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The impact of social media on child abuse: A critical examination of dissemination, cyberbullying, and predatory behaviour

**Priya Paul¹, Siya Mariya Sunny² and
Keziah Sarah Thomas³**

Abstract:

Recent years, the proliferation of social media platforms has revolutionized the interaction and communication of people including children and adolescents. However, alongside its many benefits, social media also presents significant risks, particularly concerning child abuse. This paper critically examines the multifaceted role of social media platforms in facilitating various forms of child abuse, including the dissemination of harmful content, cyberbullying, and predatory behavior targeting vulnerable individuals.

Firstly, the paper explores how social media platforms serve as conduits for the dissemination of harmful content, including explicit imagery, violent videos, and extremist ideologies. Secondly, the paper investigates the phenomenon of cyberbullying within the context of social media, wherein children and adolescents are subjected to harassment, intimidation, and defamation by peers or strangers online. Through a comprehensive review of existing literature, case studies, and empirical evidence, this study aims to elucidate the mechanisms through which social media facilitates instances of child abuse, while also exploring the socio-

1. Ms. Priya Paul, Asst. Prof., St. Kuriakose College of Management & Science, Kuruppampady, Perumbavoor, Ernakulam Dt., Kerala. Email: priyappaul@gmail.com, contact : 9072874277
2. Ms. Siya Mariya Sunny, Asst. Professor, St. Kuriakose College of Management & Science, Kuruppampady; Email : mariyasunnysiya@gmail.com. Contact : 9061894495
3. Ms. Keziah Sarah Thomas, Asst. Professor, St. Kuriakose College of Management & Science, Kuruppampady; Email : keziahthomas137@gmail.com, Contact : 9645643010

cultural and technological factors that contribute to its prevalence.

Key Words: *Proliferation of social media platforms, child abuse, dissemination of harmful content, harassment*

Introduction

It is important to carefully consider the complex and varied question of how social media use affects child abuse. Social media platforms provide a plethora of advantages and chances for interaction, education, and communication; yet, they also pose several hazards and difficulties concerning the protection of children. Here's a critical look into three important areas: predatory behavior, cyberbullying, and dissemination of negative content.

Social media networks have the potential to facilitate the quick spread of offensive materials, such as violent videos, explicit language, and offensive remarks. Unintentionally exposing children to such stuff might cause psychological anguish and even desensitization. To prevent children from being exposed to unsuitable material, parents, caregivers, and platform administrators must collaborate to create age restrictions, parental controls, and effective content moderation. It is imperative to take a collaborative strategy involving parents, educators, policymakers, and platform administrators to address the influence of social media on child abuse. Children may have a safer online experience by establishing and upholding age-appropriate rules, encouraging digital literacy, and fostering an environment that encourages candid communication. To adjust plans and policies to changing difficulties in the digital ecosystem, it is imperative to do ongoing research and monitor social media trends.

Defining dissemination

Misinformation is an objective social phenomenon that appears in the social operation environment. It usually refers to the information that is widely circulated intentionally or unintentionally without a factual basis and confirmation or clarification. It has been a concern not only in the social sciences such as sociology and journalism but also in computer science and other research fields. With the development of Internet technology and social

media platforms, the misinformation spread by word-of-mouth is rapidly spread through social media platforms and has the characteristics of fission diffusion, fast propagation speed, a wide range of influence, and deep impact. A large amount of false information and the spread of rumors and misleading information on social media platforms not only cause public concern and pose a threat to the public's physical and psychological health but also bring serious challenges to the governance and stability of social order. The impact of social media on fake news dissemination is significant. Social media platforms have enabled the rapid spread of fake news, leading to negative consequences for individuals and society as a whole. The availability of information from various sources on social media, combined with proprietary algorithms that provide targeted information, has made it difficult for users to distinguish between true and false news. This has resulted in the unintentional or intentional sharing of fake news by a significant percentage of social media users, leaving them confused about current events. Many children have fallen prey for these widespread negative and unauthentic messages.

Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying is the use of technology to harass, threaten, embarrass, or target another person. Online threats and mean, aggressive, or rude texts, tweets, posts, or messages all count. So does posting personal information, pictures, or videos designed to hurt or embarrass someone else. Cyberbullying poses a particularly grave threat to children, primarily due to its widespread nature. In the past, bullying was largely confined to school environments and interactions with peers during leisure time. The USA National Crime Prevention Council specified that "Cyber-bullying could be limited to posting rumors or gossip about a person in the internet bringing about hatred in other's minds, or it may go to the extent of personally identifying victims and publishing materials severely defaming and humiliating them" (US National Crime Prevention Council, 2017). However, the rise of the Internet and social media means that children can now be constantly connected, leaving them vulnerable to incessant exposure to harmful content throughout the day. Research indicates that prolonged exposure to cyberbullying can result in the onset of anxiety, depression, and other stress-related conditions. Those who are targeted by

cyberbullying often experience adverse effects on their academic and social well-being, potentially leading to withdrawal and reluctance to communicate. Tragically, there have been well-publicized instances where persistent cyberbullying has culminated in suicide. Instances of cyberbullying occur among individuals or social cohorts, predominantly involving teenagers and young adults who assume roles as either perpetrators or targets. However, it's acknowledged that various other social groups may also be involved in this offense, regardless of their position within the scenario.

Predatory behavior

Sex offenders have used the Internet to identify and contact minors for sexual exploitation (Armagh, 1998; Hernandez, 2000; Lamb, 1998; Lanning, 1998). Social media can serve as a haven for predatory conduct, where those with bad intentions might try to use kids as leverage and manipulate them. Adult predators seeking to groom children online frequently frequent social media platforms popular among young users, where they assume false identities to appear as peers. They employ various tactics to gain the child's trust, such as using fake profile pictures, feigning shared interests, offering gifts, or giving compliments. Once rapport is established, the groomer often shifts the conversation towards sexual topics. The child may feel pressured into sharing explicit photos or videos with the groomer. In severe cases, the groomer may coerce the child into arranging an in-person meeting, sometimes even traveling to meet them. To maintain control, the groomer might resort to blackmail, threatening to expose the private content to the child's friends or family. While online groomers are commonly strangers to the child, this isn't always the scenario. In some instances, the child may have encountered the groomer through familial or other connections, leading to the development of an online relationship. The child may not recognize the grooming process and may perceive the groomer as a romantic partner, such as a boyfriend or girlfriend.

Many states have enacted laws prohibiting adults from corrupting minors or participating in sexually explicit discussions with individuals under the age of 18. Furthermore, it is unlawful to transmit pornographic materials to minors or to coerce and pressure minors into sharing explicit photos or videos of

themselves. Adults found guilty of such behavior may face imprisonment and might be mandated to register as sex offenders following their conviction. Parents and guardians should teach their kids about online safety, the value of privacy settings, and the possible risks associated with connecting with strangers on the internet to reduce this risk. Platforms also need to take strong action to find and remove predatory accounts.

About the present study

This paper is literature research typically involves reviewing existing literature, such as academic papers, books, and other sources, to gather information, theories, and findings relevant to the research topic: The Impact of Social media on child abuse: A critical examination of dissemination, cyberbullying, and predatory behaviour.

