

THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON CHILD HARASSMENT IN INDIA

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1. ABSTRACT

The widespread use of social media has significantly transformed the lives of children and adolescents in India. Platforms such as Instagram, WhatsApp, Facebook, Snapchat, YouTube, and online gaming applications have become important tools for communication, education, and entertainment. However, alongside these benefits, the increasing use of digital platforms has exposed children to various forms of online harassment, including cyberbullying, cyberstalking, online grooming, sexual exploitation, identity theft, privacy violations, and emotional abuse. These incidents have raised serious concerns regarding child safety and mental well-being, making online child protection a major contemporary issue in India.

This study aims to examine the impact of social media on child harassment in India by identifying the major forms of online abuse, analyzing the factors contributing to children's vulnerability, and evaluating the effectiveness of existing legal and institutional mechanisms. The research adopts a qualitative approach based on the review of recent academic literature, government reports, policy documents, and published case studies. It also examines the role of the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, 2012, the Information Technology Act, 2000, and cybercrime reporting systems in addressing offences against children in digital environments.

The study finds that increased smartphone usage, easy internet accessibility, lack of digital literacy, inadequate parental supervision, anonymous online interactions, and underreporting of cybercrimes have contributed to the growing incidence of child harassment on social media. The psychological consequences of such harassment include anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, social isolation, academic decline, and long-term emotional trauma. Although India has strengthened its legal framework to protect children, challenges remain in law enforcement, public awareness, digital education, and timely victim support.

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The study concludes that ensuring children's online safety requires a collaborative approach involving government agencies, educational institutions, parents, technology companies, and civil society organizations. It recommends strengthening digital literacy among children and parents, improving cyber safety education in schools, enhancing platform accountability, ensuring effective implementation of child protection laws, and promoting accessible reporting mechanisms. These measures are essential to create a safer and more secure digital environment for children in India.

Keywords: *Social Media, Child Harassment, Cyberbullying, Online Grooming, Child Protection, Digital Safety, POCSO Act, India*

2.Introduction

Social media companies also play a crucial role in ensuring child safety. Although many platforms have introduced privacy settings, parental controls, age restrictions, and reporting mechanisms, these measures are often insufficient to prevent children from becoming victims of online harassment. The lack of effective age verification, anonymous communication, and the rapid spread of harmful content continue to create opportunities for offenders. Therefore, greater accountability among technology companies and stronger collaboration with law enforcement agencies are necessary to improve online child protection.

The consequences of child harassment extend beyond immediate emotional distress. Victims often experience anxiety, depression, fear, low self-esteem, social isolation, academic difficulties, and long-term psychological trauma. In severe cases, online harassment may result in self-harm, suicidal thoughts, or lifelong mental health challenges. These impacts highlight the urgent need for preventive strategies that combine legal enforcement, digital literacy, parental supervision, school-based awareness programmes, and responsible technology governance.

This study seeks to examine the impact of social media on child harassment in India by exploring the nature and prevalence of online abuse, identifying the factors contributing to children's vulnerability, and evaluating the effectiveness of existing legal and institutional responses. It also aims to provide practical recommendations for strengthening child online safety through improved awareness, education, policy implementation, and stakeholder collaboration.

As India continues its rapid digital transformation, ensuring a safe online environment for children has become a national priority. Protecting children from online harassment requires a coordinated effort involving families, schools, government agencies, law enforcement authorities, technology companies, and civil society organizations. By understanding the emerging challenges associated with social media and child harassment, policymakers and stakeholders can develop effective strategies to safeguard children's rights, well-being, and digital security in an increasingly connected world.

3.Review of Literature

Previous studies indicate a growing relationship between social media usage and child victimization. Research has shown that cyberbullying negatively affects children's psychological well-being, academic performance, and social relationships. Studies on online grooming highlight how offenders exploit social networking sites to manipulate and exploit minors. Scholars have also emphasized the importance of digital literacy and parental involvement in preventing online abuse. Existing literature further reveals that despite legal protections such as the POCSO Act, underreporting and limited awareness continue to hinder effective child protection.

4.Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the impact of social media on child harassment in India.
2. To identify the major forms of online harassment affecting children.
3. To analyze factors contributing to children's vulnerability on social media.
4. To evaluate the effectiveness of legal and institutional mechanisms for child protection.
5. To suggest measures for improving online safety for children.

