

INCREASING CYBER THREATS DURING COVID-19 CONCERNING E-EDUCATION

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INTRODUCTION

As technology is getting advanced day by day, our lives are becoming easier. The Internet has become a crucial platform for our daily lives. The use of the Internet has positive as well as negative consequences. It has become a seedbed for cybercrime. Since the coronavirus lockdown has taken place, almost all the activities, whether education or leisure, have shifted online which has resulted in a significant hike in cybercrimes. Online sexual harassment and cyberbullyingⁱ are the most recent crimes that happened during online classes.

Amidst the lockdown, there has been a spike in the number of cyber threats amounting to rape and murder to the teachers. *“Spending more time on virtual platforms can leave children vulnerable to online sexual exploitation and grooming, as predators look to exploit the COVID-19 pandemic. A lack of face-to-face contact with friends and partners may lead to heightened risk-taking such as sending sexualized images, while increased and unstructured time online may expose children to potentially harmful and violent content as well as a greater risk of cyberbullying”*, according to UNICEF.ⁱⁱ

Focusing on the increase in the number of cyber threat cases, the object of this paper is to provide an overview of various cyberbullying cases. The main sections will cover cyber threats and education, the effectiveness of cyber laws, and finally, the conclusion.

RESEARCH QUESTION

How effective are our cyber laws at addressing the increasing threat risks that are affecting online education?

CYBER THREATS AND EDUCATION

The education sector is rapidly exploring the use of technology to meet the demands of the needy. Since the nation-wide lockdown took place, the need for technology bumped up.

According to the report of Hindustan Times, “*India’s internet consumption rose by 13% since the nationwide lockdown was put in place to check the spread of Covid-19, according to telecom ministry data that showed Indians consumed 308 petabytes (PB) or 308,000 terabytes (TB) of data daily on an average for the week beginning March 22. India’s internet consumption rose by 13% since the nationwide lockdown was put in place to check the spread of Covid-19, according to telecom ministry data that showed Indians consumed 308 petabytes (PB) or 308,000 terabytes (TB) of data daily on an average for the week beginning March 22.*”ⁱⁱⁱ Similarly, the classes of schools and colleges also shifted to online platforms like Zoom and Google Meet, in which the students are given a link or login IDs to join the class. Inattentive students, bad internet connectivity, added pressure, and anxiety of technology (particularly in older teachers) have made online classes a nightmare for teachers. Increased use of the internet led to increased cases of cyber threats, cyberbullying, and online sexual harassment, especially since the nationwide lockdown took place.

Teachers: The victims of cyber threats

In the present scenario, online classes have become a nightmare for teachers. Online sexual harassment and cyberbullying have become a habitual part of these online classes. In most cases, teachers are victimized. Some uninvited people join the online classroom and cause nuisance like muting teachers, abusing teachers, removing teachers from the meeting, displaying obscene content, etc. Teachers also get rape threats from young students. Some of the teachers don’t even have technical support, still, they try their best to teach the students.

There was a horrifying case at a private school in Delhi where an unknown attendee started showing a porn video. The 35-year-old female teacher, then, ended the class in a hurry. The same attendee said, ‘I will rape you, why you’re troubling us by teaching online? Stop it at once!’ The attendee abused and harassed her. Nowadays abusing teachers and harassing them has become a viral trend. Look what the generation has become but why are they doing such things? The answer to this is very simple: they just want to be cool; they think doing such things makes them cool and the fellow students enjoy it. This gives them a sense of reinforcement.

Students are even making unofficial pages on social media with the tags, 'if anyone wants entertainment in class, contact us', and they disturb the class or cause such terrible acts. Whatever the unknown persons or attendees are doing their digital footprint is being recorded. So the teachers can record such acts as a part of the evidence and forward it to the cyber cell and security.^{iv}

This was another case; As online classes of the colleges began, many teachers said that they were abused, harassed, and threatened by the attendees during the classes. They reported that some unknown persons or persons with fake names enter into the class and cause nuisance like abusing and bullying teachers. Teachers said that they send invites to the students for live classes on Zoom or Google Meet and the students share the login IDs to the outsiders also. According to me, Google Meet and Zoom both the platforms have some security measures like a waiting room, etc. Unknown persons must be kept in the waiting room or should not be admitted by the teachers. Maybe by this method, these threats can be slowed down.^v These kinds of acts adversely affected the minds of teachers.

