



Cyberbullying in Pakistan: Exploring Effects, Impacts and Strategies for Prevention

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To cite: Khan, R. N. (2026). Cyberbullying in Pakistan: Exploring effects, impacts and strategies for prevention. *Journal of Pakistan Administration*, 47(1), 31–60. <https://doi.org/10.65755/jpa-20264701-134>.

ABSTRACT

The study addresses the growing issue of cyberbullying in Pakistan, particularly with the rise in internet and social media use. It explores the psychological and emotional consequences of cyberbullying on victims, including anxiety, depression, and suicidal thoughts. The study also evaluates the effectiveness of Pakistan's legal frameworks, especially the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) 2016, in combating online harassment. Despite PECA's existence, the study finds that its implementation faces challenges such as low conviction rates, difficulties in gathering digital evidence, and a lack of enforcement resources. Furthermore, cultural and societal factors, such as the stigma surrounding mental health, contribute to the underreporting of incidents. By comparing Pakistan's situation with that of India and the United States, the research highlights the specific legal and societal challenges in Pakistan, offering recommendations for improving awareness, legal responses, and victim support systems. The study concludes that a more robust, adaptive legal framework, enhanced digital literacy programs, and greater cooperation among stakeholders are crucial to effectively tackle cyberbullying in Pakistan.

Keywords:

Cyberbullying, Online harassment, Digital evidence, Mental health stigma, Digital literacy

1. INTRODUCTION

The widespread adoption of digital technologies and the extensive use of social media platforms have fundamentally transformed the methods by which individuals communicate and interact. While these advancements have yielded significant benefits, they have also introduced a range of new

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challenges, with cyberbullying emerging as one of the most pressing concerns. Cyberbullying is defined as the deliberate use of digital platforms to harm others through various forms of harassment, defamation, or psychological abuse. Unlike traditional bullying, which is typically confined to specific times and locations, cyberbullying transcends physical boundaries, operating continuously across the digital landscape. This constant accessibility renders it more pervasive, harmful, and difficult to escape, resulting in profound psychological consequences for its victims.

In Pakistan, the rapid expansion of internet access and the increasing use of social media have contributed to a surge in cyberbullying incidents. While the global issue of cyberbullying has been widely studied and documented, the specific cultural, societal, and legal implications within Pakistan have not been comprehensively addressed. This research paper seeks to bridge this gap by providing an in-depth analysis of cyberbullying in Pakistan, with a particular focus on its psychological effects, the current legal framework designed to combat it, and the strategies necessary for its prevention. The study also examines the significant psychological toll of cyberbullying on victims, particularly its association with anxiety, depression, and suicidal tendencies.

To explore these issues, the study adopts a qualitative research approach, utilizing secondary data from a range of research articles, government reports, legal documents, and media sources. The analytical and descriptive methodology applied in the study allows for a thorough examination of the prevalence, psychological and societal impacts, and the legal frameworks surrounding cyberbullying in Pakistan. Thematic analysis has been employed to identify recurring themes across the data, focusing on the psychological consequences of cyberbullying and the effectiveness of the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) [2016](#). This methodology provides valuable insights into the legal challenges and societal perceptions of cyberbullying, while also shedding light on the psychological toll it takes on victims.

The research highlights the limitations of Pakistan's existing legal framework, specifically PECA [2016](#), in effectively addressing online harassment. Despite PECA's intent to regulate online behavior and impose penalties for cyberbullying, its enforcement remains inadequate due to factors such as low conviction rates, challenges in evidence collection, and the anonymity afforded to perpetrators.

Moreover, cultural barriers and a lack of digital literacy exacerbate the problem, leaving numerous victims exposed to online abuse without adequate protection. By comparing the situation in Pakistan with trends in India and the United States, the research offers valuable insights into the global challenges of cyberbullying. It also provides actionable recommendations aimed at improving legal responses, enhancing public awareness, and strengthening victim support systems. The primary objective of this study is to foster a safer online environment in Pakistan by advocating for stronger legal mechanisms, more effective support for victims, and the widespread dissemination of educational initiatives on cyber safety.

1.2. Statement of the Problem

Cyberbullying in Pakistan has become a significant issue due to rapid internet usage and social media engagement, leading to new forms of online harassment. Despite its growing prevalence, especially among youth, current measures to address it remain insufficient, as seen in the rising number of cases. The problem is further exacerbated by a lack of awareness, weak legal frameworks, and poor enforcement of existing regulations. Studies show that cyberbullying has severe psychological, emotional, and social effects, including depression, anxiety, and isolation. This paper examines the urgency of implementing effective prevention strategies and strengthening the legal framework to address cyberbullying in Pakistan, aligning with global best practices.

1.1 1.3 Significance and Scope of the Study

This study on cyberbullying in Pakistan is of significant importance due to the rapid increase in internet and social media usage, which has contributed to a rise in online harassment, particularly among youth. It explores the psychological and emotional consequences of cyberbullying on victims and critically assesses the effectiveness of the existing legal framework, with particular emphasis on the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) [2016](#). The study provides valuable insights into the challenges Pakistan faces in addressing cyberbullying and proposes recommendations for improvement.

Scope of the research encompasses the causes, consequences, and legal responses to cyberbullying in Pakistan, with a specific focus on its societal impact, especially on women and marginalized groups. Furthermore, the study offers a comparative analysis of cyberbullying trends in Pakistan, India, and the United States. It highlights key

challenges, including enforcement gaps, low conviction rates, and the lack of digital literacy, which exacerbate the issue.

