Review

Cyberbullying in Technological Age: A Review of Legal Laws

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ABSTRACT

Cyberbullying is a harsh reality for many young people today, with the rise of technology making it easier for hurtful behaviour to spread. It has become a persuasive issue, with severe consequences. These consequences can be devastating, affecting not only their mental health but also, in the most tragic cases, leading to suicidal thoughts. Despite our best efforts to create a safe space online, we still have a lot to learn about how to protect our children from this kind of abuse and create a safer digital environment having a legal framework. Cyberbullying is a growing concern in Pakistan, but efforts to combat it are hindered by outdated and inadequate laws. The Electronic Transaction Ordinance 2002 and Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act 2016 failed comprehensively due to many challenges. This article delves into cybercrime legislation, including past acts such as the Electronic Transaction Ordinance 2002 and the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act 2016. This article also discusses the latest amendments made in 2025 to the ETO. However, a glaring gap remains: the lack of a clear definition of bullying. Moreover, complexities surrounding intent, surveillance, awareness, jurisdiction, technology, and the age of criminal responsibility further complicate the issue. This article explores these challenges and discusses the need for comprehensive and effective legislation to protect Pakistan's citizens from the devastating effects of cyberbullying.

Keywords*: Cyberbullying; Technology; ETO Amendment; Legislation*

1. Introduction

We're living in a world where technology has changed everything. It's opened doors to new ways of learning and connecting. But, just like with any powerful tool, it comes with its own set of challenges. We're facing new kinds of threats, like cybercrime, and social conflicts that can arise online (Srivastava, 2012). The word "bully" has been a part of our language for nearly 500, years dating back to the 1530s (Donegan, 2012). At its core, bullying is a hurtful dynamic between two people: the one harming, and the one being hurt. The bully uses physical, verbal, or other forms of abuse to feel more powerful and in control. This can happen in obvious ways, like hitting or insulting someone to their face, or in more suitable ways, like spreading rumours or gossip (Donegan, 2012). Sadly, bullying has long been a painful reality for kids, often seen as a normal part of growing up (Limber & small, 2003). But that's changed in the last 20 years. People have started to question this view, realizing that bullying needs to be taken seriously and addressed (McCarthy, 2001). The world has finally taken notice of cyberbullying, and it's about time (Campbell, 2005). Many of us have experienced bullying firsthand, whether in childhood, adolescence or even as adults. Traditional bullying is a repeated, intentional act of aggression, carried out by one person or a group, targeting someone who can't easily defend themselves (Whitney & Smith, 1993; Catalano et al., 2014). Bullying is a form of abuse that thrives on an imbalance of power. At its core, it's a deliberate and repeated misuse of power to harm or intimidate others (Sharp et al., 2002; Rigby, 2002).

In recent years, bullying has evolved into a new form: Cyberbullying. This type of harassment involves using the Internet, social media, and electronic devices to intentionally intimidate, threaten and harm others. Cyberbullies exploit power and imbalances to repeatedly torment their victims through methods like texting, emailing, and video messaging (Juvonen & Gross, 2008; Marczak & Coyne, 2010; Patchin & Hinduja, 2015; Smith et al., 2008). Alarmingly, bullying is a widespread issue among children. In the UK alone, the NSPCC reported that over 25,000 counselling sessions were needed and just one year to support kids affected by

face-to-face and online bullying (NSPCC, 2015). Shockingly, some people have even viewed bullying as a form of entertainment or a normal part of growing up (Smith et al., 2008; Sabella, Patchin & Hinduja 2023). The reality is that bullying has severe and lasting psychological effects on both the bully and the victim. Research has consistently shown that face-to-face bullying and cyberbullying can lead to serious emotional and psychological harm. Studies have found that young people who are bullied in person often experience a range of negative outcomes (Beran & Li, 2007). Research has also revealed links between face-to-face bullying and a range of serious health issues, including psychiatric problems, psychosomatic complaints, and physical health concerns (Arseneault et al., 2006; Kim et al., 2006; Pozzoli, 2009). Cyberbullying also has devastating effects, leading to depression (Baker & Tanrikulu, 2010), stress, loneliness, anxiety, and low self-esteem (Katzer et al., 2009; Ybarra et al., 2006). In severe cases, it can even drive victims to suicidal thoughts (Katsumata et al., 2008) and, tragically, suicide itself (Feinberg & Robey, 2008).