Review of Literature

Differential opportunity theory, proposed by criminologist Lloyd Ohlin in 1960, suggests that individuals engage in criminal behavior due to their unequal access to legitimate opportunities. This theory emphasizes that crime is not just a result of individual characteristics but is also influenced by the availability of opportunities for criminal behavior within a given society. Cloward and Ohlin's (1960) differential opportunity theory made several significant contributions to criminology, including the emphasis on illegitimate means and the idea that social structure influences criminal opportunity. The problem, however, is that the field largely misinterpreted Cloward and Ohlin's intent as a simple variation of strain theory instead of a critical refinement of the existing perspective. Generally, the theory has not received much scholarly attention in terms of testing of its key propositions. Using semi-structured personal interviews with 105 active residential burglars in St. Louis, Missouri during 1989-1990, the current study uses qualitative measures to analyse differential opportunity theory as it applies to residential burglary. Results show support for the theory, including access to criminal learning environments and mentoring, the importance of criminal connections, neighborhood influence on offenders' risk perceptions, and the overall salience of neighborhood context on what are termed "front-end" and "back-end" opportunity structures. Emerging themes, practical implications, and directions for future research are discussed. (Shjarback, 2018).

Disseminating information, particularly rumors and public opinion, is a complex process mostly fueled by psychological factors. The dissemination of information online is strongly correlated with personal psychological traits. Due to curiosity and attention, people forward and spread internet content. Combining the theories of attenuation and interference, we can see that as time goes on and new information is produced, the prior news will be impacted and lose strength as a result. Additionally, people are less interested in and pay less attention to earlier news, and the impact of fresh information lessens the intensity of earlier information. (Luo et al., 2022). But this study cannot completely explain why people indulge in sharing negative content on online social media.

The study conducted by Barlett (2023) titled *Cyberbullying as a Learned Behavior: Theoretical and Applied Implications*, stated that cyberbullying perpetration has emerged as a worldwide societal issue. Interventions need to be continuously updated to help reduce cyberbullying perpetration. In this study, the author explained that cyberbullying is a learned behavior.

In a study by Shen et al., (2021) on “Why people spread rumors on social media: developing and validating a multi-attribute model of online rumor dissemination” an aim to focus on the psychological mechanisms accounting for online rumor transmission behavior on the individual level found that Four information characteristics (sense-making, funniness, dreadfulness and personal relevance) and three psychological motivators (fact-finding, relationship enhancement and self-enhancement) promote online rumor-forwarding behavior.

Aim and Research Questions

This paper explains how social media impacts on child abuse through cyberbullying, predatory behavior, and online victimization and examines the proliferation of toxic content.

- How does the connection between victim and offender affect the possibility of Predation and how an online predator chooses their victims?
- What are the psychological effects of cyberbullying among children?

- Are there gaps in current legislation that need to be addressed to better combat cyberbullying?
- What are the factors contributing to social media dissemination of harmful content?

Methods

The paper aims to examine ‘The impact of social media on child abuse through the dissemination of content, cyberbullying, and predatory behaviour through literature research. The review was based on the theories of Social Learning (Albert Bandura, 1977), Differential opportunity theory (Lloyd Ohlin, 1960), and the Social Identity model of De-individuation effects theory (SIDE), (Russel Speras and Martin Lea, 1992). The theories were chosen in an attempt to cover different perspectives on the negative influence of social media in children which include dissemination, cyberbullying, and predatory behavior. All of the theories were able to explain how social media has a negative influence on a child.

Selection of theories

There is many theories that helps to understand cybercrime activities, especially on cyber abuse cases. Here we are studying child abuse while using social media specifically on the dissemination, cyberbullying, and predatory behaviour.

The first theory chosen was the Social Learning Theory (Albert Bandura, 1977) to explicate online victimization from the social aspect. All the elements of the theory have been previously used to explain criminal behaviors so their application to cyberbullying cases were captivating and able to supplement the findings of other theories’.

The second one is Differential opportunity theory in criminology is an ideology that Richard Cloward and Lloyd Ohlin (1960) proposed and assumes that young individuals who are unable to find financial reward and status via legitimate means will turn to one (or more) of three possible subcultures to achieve certain goals. crime will occur when the motivated thief is present near an easy target that is not adequately protected.

The last theory included is The Social Identity model of Deindividuation Effects (SIDE) which is described as an approach that seeks to explain crowd behavior by an individual's "conformity to salient local [group] norms" (Kugihara, 2001; Reicher, Spears, & Postmes, 1995). this conformity and anonymity encourage individuals to share negative content and hatred through online media.