1.4 The Rationale of the Study

The rationale behind this study lies in the increasing prevalence of cyberbullying in Pakistan, driven by the rapid growth of internet access and social media platforms. While the global issue of cyberbullying is well-documented, its unique cultural, societal, and legal implications within Pakistan have not been adequately explored. This research aims to address this gap by examining the effects of cyberbullying on victims, evaluating the effectiveness of existing legal frameworks, such as the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) [2016](#), and proposing strategies for prevention. By comparing Pakistan's situation with India and the United States, the study seeks to offer a broader perspective on how different countries, both developing and developed, approach the issue and highlight the legal and societal challenges specific to Pakistan.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Cyberbullying, a form of harassment mediated through digital platforms, is a growing issue, made easier by the anonymity the internet provides. This anonymity removes immediate consequences, enabling perpetrators to harass others without fear of retribution. Unlike traditional bullying, cyberbullying is not confined to a specific time or place, making it more pervasive and psychologically damaging. The tactics of cyberbullying, such as impersonation, cyberstalking, trolling, and outing, exploit the functionalities of digital platforms to inflict harm on victims. These actions can severely impact the victim's mental health, causing distress, isolation, and a lasting emotional toll.

Cyberbullying has been defined as a deliberate and repeated act of aggression mediated through digital devices (Hinduja & Patchin, [2006](#)). It can take many forms. Generally, it can be either direct (sending hurtful messages directly) or indirect (spreading rumors and fake news) (Vandebosch & Van Cleemput, [2008](#)). Cyberbullying can also be categorized based on how it happens, such as visual/sexual cyberbullying, verbal cyberbullying, and social exclusion (Lee, Abell, & Holmes, [2017](#)). One classification of cyberbullying includes eight types: flaming harassment, denigration, impersonation, outing, trickery, exclusion, and cyberstalking (Willard, [2007](#)).

Recent studies have also pointed out that memes can be a form of cyberbullying (Jaiswal, [2021](#)). Humans are inherently social creatures,

and our relationships and social environment play a significant role in shaping our perception of ourselves. However, the digital world, particularly the screen, acts as a mask. Many people misuse this mask to hide behind anonymity. The psychological impact of being anonymous and the ability to escape consequences make it easier for individuals to harass others. Cyberbullying, the misuse of technology to cause harm, has become a serious issue, especially in an era where people are more aware of mental health (Habeb, 2021).

There is a fine line between cyberbullying and traditional bullying. While both cyberbullying and traditional bullying share common elements such as intent to harm, repetition, and a power imbalance, they differ significantly in how they manifest. Traditional bullying is typically direct, involving physical or verbal aggression that can be seen by others and occurs in specific settings like schools or workplaces (Smith & Steffgen, 2013).

In contrast, cyberbullying transcends these boundaries by using the digital world, where cyberbullies can remain anonymous and target victims from anywhere in the world. This anonymity makes it harder for bullies to face immediate consequences, which often encourages more severe forms of harassment (Jane, 2016). Moreover, unlike traditional bullying, cyberbullying is not limited by time or location, as it can invade victims' homes, creating feelings of isolation and powerlessness (Yang, et al., 2021). This constant exposure amplifies the psychological impact, making cyberbullying potentially more damaging than traditional bullying (Imam & Naz, 2024). Unlike traditional bullying, cyberbullying takes place online, allowing perpetrators to target victims from anywhere in the world, at any time (Imam & Naz, 2024). This constant access makes it harder for victims to escape the abuse, as it affects both their real and online interactions (UNICEF, 2024).

The permanence of online content, such as emails, can worsen the psychological impact on victims, as the abusive material can be retrieved and shared repeatedly, intensifying emotional trauma (Espelage & Hong, 2017). Sometimes, cyberbullying involves groups (Iqbal & Jamil, 2022). For example, certain incidents have shown how social media can be flooded with hate comments targeting one person, creating a “cybermob” (Bhutto, 2021). Although this has been reported in the news, it hasn't received much attention from researchers. However, a US army monograph has discussed how cybermobs can contribute to conflict or civil war in different countries (Krumm, 2013). In Germany, the term

"cybermobbing" is used for cyberbullying, without distinguishing between the two terms (Schenk, [2020](#)).

The tactics used in cyberbullying are varied and complex, exploiting the functionalities of digital platforms in different ways. One common form of cyberbullying is impersonation, where an attacker creates a fake online profile or uses the victim's identity to post harmful content or contact others in their name. This tactic can severely damage a victim's reputation and relationships, as others may believe the harmful actions or statements came from the victim (Plunkett, [2019](#)). Impersonation not only destroys credibility but also invades the victim's personal space, as the perpetrator takes over their digital identity. This misuse of online social bonds can cause significant emotional distress, carrying over into the victim's real-world interactions (Blakemore & Frith, [2005](#)).

Another form is cyberstalking, which involves repeated and unwanted digital surveillance of the online activities of victim. This tactic can escalate to direct harassment, such as sending threatening messages or spreading false information to damage the victim's reputation (NCPC, [2009](#)). Cyberstalking instills fear and vulnerability in the victim, knowing they are constantly being monitored. The psychological effects of cyberstalking can include anxiety, paranoia, and depression, as victims live in constant fear of harassment (Macnish, [2017](#)). The anonymity of the internet makes it difficult for victims to identify or act against the stalker, which intensifies the situation (Mondal, Correa, & Benevenuto, [2020](#)).

Trolling is another tactic where perpetrators provoke victims with inflammatory or offensive comments intended to provoke emotional reactions or disrupt online discussions (Phillips, [2015](#)) (Phillips, [2015](#)). Trolls often target public forums or social media platforms, where their actions can be seen by a large audience, increasing the humiliation for the victim. While trolling is often impersonal and driven by entertainment rather than personal vendettas, it can still create significant emotional distress, causing victims to withdraw from online communities (Moreno, Midamba, Berman, Moreno, Donlin, & Schlocker, [2019](#)).

Outing, which involves exposing a victim's private or sensitive information with the intent to shame or humiliate, is another common form of cyberbullying (Willard, [2007](#)). This tactic violates the victim's right to privacy and can lead to public judgment and social ostracism. The effects of outing can be long-lasting, especially if the information remains online indefinitely (Livingstone & Blum-Ross, [2020](#)).