Gaps: Despite growing awareness of cyberbullying, a significant research gap remains. First, there is a lack of empirical studies analyzing the long-term psychological impact of cyberbullying, particularly in the Pakistani context. Most existing research focuses on immediate effects, leaving the long-term consequences underexplored. Second, legal ambiguity persists regarding cyberbullying definitions and enforcement, necessitating comparative studies between Pakistan and other jurisdictions with established frameworks. Third, the role of artificial intelligence and automated detection in identifying and preventing cyberbullying remains an emerging yet underdeveloped field. Last but not least more research is needed on the effectiveness of intervention programs, including school-based awareness initiatives and psychological support systems for victims.

2. Cyberbullying

While technology has revolutionized our lives, offering numerous benefits and education, career, and social connections, it also has a darker side. The rise of online harassment, stalking, and bullying has made cyberbullying a pressing concern in today's digital landscape (Walrave & Heirman, 2011). The pervasive use of technology has given rise to a persistent and growing issue: Cyberbullying. This form of harassment may soon eclipse traditional bullying. Cyberbullying involves intentional, aggressive, and repeated behaviour intended to harass, intimidate, and threaten victims through digital means, often leveraging an imbalance of power (Juvonen & Gross, 2008; Marczak & Coyne, 2010; Patchin & Hinduja, 2012; Smith et al, 2008). Cyberbullying has a broader reach and greater persistence online, enabling multiple perpetrators to harass victims over time (Grigg, 2010). The anonymity of the internet and ease of access to victim's contact information make it easier for bullies to commit acts without facing consequences (Poland, 2010). Research suggests that cyberbullying often builds upon existing face-to-face bullying dynamics (Vandebosch & Van-Cleemput, 2008). Studies have found that most cyberbullying is perpetrated by individuals who already bully in person, targeting the same victims within their social networks (Juvonen & Gross, 2008; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004). This overlap highlights the connection between online and offline bullying behaviours.

2.1. Types of Cyberbullying
Just like traditional bullying, cyberbullying comes in many forms, including;

- Flaming
- Harassment
- Impersonation
- Outing and trickery
- Exclusion and ostracism
- Denigration,
- Defamation
- Cyberstalking

Understanding cyberbullying requires recognizing the various forms it can take and the roles individuals play and each incident. By identifying and distinguishing between different types of cyberbullying, we can better comprehend the complexity and severity of this issue (El Asam & Samara, 2016; Feinberg & Robey, 2009; Gillespie, 2006; Kowalski, et al., 2012; Pearce, Cross, Monks, Waters, & Falconer, 2011).

Flaming involves exchanging hostile or aggressive emails or online messages, often with insults or profanity (Friedman & Curral, 2003). According to Turnage (2007), "flames" are defined as messages containing aggressive, hostile, or insulting content, often marked by hurtful messages filled with capital letters, excessive punctuation, and filthy obscenity. Flaming is often interchangeable with the term *Trolling*, as both describe the act of intentionally posting hurtful or provocative content online.

Harassment is a form of cyberbullying that involves sending repeated, intentional, and upsetting emails to a person, often using offensive language (Feinberg & Robey, 2009; Wolak, et al., 2007).

Impersonation is a devastating form of cyberbullying where someone pretends to be another person often to deceive or harm others through fake online interactions (Kowalsky, 2009). The internet's anonymity allows individuals to easily create fake identities, often on social media, and pretend to be someone else. A tragic example is the case of 13-year-old Megan Meier, who took her own life after being bullied online by a woman using a fake identity (Tresniowaki, Truesdell, & Morrissey, 2008).