5.Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology. Data have been collected from secondary sources, including journal articles, books, government reports, policy documents, and online publications. Relevant legal provisions, including the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, 2012, and the Information Technology Act, 2000, have been examined to understand the legal framework governing child protection in digital spaces.

6.Review of Literature

Kaur and Singh (2023) examined the increasing prevalence of cyberbullying among adolescents in India and its relationship with social media usage. The study found that children who spend extended periods on social networking platforms are more likely to experience online harassment, including bullying, threats, and emotional abuse. The authors emphasized that poor digital literacy and inadequate parental monitoring significantly increase children's vulnerability. The study recommended introducing cyber safety education in schools and strengthening parental awareness to reduce online risks.

UNICEF's report on children's online safety highlighted that digital platforms have become an integral part of children's daily lives, providing opportunities for education and communication while also exposing them to cyberbullying, online grooming, sexual exploitation, and privacy violations. The report stressed the importance of collaboration among governments, educational institutions, parents, and technology companies to ensure a safer online environment. It also emphasized strengthening digital literacy and child-friendly reporting mechanisms to protect children from online abuse.

The National Crime Records Bureau's Crime in India 2024 report indicates a continued increase in crimes against children, including offences facilitated through digital platforms. The report shows that social media has become a common medium for online harassment, cyberstalking, and child sexual exploitation. It also highlights that many incidents remain unreported due to fear, social stigma, and lack of awareness. The findings demonstrate the need for stronger cybercrime investigation systems and greater public awareness regarding child online safety.

The Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology emphasized that increasing internet access among children has created new challenges in protecting them from online exploitation. The ministry highlighted the importance of cyber awareness campaigns, parental controls, digital literacy programmes, and collaboration with social media companies. It also encouraged the use of the National Cyber Crime Reporting Portal for reporting online offences involving children and called for stronger implementation of child protection laws in digital environments.¹

The World Health Organization reported that cyberbullying and online harassment have significant effects on children's mental health, including anxiety, depression, stress, social

¹ Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY) (2023)

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isolation, and low self-esteem. The report emphasized that prolonged exposure to online abuse can negatively affect children's academic performance and emotional development. WHO recommended integrating mental health support, counselling services, and digital safety education into school programmes to reduce the harmful effects of online harassment.

7.Social Media Usage Among Children in India

Social media has become an integral part of children's daily lives in India. The widespread availability of affordable smartphones, low-cost internet services, and digital learning platforms has significantly increased internet access among children and adolescents. Platforms such as Instagram, WhatsApp, YouTube, Snapchat, Facebook, Telegram, Discord, and online gaming applications are widely used for communication, education, entertainment, and self-expression. While these digital platforms offer numerous educational and social benefits, they have also created opportunities for offenders to target children through various forms of online harassment.¹

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated children's dependence on digital technologies. Online education, virtual classrooms, and increased screen time resulted in children spending several hours each day on the internet. Although digital technology supported educational continuity, it also exposed children to greater online risks. Many children joined social networking sites without adequate parental supervision or digital literacy, making them vulnerable to cyber threats. The ease of creating anonymous accounts and communicating with strangers has further increased the risk of exploitation².

Children often share personal information, photographs, videos, and their daily activities without fully understanding the long-term consequences. Such information can be misused by cybercriminals for identity theft, blackmail, cyberstalking, and sexual exploitation. Therefore,

¹ United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, Education in a Post-COVID World: Nine Ideas for Public Action (2020).

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² United Nations Children's Fund, Child Online Protection: Global Challenges and Strategies.

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while social media promotes learning and connectivity, its misuse has become a growing concern for child safety in India.

8. Forms of Child Harassment on Social Media

Child harassment on social media occurs in multiple forms, each posing serious risks to children's safety and well-being.

Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying is one of the most common forms of online harassment. It involves repeated acts of threatening, insulting, humiliating, or intimidating children through digital platforms. Offensive comments, rumours, fake profiles, abusive messages, and the public sharing of embarrassing content often result in emotional distress and social isolation.