The rise of cyberspace technology has significantly transformed the landscape of cyberbullying in Pakistan. The anonymity of the internet has

facilitated the growth of cyberbullying, with incidents rising since 2018 due to increased internet penetration and inadequate legal frameworks. Cyberbullying in Pakistan has shifted from physical bullying to covert, psychological online harassment, a trend seen globally as digital platforms have become spaces for emotional abuse, free from physical boundaries. The surge in social media use, particularly among younger populations, has worsened the issue, with perpetrators often escaping immediate consequences (Foundation, 2024).

Since 2018, cyberbullying incidents in Pakistan have escalated alongside increased digital literacy and internet access. While the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) [2016](#) was introduced to address cybercrime, including cyberbullying, its implementation has faced significant challenges. A gap between legislation and enforcement has allowed cyberbullying to persist, compounded by the growing use of electronic devices and social media platforms, which has made it easier for individuals to engage in cyberbullying. Furthermore, a lack of digital awareness has left many users vulnerable to online harassment. Despite the broad coverage of PECA, weak enforcement and slow judicial processes have failed to curb the rise in cyberbullying incidents (Pakistan, 2016; PTA, [2023](#)).

Social media platforms have played a dual role in Pakistan's cyberbullying issue. While these platforms have become a refuge for cyberbullies to operate anonymously and inflict harm, they have also served as tools for exposing and rallying support against cyberbullying (Imam D. S., [2024](#)). The widespread use of platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram has made it easier for harmful content to spread quickly, amplifying the scale of harassment (Rafi, [2019](#)). The response from social media companies in Pakistan has been inconsistent, with some efforts to introduce reporting mechanisms and content moderation policies, but these have not fully addressed the issue. The situation is further complicated by the fact that global policies often fail to align with the socio-cultural context of Pakistan (Saleem, Khan, & Zafar, [2021](#)).

Cyberbullying in Pakistan is highly gendered, with women, particularly those in public roles like journalists, activists, and entertainers, facing more online harassment than men. This harassment often aims to discredit and silence them in public discourse (Imam D. S., [2024](#)). Female journalists, for example, are particularly vulnerable, with research showing that nine out of ten have experienced online harassment, leading to significant personal and professional consequences.

The harassment can involve threats of violence, sexual assault, and character assassination, undermining press freedom (Jamil, [2020](#)). Additionally, women and trans individuals in Pakistan face significant underreporting of cyberbullying. Victims often hesitate to report due to stigma and a lack of trust in law enforcement, fearing retaliation and further victimization. This underreporting distorts the extent of the issue, hindering effective solutions (Sohail & Durrani, [2023](#)). Based on the literature on cyberbullying, the following three research questions have been identified, which will be answered in detail in this study:

1. What are the psychological and emotional effects of cyberbullying on victims in Pakistan, and how do these impacts vary across different age groups and genders?
2. How effective is the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) [2016](#) in addressing cyberbullying incidents in Pakistan, and what are the key gaps in its enforcement?
3. What preventive strategies can be implemented in Pakistan's educational, legal, and social frameworks to mitigate the prevalence of cyberbullying and support victims effectively?

2.1.2.1 Research Gap

The research gap in this study is the limited exploration of the specific cultural, societal, and legal implications of cyberbullying in Pakistan. While global studies exist, there is a lack of in-depth research on how cyberbullying uniquely affects Pakistan, especially in terms of legal enforcement, the effectiveness of PECA [2016](#), and the psychological impact on victims. This study addresses this gap by analyzing these issues within the Pakistani context and comparing them with trends in India and the United States.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research approach, utilizing secondary data sourced from a range of research articles, government reports, legal documents, and media sources to examine the phenomenon of cyberbullying in Pakistan. The primary methodology applied is analytical and descriptive, which allows for an in-depth exploration of the prevalence, psychological and societal impacts, and the existing legal frameworks related to cyberbullying. Secondary data was systematically collected to provide insights into various dimensions of the issue, including the legal challenges, societal perceptions, and the psychological toll experienced by victims. This approach is particularly valuable in

understanding the broader context and trends of cyberbullying, especially in a country like Pakistan where empirical data on this topic is relatively limited.

Thematic analysis has been employed as the main tool for data analysis. This technique allows for the identification of recurring themes across the secondary data, focusing on key issues such as the psychological consequences of cyberbullying and the effectiveness of the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) [2016](#) in addressing online harassment. The use of thematic analysis enables the study to highlight significant patterns and trends that inform the legal and societal dimensions of cyberbullying. While the reliance on secondary data provides substantial insights, it is important to note that the absence of firsthand accounts and real-time data may limit the depth of the findings. Despite these limitations, the qualitative method and thematic analysis remain highly appropriate for exploring the complexities of cyberbullying in Pakistan, offering valuable recommendations for policy and practice.

3.13.1 Organization of the Paper

This research paper on cyberbullying in Pakistan is organized into distinct sections that explore various aspects of the issue. It begins with an Introduction that defines cyberbullying, highlights its rise in Pakistan due to increased internet and social media use, and introduces the legal framework's limitations, particularly the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) [2016](#). Section I delves into the local impact of cyberbullying, focusing on its psychological effects, legal shortcomings, and the societal factors exacerbating the issue, such as stigma and lack of digital literacy. Section II compares global trends in cyberbullying, focusing on India and the USA, and examines their legal frameworks and societal responses. Section III offers a comparative analysis of Pakistan, India, and the USA, identifying gaps in Pakistan's approach and proposing lessons from the other countries. The Conclusion synthesizes the findings, emphasizing the need for stronger legal measures and better support systems. Finally, the Recommendations section suggests short-term, medium-term, and long-term strategies to tackle cyberbullying, including legal reforms, digital literacy programs, and international cooperation. Each section builds on the previous one, offering a comprehensive approach to addressing cyberbullying in Pakistan.

4. DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

4.1 Section One

4.1.1 Cyberbullying in Pakistan

Cyberbullying is a significant issue in Pakistan, causing severe psychological effects such as anxiety, depression, and suicidal thoughts. While the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) [2016](#) provides a legal framework, its enforcement faces challenges, including low conviction rates, difficulties in gathering digital evidence, and the anonymity of perpetrators. Despite provisions against dignity offenses, cyberstalking, and protecting minors, PECA's effectiveness is undermined by inadequate law enforcement expertise and delays in legal procedures. The mental health stigma in Pakistan discourages victims from seeking help, while socio-economic factors like corruption, resource shortages, and limited digital literacy exacerbate the problem. This paper explores the legal, psychological, and social challenges of cyberbullying in Pakistan and calls for reforms to improve legal responses, law enforcement, and victim support (Imam D. S., [2024](#)). Some of the facts and figures in respect of cyberbullying in Pakistan are given as under:

Table 1

Facts and figures of Cyberbullying in Pakistan

Category	Fact/Figure	Details
Cybersecurity Global Rank	79 th	Pakistan's position in GCI 2020
FIA Cybercrime Complaints (2020)	85,000+	Various online offenses
Digital Rights Foundation (DRF), 2024 Helpline	146+ calls/month	57% women, 30% men
PECA Female Harassment Complaints	310 (2018) → 11,723 (2023)	Rapid increase
PECA Total Complaints (2018–2023)	27,867	Only 1,717 cases registered
PECA Registration Rate	~6.2%	Low formal complaint follow-up
PECA Conviction Rate (total complaints)	0.24%	67 convictions
PECA Conviction Rate (of registered cases)	~3.9%	Very low legal success rate
Cybercrime Data (2024)	1,854 complaints → 59 cases → 48 arrests → 4 convictions	Indicates decline or partial data
NCCIA Role	Replaced FIA	New oversight under PTA

Source: (Imam D. S., [2024](#))

i. Legal Framework and Law Enforcement in Pakistan

The Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) [2016](#) represents a significant legislative step in the efforts of Pakistan to combat cyberbullying. It provides a legal framework for regulating online behavior and protecting citizens' rights through penalties for crimes such as privacy violations, defamation, and the dissemination of harmful content (Pakistan, 2016). Critical provisions within PECA, such as Section 21 (addressing offenses against an individual's dignity), Section 22 (protecting minors from explicit content), and Section 24 (targeting cyberstalking), offer vital measures to counter cyberbullying, especially among young people. These provisions establish a foundational legal approach to online harassment, marking progress in safeguarding individuals from digital harm (Pakistan, 2016).

ii. Challenges in Enforcement and Low Conviction Rates in Pakistan

Despite PECA's comprehensive framework, its enforcement has faced significant challenges. The most concerning issue is the exceptionally low conviction rate for cyberbullying offenses. Between 2018 and 2024, over 27,000 complaints were filed, but only 67 convictions were recorded, illustrating a large gap between the reported incidents and actual legal outcomes (Kamboyo, [2024](#)). Factors contributing to this discrepancy include difficulties in collecting solid evidence, delays in legal procedures, and the challenges posed by anonymous perpetrators, which complicate the identification and prosecution process. The anonymity provided by the internet enables cyberbullies to operate without fear of immediate consequences, exacerbating the issue and making enforcement less effective (Usman, [2017](#)).

iii. Difficulties in Evidence Collection and Technical Expertise in Pakistan

One of the primary barriers to effective prosecution in cyberbullying cases is the challenge of evidence collection. Digital evidence is often volatile, easily altered, or deleted, making it difficult to preserve and present in legal proceedings. Law enforcement agencies often lack the technical expertise and resources needed to gather and analyze digital evidence effectively (Kamran, Arafeen, & Shaikh, [2019](#)). The absence of specialized skills within law enforcement further weakens the ability to build a solid case, leading to cases being dismissed or perpetrators acquitted. Furthermore, the transnational nature of cyberbullying, where

perpetrators and victims are often located in different countries, complicates jurisdictional issues and makes international cooperation on cybercrime difficult (Sahoutara, [2022](#)).

iv. Gaps in Judicial Understanding and Need for Specialized Agencies in Pakistan

The lack of specialized knowledge within the judiciary also exacerbates enforcement problems. Many judges are not adequately trained to assess digital evidence, which can result in dismissals or failures to convict, even when compelling evidence is available (Usman, [2017](#)). This gap in judicial understanding diminishes the deterrent effect of the law. Additionally, the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA), tasked with enforcing PECA, faces operational strains due to the growing number of cybercrime cases. Calls for the establishment of a National Cyber Crime Investigation Agency (NCCIA) reflects the need for a specialized institution to focus on cyberbullying and enhance international cooperation. However, overlapping jurisdictions between the FIA and the proposed agency could lead to bureaucratic inefficiencies, hindering coordinated efforts in combating cyberbullying (Sahoutara, [2022](#)).

v. Operational Limitations of Cyber Crime Reporting Centers in Pakistan

The Cyber Crime Reporting Centers (CCRCs), established to assist victims of cyberbullying, face significant operational challenges. Despite receiving a large number of complaints—over 134,000 in 2023—CCRCs are hampered by inadequate staffing, insufficient resources, and limited access to forensic tools. These limitations hinder their ability to effectively investigate and address complex cyberbullying cases (Imam & Naz, [2024](#)). Furthermore, low public awareness of these centers reduces their reach and effectiveness, as many individuals are unaware of the services they provide. This lack of awareness limits the potential of CCRC to serve as a reliable mechanism for addressing cyberbullying complaints (Abbas, [2023](#)).