Participation of minors in such ventures

The younger generation falls into the category of accused. They are also involved in the activities of sexting and most of them are not aware that whatever they're browsing is being recorded as a digital footprint which can put students as well as their parents into serious trouble. These threats not only sway the online classes but also the mental health of the teachers. Most of the students think that bullying teachers make them cool, but they can never realize how embarrassing this can become for teachers. Later on, this embarrassment will result in a change in the way of interaction with students. Students think they entertain fellow students by doing such acts between the lectures to look cool among their friends which gives them a feeling of reinforcement.

Students also suffer

Not only the teachers are the victims but students also get threatened by such acts. They are also bullied and harassed as they are the ones who use technology the most and are glued to the devices all the time. According to the Times of India, "recently, in an online session of class-6 students of Kolkata girls' school, some hackers intruded the class and threatened the students with rape and murder. They started abusing and threatening the girls with rape and

murder, writing sexual comments in the chatbox due to which the online classes were suspended.”^{vi}

EFFECTIVENESS OF CYBERBULLYING AND SEXUAL HARASSMENT LAWS IN INDIA

In India, we don't have any specific provisions to deal with the threats of cyberbullying and sexual harassment but there are numerous provisions in the existing laws of the country which can be related to the same. The Information Technology Act and the Indian Penal Code have played a significant role to curb such issues.

“^{vii}[Section 66A of Information Technology Act, 2000 deals with sending offensive messages through communication service, etc. [Shreya Singhal and Ors. v. Union of India AIR 2015 SC 1523]^{viii}”

Section 67B deals with punishment for publishing sexually explicit act depicting children:

“First conviction with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to five years and with fine which may extend to ten lakh rupees and in the event of second or subsequent conviction with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to seven years and also with fine which may extend to ten lakh rupees.”^{ix}

Section 354A of the Indian Penal Code, 1860 deals with sexual harassment and its punishment.^x

Section 354D cope with stalking and contacting, attempting to contact woman- *“shall be punished on first conviction with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to three years, and shall also be liable to fine; and be punished on a second or subsequent conviction, with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to five years, and shall also be liable to fine.”^{xi}*

Section 509 provides for the punishment if anyone intends to insult the modesty of a woman through any act or gesture.

To stop cyberbullying, reporting is the initial step. Most people ignore it and they don't take it seriously rather they think that it is going to be okay with time. According to UNICEF, *“Laws*

against bullying, particularly on cyberbullying, are relatively new and still do not exist everywhere. This is why many countries rely on other relevant laws, such as ones against harassment, to punish cyberbullies.

In countries that have specific laws on cyberbullying, online behavior that deliberately causes serious emotional distress is seen as criminal activity. In some of these countries, victims of cyberbullying can seek protection, prohibit communication from a specified person, and restrict the use of electronic devices used by that person for cyberbullying, temporarily or permanently.”^{xii}

SUGGESTIONS

According to me, a simple checklist containing Dos and Don'ts can help build a security culture. Teachers can also adopt security measures and prevent these kinds of threats. The majority of the teachers are not aware of the features of online platforms like being a host gives you the power to do anything such as muting everyone, etc. So to spread awareness about the same, schools and colleges should conduct training programs for the teachers to enhance their skills in online teaching.

If we want to curb the issue of cyber threats, it is important to note that punishment is not always the best way because the act is already done. We need to focus on prevention first and not the cure.

Moreover, parents can also sit with the students during the online sessions so that they will be monitored by them.

CONCLUSION

It is of utmost importance to prevent cyber threats for the efficient working of online education. We all know that technology is strengthening day by day. So just like students, the teachers are also learning how to figure out the workings of the various online platforms prescribed by institutions. For the systematic training of teachers, respective institutions should organize

workshops regarding the use and features of the online portals. Parents should keep an eye on their child's device to avoid any nuisance.

The central and state governments should step forward, take measures, and execute appropriate plans to resolve the issue of cyber threats. It is a challenge for higher education IT departments to implement, monitor, and build a secure system.

Hence, laying out more emphasis on awareness and training will create a benevolent environment for teachers as well as students.

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ENDNOTES

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