Online Grooming

Online grooming refers to the process through which offenders gradually establish trust with children through social media, messaging applications, or gaming platforms. Groomers manipulate children emotionally to obtain personal information, explicit photographs, or arrange offline meetings for exploitation. This form of harassment is particularly dangerous because victims often fail to recognize the offender's intentions.

Cyberstalking

Cyberstalking involves persistent monitoring or harassment through online communication. Offenders repeatedly send unwanted messages, monitor children's social media activities, threaten them, or misuse personal information. Such behaviour causes fear, anxiety, and emotional trauma.

Sextortion

Sextortion occurs when offenders obtain intimate photographs or videos and threaten to publish them unless the child provides additional explicit material, money, or other favours. The anonymity of social media makes this crime increasingly difficult to detect.

Identity Theft and Fake Profiles

Children frequently become victims of identity theft when offenders misuse their personal information to create fake social media accounts. Such accounts may be used to deceive others, spread misinformation, or commit further cybercrimes.⁷

9.Factors Contributing to Child Harassment

Several social, technological, and behavioural factors contribute to the increasing incidence of child harassment on social media.

One of the major contributing factors is the rapid increase in smartphone ownership among children. Easy access to the internet allows children to interact with strangers without parental knowledge. Many parents possess limited awareness of digital risks and therefore fail to monitor their children's online activities effectively.

Another important factor is inadequate digital literacy. Children often accept friend requests from unknown individuals, click suspicious links, or disclose personal information without understanding potential consequences. This behaviour makes them vulnerable to cybercriminals.

Peer pressure also influences children's online behaviour. Adolescents often seek social acceptance through social media, encouraging them to share photographs, personal opinions, and private details publicly. Such activities increase exposure to harassment.

Anonymous online communication further contributes to child victimization. Offenders exploit fake identities to conceal their real identities while targeting vulnerable children. In addition, weak privacy settings and insufficient age verification systems on some social media platforms make it easier for offenders to contact minors.

Finally, underreporting remains a significant challenge. Many child victims hesitate to report harassment because of fear, shame, social stigma, or concerns about punishment from parents. Consequently, numerous incidents remain hidden.

10.Psychological and Emotional Impact

The psychological effects of social media harassment can be severe and long-lasting. Victims frequently experience anxiety, depression, fear, loneliness, stress, and emotional instability.

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Continuous exposure to online abuse negatively affects children's confidence and self-esteem.

Many victims develop feelings of helplessness because online harassment often continues beyond school hours and invades their private lives. Unlike traditional bullying, cyberbullying can occur twenty-four hours a day, making it difficult for victims to escape.

Children subjected to online harassment may withdraw from social interactions, avoid attending school, or lose interest in educational activities. Academic performance often declines because of emotional distress and reduced concentration.

Research has also shown that prolonged cyber harassment increases the risk of self-harm, substance abuse, eating disorders, and suicidal thoughts among adolescents. Victims may suffer long-term psychological trauma requiring professional counselling and mental health support.

Families also experience emotional distress when children become victims of online harassment. Parents frequently struggle to identify early warning signs and may lack the knowledge required to provide appropriate support¹.

11.Educational and Social Consequences

The impact of social media harassment extends beyond mental health. It significantly affects children's educational development and social relationships.

Victims often experience reduced classroom participation, declining academic achievement, absenteeism, and school dropout in severe cases. Emotional distress interferes with concentration, memory, and motivation to learn.

Socially, victims may isolate themselves from friends and family because of embarrassment or fear of further harassment. Their interpersonal relationships may deteriorate, resulting in loneliness and reduced social confidence.

¹ World Health Organization, Adolescent Mental Health.

Children who experience repeated online harassment may develop distrust toward digital communication, reducing their willingness to participate in educational technologies and online learning platforms.

Educational institutions also face challenges in responding to cyberbullying incidents that originate outside school premises but significantly affect students' behaviour within schools. Consequently, schools increasingly recognize the need for cyber safety policies and counselling services¹.

12. Emerging Trends in Online Child Harassment

Recent technological developments have introduced new forms of child exploitation. Artificial intelligence tools can generate manipulated images, deepfake videos, and synthetic content that may be used to harass or blackmail children. Encrypted messaging applications create additional challenges for law enforcement agencies investigating online offences.