vi. The Growing Importance of Cybersecurity in Pakistan

Cybersecurity has become a critical concern for Pakistan as digital access expands. The rising number of cybercrime complaints, low registration and conviction rates, and increasing harassment—especially against women—highlight urgent gaps in legal enforcement and digital safety. Strengthening cybercrime response and regulatory oversight is essential

for protecting citizens in the evolving digital landscape (Imam D. S., [2024](#)).

vii. Psychological Impact of Cyberbullying on Victims

Cyberbullying has profound psychological consequences, with one of the most common effects being the development of depression and anxiety. The constant nature of online harassment intensifies feelings of hopelessness and despair, as it is not confined to specific times or places, unlike traditional bullying (UNICEF, [2024](#)). The anonymity of the internet empowers perpetrators, making the attacks more vicious, and the inability to identify or confront tormentors exacerbates the victim's isolation and distress (Mishna, Cook, Gadalla, Daciuk, & Solomon, [2010](#)). The anxiety and helplessness felt by victims are heightened by the inescapable nature of cyberbullying, causing significant emotional pain.

viii. Suicidal Thoughts and Long-Term Psychological Effects

The pervasive nature of cyberbullying can lead to anxiety disorders and hyper vigilance, often resulting in suicidal thoughts. The emotional toll from constant exposure to derogatory comments, threats, and public humiliation can cause some victims to resort to self-harm as a coping mechanism. Studies have shown a clear correlation between cyberbullying and suicidal ideation, with victims being far more likely to contemplate suicide compared to those who are not targeted online (Hinduja & Patchin, [2014](#)). The psychological effects of cyberbullying can extend far beyond short-term distress, resulting in lasting emotional scars and, in severe cases, tragic outcomes.

ix. Impact on Families and Communities

Cyberbullying also affects the victim's family and the broader community. Families often feel helpless and distressed as they watch a loved one suffer through online abuse, creating a sense of anger, fear, and emotional strain within the household (O'Brien & Moules, [2010](#)). The pervasive nature of the harassment leads to a sense of powerlessness, as families struggle to protect their loved one from ongoing abuse, which amplifies anxiety within the family (Foundation, 2024). Additionally, victims may withdraw from their families due to the stigma associated with being targeted, and this stigma can also cause embarrassment or shame among family members, further isolating them (Center P. R., [2021](#)).

x. Stigma and Lack of Support for Victims

Cultural attitudes toward cyberbullying victims and perpetrators often worsen the situation. In many societies, the victim is blamed for the bullying, suggesting they are not resilient enough or somehow provoked the harassment (Bauman, Cross, & Walker, [2013](#)). This is particularly prevalent in cultures where mental health and online harassment are not openly discussed or understood. The stigma surrounding cyberbullying and mental health struggles discourages victims from seeking help, reinforcing isolation and further mental distress (Rights, [2014](#)). The combination of cultural stigmas and cyberbullying makes it harder for victims to recover, trapping them in a cycle of emotional distress (Livingstone & Bulger, [2014](#)).

xi. Social Pressures and Insecurities

Societal pressures often lead to insecurities, which can make individuals vulnerable to cyberbullying, particularly those who are seen as different or atypical. The lack of strong social support systems—both online and offline—leaves victims with little defense against online attacks. In some social circles, cyberbullying behaviors are normalized, making it more difficult to address and stop these actions. Additionally, a lack of understanding about proper internet etiquette and protocols allows harmful online behaviors to flourish (Imam D. S., [2024](#)).

xii. Impact on Mental Health

Social media has a strong grip on Pakistan, with 71.7 million users in January 2023. With over 90 million internet users, the country is increasingly vulnerable to cyberbullying—online harassment that can severely affect mental health. A 2021 study showed nearly 90% of Pakistani students had been victims. Cyberbullying can lead to depression, low self-esteem, and even suicidal thoughts, with victims 1.9 times more likely to contemplate suicide (Rifaat, [2024](#)).

xiii. Corruption and Resource Shortages

Corruption within law enforcement agencies worsens the situation by delaying investigations into cyberbullying cases. Additionally, there are limited resources available for addressing cybercrime, making it difficult for authorities to pursue and resolve cases effectively. This lack of transparency contributes to unreported cases of cyberbullying (Haque, Abbasi, Murugesan, Anwar, Khan, & Lee, [2023](#)).



xiv. Low Digital Literacy

A major barrier to tackling cyberbullying is the widespread lack of digital skills. Many people in Pakistan do not have the knowledge of how to protect themselves online, making them more vulnerable to cyberbullying and other forms of online harassment. Without an understanding of web safety, victims may struggle to recognize or respond to cyberbullying (Imam D. S., [2024](#)).

While PECA [2016](#) provides a legal framework to combat cyberbullying in Pakistan, enforcement is undermined by systemic issues such as low conviction rates, challenges in evidence collection, and a lack of specialized expertise within law enforcement and the judiciary. The operational limitations of the FIA and the CCRC, combined with gaps in public awareness, further constrain the effectiveness of Pakistan's legal response to cyberbullying. These challenges highlight the urgent need for institutional reforms, increased resources, and specialized training to strengthen Pakistan's ability to prevent and address cyberbullying more effectively (Imam & Naz, [2024](#)).

