measure of prevention.

It impacts the victim's familial and societal interactions, as there is increased isolation, confinement and declined socialization. Parents and siblings also become frustrated and helpless knowing that their loved one is being bullied. When they are unsure of how to support or handle the situation, and unfamiliar with the digital environment, this would impact their effectiveness in a healthy communication with the victim and among family itself. Sometimes they become overprotective, which further damages the victim's sense of autonomy and decision-making ability.

Some might even stop using phone abruptly due to the fear of seeing such messages and comments as they feel that it's going to be there. In addition to it, anonymity factor in cyberbullying, also affects victim's tendency to avoid communicating with others online which eventually culminates in social isolation.

Is deleting and blocking the accounts of cyberbullies has now become the only solution to cyberbullying? Is it that people are unaware of seeking legal support from cyber cell? One of the respondents answered these questions with another question. It's a sad reality that even the legal guardians are not updated enough or aware of the crimes happening online. They have to be equipped in order to address the emerging forms of cyber-crimes and to adopt effective strategies to stop cyberbullying from the source prior to any damage being done. Respondents also acknowledged that handling cases of cyberbullying employing fake identities might be difficult. Victims find it difficult to pursue remedies or file a lawsuit against harassers when there are no identifying offenders.

Furthermore, when offenders operate under the pretense of anonymity, platforms may find it difficult to properly filter material and implement regulations against cyberbullying.

Therefore, at societal level, cyberbullying is a reflective of the existing social and cultural dynamics in India. Public online platforms like social media platforms have become arenas where societal prejudices and discriminations are

perpetuated and intensified. This not just impact the individuals but also the entire communities. For instance, female population often face gender-based violence and sexually colored remarks including rape threats online, which could discourage their participation in digital spaces, hindering gender equality. As well as it would lead to a culture of fear and mistrust in online spheres, as there is no effective actions taken against such bullying. It discourages people from expressing themselves freely in digital spaces, which limits online platforms into a negative and nondemocratic place. This culture would be detrimental to a diverse country like India as democracy ensures freedom of speech of every citizen.

In this digital era where cyberbullying is the **pervasive pandemic**, it is inevitable to have a support system, that establishes a trusted and non-judgmental relationship that encourages open conversation to mitigate the effects of cyberbullying.

During covid-19 and after covid-19, every single service got linked to mobile phone and internet, services like banking, business, communication, education, healthcare, etc. Technology became a mandatory lifeline for people, engaging in electronic devices to keep up with the fast-growing world. Since online interactions grew, everything became virtual, people started engaging and existing more in online spaces, spending more time in mobile phones as well as social medias. Technology is omnipresent as the accessibility of it has increased magnificently. Consider this situation, when an individual who is traditionally bullied in college environment, could go home and distance themselves from that environment and could get away from it. But when it comes to cyberbullying, it's ubiquitous and one can't escape from its vicious circle. There is no limit of transferring information in cyberspace, as any information or misinformation can be disseminated without limits.

Therefore, adopting a multipronged integrated strategy than an isolated one can make the digital space safer, inclusive and respectful online community.

Analyzing cyber-safety awareness

As per the survey majority of the people are aware of the prevalence of cyberbullying and many have received cyber safety awareness education too. But sadly, 62.5 % of people in the survey have never supported a cyberbullying victim nor have they reported incidents of cyberbullying. This figure highlights a notable deficiency in both empathy and action among the individuals questioned. Even while most people are aware of the problem and may even have information from cyber safety education, many have not taken action when they come across cyberbullying.

These results highlight the vital necessity of community-based awareness campaigns and empathy-building projects. To effectively tackle this widespread issue, victims must get active assistance and instances must be reported. Merely being aware of cyberbullying is insufficient. Sensitization campaigns can encourage people to speak out against cyberbullying and assist those who are impacted by it by fostering an atmosphere of empathy and understanding. Communities may strive to make the internet a safer and more encouraging place for everyone by spreading empathy and increasing awareness.

Suggestions and recommendations

In this digital era where internet and artificial intelligence is invading human lives in every realm, and transforming the entire human existence to a virtual space. Creating a policy intervention that will educate and desensitize young people to cyberbullying while also encouraging empathy-building in them requires a planned strategy that combines digital tactics, community involvement, and educational initiatives. The goal of the policy should be to promote a more welcoming and helpful online environment by means of thorough instruction and proactive participation from a range of stakeholders, including parents, schools, community organisations, and digital platforms.