Live-streaming platforms and online gaming communities have also become environments where offenders communicate with children anonymously. Financial scams targeting children through gaming applications and digital payment systems have become increasingly common.

The expansion of influencer culture encourages many children to share personal information publicly in pursuit of popularity. Unfortunately, excessive online visibility may increase their exposure to cyberstalking and online predators.

These emerging trends demonstrate that child protection strategies must continuously evolve to address new technological threats. Governments, educational institutions, technology companies, parents, and civil society organizations must work together to ensure that children's rights and safety are protected within the rapidly changing digital environment.

¹ United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, Behind the Numbers: Ending School Violence and Bullying (2019).

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14.Conclusion

The rapid growth of social media has transformed the way children in India communicate, learn, and interact with the world. Digital platforms such as Instagram, WhatsApp, YouTube, Facebook, Snapchat, online gaming applications, and messaging services have become an essential part of children's everyday lives. While these platforms provide opportunities for education, creativity, social interaction, and access to information, they have also exposed children to significant risks, including cyberbullying, online grooming, cyberstalking, identity theft, sextortion, and other forms of digital harassment. As internet penetration and smartphone usage continue to expand across India, protecting children from online exploitation has become an urgent national priority.

The study highlights that child harassment on social media is influenced by multiple interconnected factors, including increased screen time, inadequate digital literacy, weak parental supervision, anonymous online interactions, poor privacy awareness, and the rapid evolution of digital technologies. These factors increase children's vulnerability to online offenders who misuse social media platforms to exploit and manipulate minors. The findings also reveal that many incidents remain unreported because of fear, social stigma, lack of awareness, and limited confidence in reporting mechanisms. Consequently, the actual extent of online child harassment in India is likely to be greater than official statistics indicate.

The research further demonstrates that the consequences of online harassment extend beyond the digital environment. Victims often experience anxiety, depression, emotional trauma, low self-esteem, social isolation, academic decline, and behavioural changes. In severe cases, prolonged exposure to cyber harassment may result in self-harm, suicidal thoughts, or longterm psychological disorders. These impacts affect not only children but also their families, educational institutions, and society as a whole. Therefore, addressing child

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harassment requires a comprehensive response that prioritizes prevention, early intervention, victim support, and rehabilitation.

India has established an important legal framework through the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, 2012, the Information Technology Act, 2000, and other cybercrime regulations to protect children from online abuse. Government initiatives such as the National Cyber Crime Reporting Portal and awareness campaigns have strengthened child protection efforts. However, effective implementation remains a challenge because of limited public awareness, technological complexity, delays in investigation, and insufficient digital literacy among children and parents.

The study concludes that ensuring children's online safety requires a collaborative approach involving government agencies, law enforcement authorities, educational institutions, parents, technology companies, non-governmental organizations, and the wider community. Schools should integrate digital safety education into their curriculum, while parents should actively supervise children's online activities and encourage open communication regarding internet use. Social media companies must strengthen age verification systems, improve privacy protections, remove harmful content promptly, and cooperate with law enforcement agencies in investigating cyber offenses.

Furthermore, policymakers should continue updating cyber laws to address emerging threats such as artificial intelligence-based exploitation, deepfake technology, encrypted communication, and online gaming-related offences. Public awareness campaigns, digital literacy programmes, accessible counselling services, and child-friendly reporting mechanisms should be expanded to empower children to recognize and report online harassment without fear.

In conclusion, social media is a powerful tool that can contribute positively to children's education and personal development when used responsibly. However, without adequate safeguards, it can also become a platform for harassment and exploitation. A coordinated effort among all stakeholders, supported by effective laws, technological safeguards, education, and public awareness, is essential to create a safe, secure, and inclusive digital environment where every child in India can enjoy the benefits of technology without compromising their safety, dignity, or fundamental rights.

15.Suggestions

1. Strengthen digital literacy programmes to educate children about safe and responsible social media use.
2. Encourage parents and teachers to actively monitor children's online activities and promote open communication.
3. Ensure strict implementation of the POCSO Act and cyber laws to protect children from online harassment.
4. Social media platforms should enhance privacy settings, age verification, and prompt removal of harmful content.
5. Conduct regular awareness campaigns and provide counselling services to support child victims of online harassment.