4.2 Section Two

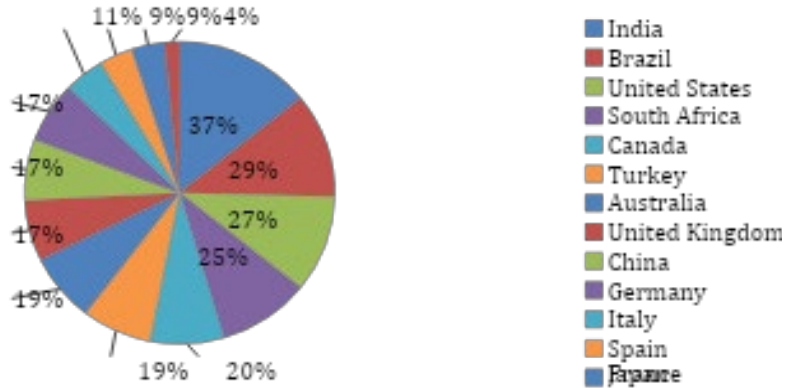
4.2.1 Global Cyberbullying Trends

According to 2018 study revealed that nearly one in five parents worldwide reported their child had experienced cyberbullying. India topped the list with 37% of parents acknowledging incidents, and 14% noting it happened regularly. In the U.S., the rate rose from 15% in 2011 to 27% in 2018, showing a sharp increase. In Europe, the UK reported 17%, Italy 14%, and both Spain and France 9%. Surprisingly, Russia reported no cases, with 0% of surveyed parents indicating their children had faced cyberbullying (Bhatti, [2022](#)). The graphical representation has been given for information as under Figure 1:

Furthermore, if we look into the global perspective, Europe, Belgium, Sweden, and the UK face similar issues. Belgium reports a 25% prevalence rate due to the challenges of moderating online content in a multilingual society (Michael, [2024](#)). Sweden, with a 23% rate, emphasizes prevention through digital literacy, but struggles with regulating social media (Iotti, Menin, & Jungert, [2022](#)). In the UK, 18% of youth report cyberbullying, with many incidents going unreported (Statistics, [2024](#)). In Australia, 19% report being cyberbullied, with reactive measures like the eSafety Commissioner in place, but lacking preventive impact (Commissioner, [2024](#)).

Figure1

Global cyber trends (percentages)



Source: (Bhatti, [2022](#))

Canada faces similar challenges, with 20% of youth affected and a focus on mental health (Protection, [2014](#)). In China, stricter internet controls keep cyberbullying rates at 17%, but societal pressures persist (Zhou, [2021](#)). The COVID-19 pandemic worsened the situation globally, with increased online time and stress contributing to higher cyberbullying rates (Sorrentino, Sulla, Santamato, di Furia, Toto, & Monacis, [2023](#)).

4.2.2 Cyberbullying in India

In India, about 85% of children are victims or participants in cyberbullying, a figure much higher than the global average (Imam, [2024](#)). This increase is driven by higher internet access and smartphone use, which promote anonymity (Kaur & Saini, [2023](#)). The social stigma surrounding mental health further complicates the issue.

i. Prevalence of Cyberbullying in India

Cyberbullying is a significant concern in India, with high incidence rates. A 2012 survey by Microsoft Corporation ranked India third globally in online bullying cases across 25 countries. Additionally, a 2014 study by McAfee revealed that half of the youth in India have experienced cyberbullying. The 2016 Norton Cyber Security Insights Report further highlighted that 51% of parents worldwide believe online bullying is more likely than traditional bullying at school or work. These findings emphasize the growing challenge of addressing cyberbullying in India (Chandra, [2018](#)).

ii. Rise of social media and New Platforms

The rise of social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Viber, and Facebook have made cyberbullying more prevalent. As noted by a Union HRD Ministry official, while cellphone-related crimes like MMS sharing were common in the 2000s, cyberbullying has escalated with teenagers' increasing use of social networks. Additionally, platforms like Tumblr and Instagram, along with newer games like the Blue Whale Challenge, have contributed to this issue. The Blue Whale Challenge, in particular, has been linked to several teenage deaths in India, prompting action from the government to remove related content from major platforms. Similarly, the app Sarahah, designed for anonymous feedback, has been criticized for enabling cyberbullying, particularly among college students (Chandra, [2018](#)).

iii. Legal Framework and Limitations

India's legal framework for tackling cyberbullying remains inadequate. The Information Technology (IT) Act, 2000, addresses issues like obscene material (Section 67) and breach of confidentiality (Section 72), but it does not directly address cyberbullying. Furthermore, there are no standardized guidelines for schools to prevent cyberbullying. While the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act (POCSO) [2012](#) deals with child sexual exploitation online, it does not specifically target bullying (India, [2012](#)). Similarly, Section 66A of the IT Act that penalized offensive messages was struck down by the Supreme Court in 2015 leaving a gap in addressing cyberbullying effectively.

iv. Need for Comprehensive Cyberbullying Legislation

The current laws in India are insufficient to address the complexities of cyberbullying, especially with the increasing reliance on digital communication. Dr. Debarati Halder, in her paper on children's vulnerability to cyberbullying, argues that a more comprehensive law is needed to regulate hate speech and bullying on digital platforms (Halder, [2015](#)). The combination of the POCSO Act and the IT Act can help address some issues, but a specific, robust law focusing on cyberbullying is crucial to tackle the growing problem in India (Chandra, [2018](#)). Some of the important figures in respect of India in connection to cyberbullying are given in tabulated as under:

Table 2
Facts and figures of Cyberbullying in India

Category	Fact/Figure	Details
Prevalence of Cyberbullying in India	85%	85% of children in India are victims or participants in cyberbullying (Imam, 2024).
	50%	50% of youth in India have experienced cyberbullying (McAfee, 2014).
Global Cyberbullying Ranking	3 rd	India ranked third globally for online bullying in a 2012 Microsoft survey across 25 countries.
Legal Framework Limitations	IT Act, 2000	The IT Act does not specifically address cyberbullying, only issues like obscene material (Section 67).
Rise of Social Media Impact	Blue Whale Challenge	Linked to teenage deaths in India, highlighting the serious risks of cyberbullying on new platforms.