Findings

Social learning theory aspect

- **Observation and imitation:** People who witness cyberbullying activities online may choose to observe and emulate them. This can entail imitating the words, actions, or plans of those who use aggressive online behavior. Social media sites offer a virtual environment where people can watch and imitate actions they find attractive or effective.
 - **Modeling of aggressive behaviour:** Cyberbullies may have online influences or role models who act aggressively. These role models could be fictitious characters, celebrities, or even classmates. People may be more tempted to engage in such activities if they witness others using cyberbully to get attention or feel better about themselves
 - **Reinforcement:** The idea of social learning places a strong emphasis on how reinforcement shapes behavior. Individuals may view specific activities as gratifying or encouraging when it comes to cyberbullying. Positive reinforcement can come from things like getting attention, feeling powerful, or getting someone else to react, all of which might motivate someone to keep cyberbullying.
 - **Social norms and approval:** The influence of social norms and approbation on conduct is also taken into account by social learning theory. An individual may be more inclined to engage in cyberbullying to obtain acceptance or approval if they believe that the practice is socially acceptable or even promoted inside a particular online group.
- Top of Form

Differential opportunity theory aspect

The Opportunity Theory, developed by Richard and Lloyd(1960), provides

valuable insights into predator behavior, particularly in the context of online child abuse. This theory posits that criminal behavior occurs when individuals have the opportunity to commit a crime and perceive the benefits as outweighing the risks. When applied to online child abuse, this theory suggests that predators are more likely to engage in abusive behavior when presented with opportunities and perceive minimal risk of detection or punishment.

In the realm of online child abuse, opportunities abound due to the anonymity and accessibility afforded by the internet. Predators can exploit various online platforms to groom and exploit vulnerable children, often without fear of immediate consequences. Factors such as lax internet regulations, insufficient cybersecurity measures, and gaps in online child protection policies further facilitate these opportunities.

- **Accessing opportunities:** In the digital era, there is a wide array of opportunities for online interactions. This includes various platforms like social media, online gaming, chat rooms, and forums, where individuals, including potential abusers, can engage with children.
- **Legitimate versus illegitimate means:** According to Differential Opportunity Theory, individuals resort to illegitimate means when they lack access to legitimate opportunities. Similarly, those who lack healthy avenues for interaction or fulfillment may resort to online child abuse as an alternative outlet for their desires, frustrations, or needs.
- **Influence of social support structures:** Ohlin's theory suggests that individuals are influenced by the social structures available to them. In the realm of online child abuse, there might be online communities or networks that offer support or normalize abusive behaviors, thus encouraging individuals to engage in such activities.
- **Subcultures of deviance:** Differential Opportunity Theory also underscores the presence of subcultures within society that promote deviant behavior. In the online sphere, there exist communities or groups that may endorse or glorify child abuse, providing a sense of belonging and validation to individuals involved in such behavior.
- **Adapting to opportunities:** Individuals adapt to the opportunities at

hand. In the case of online child abuse, perpetrators may adjust to technological advancements to exploit children more effectively. This might involve using encryption, anonymity tools, or grooming techniques to establish trust with their victims.

Moreover, the perceived benefits of engaging in online child abuse, such as gratification, power, and control, may outweigh the perceived risks for predators. They may believe they can evade detection due to the perceived anonymity of online interactions or the difficulty in tracing their digital footprints.

Understanding the ‘Opportunity theory’ in the context of online child abuse underscores the importance of addressing systemic vulnerabilities in internet safety protocols, enhancing law enforcement efforts to combat online predators, and implementing comprehensive strategies for online child protection. By reducing opportunities for abuse and increasing the perceived risks for predators, it becomes possible to mitigate the prevalence of online child exploitation and protect vulnerable individuals from harm.