The *outing* is when someone shares private or embarrassing info about you online without your okay, which can be super hurtful and violating (Willard, 2007). Trickery happens when someone shares personal or embarrassing info with you, gaining your trust, but then betraying that trust by sharing it with others without your consent. Exclusion and ostracism are forms of cyberbullying where someone is intentionally left out of online groups, like games, chats, or social media groups, making them feel isolated and unwanted (Siegle, 2010; Willard, 2007; Kowalski, 2009).

Cyberstalking is another form of cyberbullying that involves tracking someone online, often without their knowledge or consent. This can include sending bullying messages, monitoring their activities, or even using other forms of cyberbullying tactics (Willard, 2007).

2.2. A technological evolution
The rise of technology has led to a proliferation of bullying particularly among youth. The advent of the internet and chat rooms in the 1990s created a breeding ground for online harassment (Subramanyam and Greenfield 2008). The widespread adoption of mobile phones among youth in the 1990s and early 2000s further facilitated bullying. By 2004 nearly half of 12 to 17-year-olds owned cell phones which increased to 75% later on (Lenhart 2010). Notably a Pew Research Center study found that 1/3 of teens send approximately 3,000 text messages per month (Lenhart 2010).

While parents may be certain that cell phones offer a sense of protection and security for their children they can also act as a tool for cyberbullying (Lenhart 2010). The rise of social media starting

with MySpace has created new platforms for interaction but also vulnerabilities for cyberbullying social media's ability to share personal information and create alias profiles can facilitate synonymous and hurtful interactions (Subramanyam and Greenfield 2008). Sites like Facebook Google and anonymous blogging platforms have enabled cyberbullying with severe cases including verbal abuse and targeted harassment (Subramanyam and Greenfield 2008). The propagation of technology has created new challenges for addressing bullying as technology continues to evolve. It is essential to develop strategies for preventing and addressing cyberbullying.

2.3. Prevalence and Risk Factors

A 2014 UK child line report revealed alarming cyber bullying statistics with 69% of 12 to 22-year-olds affected and 20% experiencing extreme cases. Facebook was identified as a major platform for bullying with 4500 young people seeking help in 2012-13. Almost half of parents (47%) lie awake at night worrying that their child will be bullied online (childline 2013). Research on cyberbullying prevalence has yielded varying rates making it challenging to determine an accurate measure. (Sabella et al., 2013). Most studies suggest that cyberbullying is less ubiquitous than in-person bullying (Sticca et al., 2013). On the other hand, a significant concern is that cyberbullying often goes unreported, with victims mostly keeping it to themselves, often suffering in silence (Smith & Slonje, 2008). Variability in prevalence rates exists with Gross and Juvonen (2008) finding that a staggering 72% of people surveyed had been cyberbullied, while a slightly higher 77% had experienced in-person bullying. Interestingly, Schneider et al. (2012) study revealed a different picture 15.8% of participants had faced cyberbullying while 25.9% had dealt with in-person bullying. These varying results are likely due to differences in research approaches (Sabella et al., 2013). Several reasons contribute to the underreporting of cyberbullying. Many victims feel that adults just don't get it and are powerless to stop the bullying, leading them to suffer in silence (Smith et al., 2008). Some victims may also carry the weight of responsibility feeling it's up to them to put an end to the bullying. Others may fear that adults won't take them seriously or believe their stories, leaving them feeling hopeless and alone (Campbell 2005; DCSF 2007). Additionally, victims may worry that reporting the incident would restrict their internet or device use (Campbell 2005; Juvonen and Gross 2008; Campbell et al., 2010). Studies have also identified demographic patterns in cyberbullying. Girls are more likely to report cyberbullying than boys (Schneider et al., 2012; Juvonen and Gross 2008). Sadly, cyberbullying is a growing problem among secondary school teens, who have easier access to technology, leaving them more vulnerable to online harassment (Campbell et al., 2012). Cyber stems from a toxic mix of emotions like shame, pride, anger, prejudice, religion and guilt (Jones and Manstead and Livingston, 2011).