4.2.3 Cyberbullying in the United States of America (USA)

Cyberbullying has become a pervasive issue in the United States, affecting both children and adults alike. With over 26% of American teenagers experiencing cyberbullying in the past month and 73% of young women receiving unsolicited sexual content online, it is clear that this problem has reached alarming proportions.

i. The Impact of Cyberbullying on Victims

Unlike traditional bullying, which can be left behind in physical spaces, cyberbullying follows victims into their homes, affecting their mental and physical health around the clock. Victims may experience emotional distress, psychological trauma, and in some cases, even physical symptoms. The mental health crisis is particularly severe among marginalized groups, including Black and LGBTQ youth, who are disproportionately affected by online harassment. For instance, Black middle schoolers who are cyberbullied are 135% more likely to consider or plan suicide than their peers, and LGBTQ students are three times more likely to attempt suicide due to bullying (Martin, [2025](#)).

ii. Legal Measures and Social Media Response

To counter this, various laws and regulations have been enacted across the U.S. to address cyberbullying. Forty-four out of fifty states have specific laws imposing criminal penalties for online harassment, although some states like Wyoming and New Mexico have yet to implement such measures. Social media companies, notably Meta, have also taken steps to



combat cyberbullying, with Facebook removing millions of pieces of content related to bullying in recent years.

iii. Challenges in Addressing Cyberbullying

However, the effectiveness of these efforts remains mixed, as public concern continues to rise. According to Pew Research, 48% of users believe harassment is a major problem on platforms like X (formerly Twitter), signaling a need for stronger enforcement and content moderation. The response from social media platforms has improved over time, with proactive content detection increasing significantly, but more needs to be done to ensure the safety of vulnerable communities (Martin, [2025](#)).

iv. The Role of Education and Continued Efforts

While laws and social media companies take steps to tackle cyberbullying, the issue remains pervasive. Education, greater awareness, and stronger enforcement of existing laws are essential to protect individuals from online harassment. Furthermore, initiatives like StopBullying.gov are providing support for victims, but continued pressure on both lawmakers and tech companies is necessary to create safer online environments for everyone (Martin, [2025](#)). Some of the important facts and figures in respect of cyberbullying in the United States of America have been given in tabulated form as under:

Table 3

Facts and figures of Cyberbullying in the United States of America (USA)

Cyberbullying facts	Percentage
The US teens who have experienced cyberbullying	46%
The US adults who have faced online harassment	41%
Children in the US who own a smartphone by age 11	53%
Children in high-income countries with internet access	87%
The US teens who say social media platforms are not doing enough to address cyberbullying	74%
The US teens who have experienced cyberbullying in their lifetime	46%
The social media content creators who have faced harassment in their careers	95%

Cyberbullying facts	Percentage
Teens who have experienced cyberbullying more since the COVID-19 pandemic	26%
Black teens who are more likely to experience cyberbullying due to race/ethnicity	Twice as likely
Teens who report that cyberbullying negatively affects their ability to learn and feel safe at school	66%

Source: (Joshua, [2024](#))

4.2.4 Comparative analysis of Pakistan, India, and the USA

From the above discussion, we can draw a comparative analysis of cyberbullying in Pakistan, India, and the USA, highlighting significant differences in prevalence, legal frameworks, and enforcement mechanisms. In Pakistan, despite the PECA [2016](#) providing a legal framework, challenges like low conviction rates and a lack of technical expertise hinder its effectiveness. India sees high rates of cyberbullying, with 85% of children affected, but lacks specific laws addressing cyberbullying. The USA has more structured laws across 44 states, though social media harassment remains a persistent issue. Across all three countries, enforcement remains a challenge, with gaps in legal frameworks, evidence collection, and public awareness, indicating the need for stronger laws and better implementation. The detail account of the comparison among the three countries is given as under:

Table 4

Comparative Analysis amongst Pakistan, India, and the USA

Category	Pakistan	India	USA
Prevalence of Cyberbullying	90% of Pakistani students have been victims of cyberbullying (Rifaat, 2024).	85% of children are victims or participants in cyberbullying (Imam, 2024).	26% of American teenagers experience cyberbullying monthly (Martin, 2025).
Global Ranking	Not specifically ranked globally in cyberbullying prevalence.	3rd globally in cyberbullying (Microsoft, 2012) while 1 st globally according to 2018 report mentioned by Haleem Bhatti in	As per 2018 report as mentioned by the study of Haleema Bhatti above, the USA has ranked the second highest affected by



Legal Framework and Legal Issues	PECA 2016 provides a legal framework but lacks effective enforcement mechanisms. Issues like low conviction rates (0.24%) (Imam & Naz, 2024).	her study (Bhatti, 2022). IT Act, 2000 does not address cyberbullying specifically, and Section 66A was struck down, leaving legal gaps (India, 2012).	cyberbullying (Bhatti, 2022). 44 states have cyberbullying laws, though Wyoming and New Mexico have no specific laws (Martin, 2025). Some laws impose criminal penalties.
Challenges in Evidence Collection	Lack of technical expertise and difficulty in gathering and preserving digital evidence (Kamran, Arafeen, & Shaikh, 2019).	No specific law for cyberbullying and lack of consistent enforcement (Chandra, 2018).	Increasing use of proactive content detection by social media companies, but still some gaps (Martin, 2025).
Enforcement Mechanism	FIA and CCRCs face operational limitations, including low public awareness, insufficient resources, and technical expertise (Imam & Naz, 2024).	Increasing rise of social media-related crimes, but lack of robust cyberbullying laws and school guidelines (Chandra, 2018).	Social media platforms like Meta have removed millions of bullying-related contents, with StopBullying.gov providing support (Martin, 2025).
Cyberbullying Platforms	Social Media (WhatsApp, Facebook) and gaming (e.g., Blue Whale Challenge) have contributed to increased bullying (Imam D. S., 2024).	Social Media platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, and the Blue Whale Challenge increase online harassment risks (Chandra, 2018).	Social media platforms (e.g., Facebook, X) continue to grapple with harassment despite improvements in content moderation (Martin, 2025).