SIDE theory aspect

The Social identity model of deindividuation effects (SIDE) is described as an approach that seeks to explain crowd behavior by an individual’s “conformity to salient local group norms” (Kugihara, 2001; Reicher, Spears, & Postmes, 1995). The SIDE model proposes that people’s behavior in online environments is influenced by their social identity, anonymity, and group norms. Here’s how this model can be applied to the context of social media dissemination and child abuse:

- **Social identity:** Social media platforms provide users with the opportunity to form online identities and join various communities or groups based on shared interests, beliefs, or characteristics. In some cases, individuals may form social identities around harmful or deviant behaviors, such as promoting child abuse or exploitation. These identities can reinforce and normalize abusive behaviors within certain online communities.
- **Anonymity:** Social media platforms often allow users to maintain a level of anonymity, which can lower inhibitions and increase the

likelihood of engaging in antisocial or unethical behavior. Individuals may feel emboldened to share or disseminate negative content related to child abuse without fear of real-world consequences. Anonymity can also contribute to the diffusion of responsibility, where individuals may feel less accountable for their actions when acting as part of a larger online group.

- **Group norms:** Within online communities, certain norms and values may develop that condone or even encourage harmful behaviors such as child abuse. These group norms can shape individuals' perceptions of what is acceptable or unacceptable behavior within the online environment. People may conform to these norms to gain acceptance or approval from their online peers, leading to the dissemination of negative content related to child abuse.

In summary, the SIDE model suggests that social identity, anonymity, and group norms play crucial roles in shaping individuals' behavior on social media platforms. When these factors align to promote negative content related to child abuse, it can contribute to the normalization and perpetuation of abusive behaviors within online communities. Efforts to combat child abuse on social media must consider these underlying social dynamics and work to promote positive norms and behaviors within online spaces.

Ethical considerations

The literature review meticulously adhered to all relevant regulations governing the field of interest, focusing on human behaviors associated with cyber abuse and criminal activities related to children while using social media. Since it was a literature review, no specific permissions, consents, or documentation were necessary. This paper serves as an analytical examination of existing research literature about the discussed topic.

Conclusion

Through the literature review study of the current study, it was found that Social Learning Theory substantiates the cyberbullying behavior on social media platforms, Differential Opportunity theory elucidates the predatory

behavior, and the Social Identity model of Deindividuation Effects (SIDE) theory explains the cause of the dissemination of harmful content.

1. How does the connection between victim and offender affect the possibility of predation and how an online predator choose their victims?

This question aims to explore the dynamics between perpetrators and victims of online child abuse, particularly in terms of how predators identify and target vulnerable individuals. The predators access opportunities that are easily available and vulnerable. there might be online communities or networks (subcultures) that offer support or normalize abusive behaviors, thus encouraging individuals to engage in such activities. Understanding the strategies and motivations of online predators can inform efforts to prevent and combat child exploitation on social media platforms.

2. What are the psychological effects of cyberbullying among children?

- This question focuses on understanding the impact of cyberbullying on the mental health and well-being of children and adolescents. By examining the psychological effects of online harassment and intimidation, stakeholders can develop interventions and support systems to mitigate the harmful consequences of cyberbullying.

3. Are there gaps in current legislation that need to be addressed to better combat cyberbullying?

- This question seeks to identify deficiencies in existing legal frameworks related to cyberbullying and online child abuse. By evaluating the effectiveness of current legislation, policymakers can enact reforms and implement stronger measures to prevent and address instances of cyberbullying and online victimization.

4. What are the factors contributing to social media dissemination of harmful content?

- This question explores the mechanisms and underlying factors that contribute to the spread of harmful content, such as misinformation, rumors, and explicit material, on social media platforms. Social identity, anonymity, and group norms contribute to the behavior of

dissemination of harmful content Understanding these factors can inform strategies for content moderation, digital literacy education, and promoting positive online behaviors.

These research questions highlight the multifaceted nature of social media's impact on child abuse and provide avenues for further investigation to develop comprehensive strategies for prevention and intervention.

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