2.4. Behavioral and Mental Health Consequences

Cyberbullying has severe adverse consequences on individuals affecting their security (Smith et al., 2008) well-being (Dehue et al., 2008) and causing trauma (Sourander et al., 2010). It should be addressed as a mental health issue rather than a discipline problem (Bauman et al., 2013). Research on cyberbullying effects was limited until 2005 relying on traditional bullying studies (Campbell et al., 2005). Tragic cases of teen suicides linked to cyberbullying have shed light on the devastating impact it can have (Agaston, Kowalski, & Limber, 2007; Baker and Tanrikulu 2010). Cyberbullying has been linked to serious health issues including stress, depression, loneliness, anxiety, and low self-esteem (Beshak, 2009). Psychological issues have also been reported along with the rise of despair (Juvonen & Gross, 2008), physical signs (Nearly & Joseph,

1994; Roland, 2002), eroding self-esteem, damaging academic performance and disrupting school life (Feinberg & Robey, 2008). The physical distance between the bully and the victim reduces social inhibition (Davies and Lee, 2008; Vandebosch et al., 2012). Cyberbullying is an adaptation of traditional bullying, highlighting the need for protective measures. Schools must raise awareness, adopt bullying policies, and teach online safety (Samara and Smith, 2008). While schools cannot prevent bullying entirely, they can encourage reporting and take disciplinary action.

3. Cyberbullying and the Law

Cyberbullying has severe psychological consequences, but its legal status remains unclear. Shockingly despite the UK's rising awareness about bullying, there's still no concrete law to protect victims, with tragic cases highlighting the need for change. For instance, Joshua Unsworth's case emphasizes the urgency for legal reform (Tozer, 2013). Another heartbreaking case is that of Daniel Perry, a 17-year-old who lost his life to bullying in 2013 after being tricked into creating an explicit video on Skype and later blackmailed online where anonymous users urged him to kill himself (BBC, 2014a). Daniel Perry's family urged Prime Minister David Cameron to take action and make the internet a safer place. Similarly, Ronan Hughes, a 17-year-old from Northern Ireland, committed suicide in 2015 after being tricked into posting online images and later blackmailed on Skype (The Telegraph, 2015). Although there is no specific law criminalizing bullying, whether offline or online, cyberbullying prosecutions can be applied under several legislative provisions. It is essential to note that all UK schools are required by law to have an anti-bullying policy addressing bullying and cyberbullying against pupils and teachers (Smith et al., 2012).

3.1. Cyberbullying and Cybercrime in Pakistan

The advent of 4G and 5G technologies has ushered in a digital revolution enabling rapid global communication. However, the increased digitalization and automation have left to a proportional right in cyber-crimes, and cyber-bullying cyber security ventures predict that cyber-crime will cost the world 10.5 trillion anyway by 2025. Pakistan has also seen an 83% increase in cyber crime or the past 3 years with the federal investigation agency FIA receiving over 102000 complaints.

3.2. Cybercrime Laws in Pakistan

Cybercrime laws in Pakistan have been passed by the Parliament.

- **Electronic Transactions Ordinance (ETO) 2002**

The Electronic Transactions Ordinance (ETO), enacted in 2002, was Pakistan's first IT-related legislation, ensuring legal sanctity and security for the local e-commerce sector. A major portion of Pakistan's cybercrime legislation was influenced by foreign cybercrime legislation, divided into 43 categories addressing various cyber offences. Pakistan's cybercrime law covers eight major aspects of the e-commerce industry, including recognition of electronic documents, electronic communications, digital signature regimes, website certification, stamp duty, attestation, jurisdiction, and offences.

- **Prevention of Electronic Crimes or Cybercrimes Ordinance 2007**

The Prevention of Electronic Crimes or cyber-crime Ordinance PECO was passed in 2007 covering electronic offenses such as terrorism damage to data electronic theory forgery authorized entry cyber stalking and cyber spamming cyber criminals in Pakistan may face sanctions ranging from 6 months in prison to the death penalty depending on the crime.