5. CONCLUSION

Cyberbullying has emerged as a significant and growing issue in Pakistan, fueled by the rapid expansion of internet access and social media platforms. This study sheds light on the alarming prevalence of cyberbullying, particularly among youth, and highlights its severe psychological, emotional, and social consequences. Victims of cyberbullying often experience anxiety, depression, and in extreme cases, suicidal thoughts. The rise in digital harassment is exacerbated by societal issues such as the stigma surrounding mental health, limited digital literacy, and the pervasive underreporting of cyberbullying incidents. The paper highlights that women, especially those in public roles like journalists and activists, are disproportionately targeted, reflecting deeper societal gender inequalities. The Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) [2016](#), although a significant step towards regulating online harassment, has proven to be insufficient in combating the issue. The law's enforcement remains weak, primarily due to low conviction rates, the challenges in digital evidence collection, and the anonymity offered to perpetrators. The lack of technical expertise within law enforcement agencies and delays in judicial processes further hinder the effectiveness of the legal framework. Moreover, the operational limitations of the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) and the Cyber Crime Reporting Centers (CCRCs) underscore the need for increased resources, specialized training, and improved public awareness of these services. Comparative analysis with other countries, such as India and the United States, reveals similar patterns of online harassment, with each country facing unique challenges in addressing cyberbullying. However, the experiences of Pakistan reflect a specific set of cultural, legal, and societal barriers that exacerbate the impact of cyberbullying. The paper stresses the importance of adopting a multifaceted approach, including legal reforms, educational initiatives, and stronger cooperation between governmental bodies, tech companies, and civil society organizations. The research calls for the establishment of a more robust, adaptive legal framework, enhanced digital literacy programs, and increased victim support mechanisms. Moreover, international collaboration is crucial in combating cross-border cyberbullying. The study concludes that, with coordinated efforts from all stakeholders, Pakistan can mitigate the impact of cyberbullying and foster a safer online environment for all its citizens.



6. RECOMMENDATIONS

The following short-term, mid-term, and long-term measures have been recommended to fight cyberbullying in Pakistan:

6.1 Short-Term Recommendations

- Regularly update and strengthen PECA to address emerging trends in cyberbullying and digital abuse, ensuring its continued relevance and effectiveness in protecting users online as cyberbullying tactics evolve.
- Launch awareness campaigns focusing on digital rights, online harassment, and the laws surrounding cyberbullying, educating the public about the importance of privacy and safe internet usage to help people understand how to protect themselves and report incidents, and the broader community to foster a culture of digital safety and empathy, preventing and mitigating cyberbullying.
- Equip the FIA with more resources and training in cyber forensics and cybercrime investigations to improve the agency's ability to effectively investigate and prosecute cyberbullying and other online offenses.
- Support NGOs like the Digital Rights Foundation (DRF), [2024](#) in their efforts to raise awareness about online harassment and advocate for better digital policies, as these organizations play a crucial role in educating the public and assisting victims of cyberbullying.
- Parents should engage in open communication with their children, encouraging them to report any incidents of cyberbullying. Educating children about privacy settings and the dangers of sharing sensitive information online can significantly reduce their vulnerability to online harassment.
- Schools should establish clear channels for reporting cyberbullying and create a safe environment for students to disclose incidents. Support should be offered to both victims and perpetrators, focusing on education and rehabilitation, with a culture of empathy promoted.
- Promote constructive communication and respectful dialogue online. Encourage internet users to consider content before sharing it and report harassment incidents to the appropriate authorities while offering support to victims.

6.2 Medium-Term Recommendations

- Strengthen cooperation between government bodies, tech-companies, and civil society organizations to create a comprehensive, multi-dimensional strategy for combating cyberbullying, as collaboration

will facilitate the preemptive protection of online platforms and enhance cybersecurity awareness.

- Pakistan should join the Budapest Convention on Cybercrime to enhance cross-border cooperation and improve its ability to tackle international cybercrimes, including cyberbullying, as participation in the treaty will allow for global collaboration and resource sharing.
- Train judges and legal professionals in cyber forensics, digital evidence handling, and the specifics of online harassment laws to ensure courts can effectively handle cyberbullying cases and address digital offenses properly.
- Expand and improve the National Cyber Security Policy to address critical cyber risks, including cyberbullying, and enhance overall cybersecurity measures, as strengthening the national cybersecurity framework will help create a safer online environment for everyone.
- Technology companies should implement robust reporting mechanisms for harmful content, utilize artificial intelligence to detect and remove abusive material, and promote digital literacy to help users protect themselves online.
- Schools should integrate digital literacy into their curricula, emphasizing empathy, ethical behavior, and the consequences of cyber harassment. Establish clear reporting and resolution policies.
- Tech companies can use AI and machine learning to detect cyberbullying in real time. This will improve detection across platforms, though concerns about privacy and false positives must be addressed.
- Provide victims of cyberbullying with access to counseling services and peer support groups to help them cope with the psychological effects of the abuse.

6.3 Long-Term Recommendations

- Cyberbullying often transcends borders, requiring international cooperation. Governments and organizations must coordinate efforts to protect victims and punish offenders.
- Countries should collaborate to share resources, knowledge, and technologies for standardized responses to cyberbullying. International organizations like INTERPOL can promote global digital responsibility.
- Encourage the adoption of the Budapest Convention to facilitate international cooperation in addressing cybercrime and enabling cross-border investigations.

- Overcome jurisdictional issues and varying laws by fostering international cooperation. The anonymity of the internet makes cross-border cyberbullying a complex issue.
- Collaborate with international organizations like UNICEF to promote global cyber safety awareness, especially among youth, and align efforts with global initiatives on online harassment prevention, as international cooperation will ensure coordinated global efforts against cyberbullying.
- Continuously update Pakistan's National Cyber Security Policy to incorporate new technologies, trends, and cybersecurity measures, ensuring the nation's digital infrastructure remains secure, as the evolving nature of cyber threats necessitates ongoing updates.

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