A detailed structure of such a policy intervention is as following;

Policy Goal: Create and execute a thorough programme to raise awareness of cyberbullying, lessen its incidence, and improve young people's empathy when interacting online.

Major Elements of the Policy:

1. Developing Educational Curricula - Including into School Curricula: Create and include a digital citizenship lesson in all elementary, middle, and high school curricula. This module would include the concept of cyberbullying, its consequences, the value of empathy in digital interactions, and safe online engagement tactics. Activities for Fostering Empathy: Incorporate interactive exercises that promote empathy, such role-playing games that assist children in comprehending the psychological effects of cyberbullying. Create situations using virtual reality experiences where children may observe the effects of cyberbullying directly.

Teacher Training Programs: Make teacher education on the newest digital practices and the psychological effects of cyberbullying obligatory. Give educators the resources and techniques they need to effectively teach empathy and handle bullying situations.

2. Involvement of Parents and Guardians - Seminars and Workshops: Frequent training sessions and conferences aimed at educating parents and guardians on the indicators of cyberbullying, how to identify it, and how to have ethical conversations with their kids about online conduct.

Resources and Support Networks: Offer parents access to online resources, such as manuals and a special hotline for guidance on handling cyberbullying.

3. Community Involvement - Community Outreach Programmes: Start anti-bullying initiatives that are driven by the community and involve NGOs, youth groups, and local leaders. Posters, community radio, and local events would all be used in these initiatives to spread the word about anti-cyberbullying messages.

Establish peer mentorship programmes in which senior students receive training to guide junior peers in the areas of empathy, digital etiquette, and responding to instances of cyberbullying.

4. Enforcement and Policy - Unambiguous School Rules: Provide explicit anti-cyberbullying guidelines for educational institutions, including with protocols for reporting, handling, and handling cyberbullying instances. Make sure that all parents, teachers, and students are properly informed about these regulations.

Review of the Legal Framework: Collaborate with legislators to guarantee that sufficient legislation is in place to combat cyberbullying and that it is properly implemented. This might involve taking steps to make sure digital platforms abide with regional laws in an effort to stop cyberbullying.

5. Digital Platform Cooperation - Tech Companies Involved: Work together with online communities and social media platforms to establish safer online spaces This entails improving reporting systems, putting in place algorithms to identify and remove offensive information, and launching efforts to raise awareness on the platforms themselves.

Encouraging the Production of Positive Content: Urge platforms to feature content that helps users understand and empathise with one another, such inspirational tales of bullying survivors and informative articles on diversity and inclusivity.

6. Observation and Assessment

Frequent Surveys and Feedback: Evaluate the success of the educational initiatives and empathy-building exercises by conducting surveys and providing feedback on a frequent basis. Adapt tactics in response to comments and new patterns in the behaviour of cyberbullies.

Research and Development: In order to continuously improve and update programmes, support independent and academic research on topics such as the psychology of empathy in digital interactions, preventative tactics, and trends in cyberbullying.

Phased implementation of the policy is recommended, commencing with trial projects in a few chosen areas and schools. The initiative can be improved and progressively expanded to cover more schools and areas in light of the pilots' results.

Funding: To guarantee the longevity and expandability of the intervention programmes, get funds from public and commercial sources as well as educational grants. In addition to educating people about cyberbullying and lowering its prevalence, this policy initiative aims to significantly enhance young people's development of empathy and moral behaviour in their digital contacts.

Conclusion

The results serve as a basis for further research in this field, despite the study's inherent limitations, which included a limited sample size, unequal demographic representation, and time limits. Greater sample numbers and longitudinal research would allow for a more thorough knowledge of the trends and patterns in cyberbullying throughout time, which would aid in the creation of preventative and intervention tactics that are more successful. To sum up, this study emphasises how important it is to provide a secure and welcoming online space for young adults. Through the dissemination of cyber safety information, sensitization campaigns, and resilience-building techniques, we may endeavour to reduce the likelihood of cyberbullying and enable young adults to confidently and resiliently traverse the digital terrain.