- **Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act 2016**

The Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act PECA was passed in 2016 providing a comprehensive framework for all forms of cybercrime It deals with internet crimes such as unauthorized data access denial of service attacks electronic forgery and cyber terrorism Becca imposes punishments on cyber criminals including imprisonment and fines for offences such as authorized access to key information systems disruption of important information systems involvement in terrorism-related offences importing or exporting electronic equipment for offensive use and data breaches. (Anees, 2025).

3.3. PECA Penalties on Cybercrimes

- Unauthorized access to key information system: up to 3 years imprisonment a fine of PKR 1 million or both.
- Disrupting important information systems with misleading motives: up to 7 years imprisonment and a PKR 10 million fine or both
- Involvement in terrorism-related offences: up to 7 years imprisonment a PKR 10 million fine or both
- Importing exporting or distributing electronic equipment for offensive use: up to 6 months imprisonment and a PKR 50,000 fine or both.
- Enrollment in data breaches: up to 3 years imprisonment a PKR 5 million fine or both including an intentional release of personal information online (Anees 2005).

4. PECA 2025

The Prevention of Electronic Crimes Amendment Bill 2025 recently passed by Pakistan's National Assembly introduces significant changes to the original PECA 2016 law. The key amendments are;

1. **Definition in the criminalization of fake news**: A new section 26A has been added to define and penalize the intentional spread of false information that may cause public fear panic or unrest offenders can face up to 3 years in prison a fine of up to 2 million PKR or both.
2. **Establishment of regulatory bodies:** Social media protection and regulatory authority: This authority will oversee social media platforms ensuring user rights and compliance with national laws it has the power to block or remove content deemed harmful offensive or country to Pakistan's ideology. **Social media complaints council:** A council has been formed to address grievances related to online content aiming to resolve cases within 90 days
3. **Mandatory registration for social media platforms:** Platforms are not required to register with the government and adhere to specific conditions content that insights violence promotes terrorism or contradicts national values can be removed
4. **Prohibition on broadcasting expunged parliamentary proceedings:** The bill prohibits the broadcasting or streaming of parliamentary proceedings that have been officially expunged.

These amendments represent a significant shift from the original Pet Car 2016 which primarily focused on cyber-crimes such as authorized access to information systems electronic fraud and cyberstalking The 2025 amendments expand the scope to include stricter regulations on online content, particularly concerning misinformation and content deemed harmful to national interest than the introduction of these changes has parked debate with concerns about potential impacts on freedom of expression in the broad powers granted to regulatory authorities critics argue that terms like fake news are vaguely defined and could be used to suppress descent supporters however is that the amendments are necessary to convert the spread of harmful content and misinformation online.

5. Conclusion

Cyberbullying is a persuasive and complex issue affecting individuals worldwide. It remains a critical issue, particularly among children and adult sense. The rise of technology and social media has transformed the way people interact creating new avenues for billing and harassment. This review highlights the severity of cyberbullying and its various forms and its devastating consequences on mental health. Despite the growing trend of cyberbullying, there is a lack of clarity surrounding its legal status emphasizing the need for comprehensive laws and policies to address this issue. Although laws like the ETO Act 2016 provide a foundation, they lack clarity and comprehensive enforcement mechanisms. Furthermore, this review underscores the importance of raising awareness promoting online safety and supporting victims of cyberbullying ultimately a multifaceted approach is necessary to prevent cyberbullying in create a safer online environment.

Future research should focus on long-term psychological effects, AI-driven prevention methods, and cross-jurisdictional legal comparisons to develop robust solutions. Additionally, policymakers must work towards clearer legislative definitions and stronger enforcement to ensure victim protection. Raising awareness, promoting digital literacy, and implementing school-based intervention programs are essential in combating this growing issue. A multidisciplinary approach encompassing psychology, law and technology is crucial to creating a safer digital environment.

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