

## Exploring Cyber Sexual Harassment of Queer Students in Indian Universities: Prevalence, Impact, and Institutional Responses

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### ABSTRACT

Digital spaces have become crucial arenas for identity exploration and community-building among queer students in Indian universities. However, they are also sites of increased vulnerability, exposing queer individuals to cyber sexual harassment and identity-based discrimination. This study examines the prevalence, nature, and impact of such harassment, using empirical data gathered as part of a larger PhD research project. The work aims to amplify the voices of queer students by focussing on their lived experiences in order to better understand how online harassment affects their academic, emotional, and social lives. The study uncovers patterns of targeted cyber violence, appearance-based harassment, and queerphobic trolling on platforms such as Instagram, WhatsApp, and dating apps. The emotional toll is significant: participants report anxiety, digital withdrawal, and academic disengagement, often compounded by the fear of being outed or further marginalised.

The paper also identifies critical institutional and policy gaps. Existing university mechanisms, such as POSH committees, largely fail to recognize or address queer-specific and cyber-based harassment. Many students avoid reporting due to a lack of trust in these systems, absence of trained staff, and no clear protocols for digital abuse. This paper highlights the limitations of existing support systems and the urgent need for inclusive, intersectional, and cyber-aware policies. Recommendations include faculty sensitization, queer-inclusive policy reforms, anonymous reporting tools, and the creation of safer digital and physical spaces within campuses. Addressing these challenges is essential to ensuring that higher education environments in India are genuinely safe and inclusive for queer students.

**Keywords:** Online harassment, Sexual harassment, Queer students, Higher education, Policy gaps

### 1. INTRODUCTION

As education progressed away from traditional in-person classrooms and towards online platforms like Zoom and Google Meet, students of all ages began to use mobile devices and the internet for learning. While this transition has increased accessibility to online learning, it has also resulted in an increase in internet misuse. The increased usage of the internet can expose young students to an array of online dangers including sexual exploitation. While not all risks associated with the internet cause actual harm, students dealing with other personal issues may be more vulnerable to these threats. Scholars have used a variety of terminology to describe sexual and gender-based violence, harassment, and abuse in cyberspace. Despite these extensive studies, none of these terminologies or definitions capture the whole spectrum of abusive experiences that occur in the digital space. Current terminology does not adequately address the complexity and diversity of online damage leaving gaps in our understanding of the much bigger scope of digital abuse. Following the pandemic, there was an enormous increase in cyber-sexual harassment. There were numerous reports of students harassing teachers online, as well as teachers acting inappropriately towards students during virtual classrooms.

Research has pointed out the role of technology in many forms of abuse, such as child sexual abuse and grooming (Martin & Alaggia, 2013, as cited in Dey, 2023). According to UNICEF, increased time spent on virtual platforms can make young adults more vulnerable to online sexual exploitation and grooming. Other types of abuse include online dating violence (Hinduja & Patchin, 2021, as cited in Dey, 2023). College students, because of their unique circumstances and frequent use of online dating sites, are especially vulnerable to sexual assault. According to studies, more than half of college students use online dating services (Beauchamp et al., 2017; Newett, Churchill, & Robards, 2018, as cited in Scannell, 2019). Cyber dating abuse refers to a wide range of harmful behaviours. Borrajo et al. (2015) identifies two basic categories of abuse: victimisation and perpetration. These include: direct aggression, which involves aggressive and intentional actions aimed at

harming a partner or ex-partner, such as insults or threats, and control, which refers to controlling or invading a partner's privacy through technology, such as unauthorized password use. Additionally, Zhang and Luo (2018, as cited in Castaño-Pulgarín et al., 2021) define online hate speech as any message that attacks an individual or group based on traits such as race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, nationality, religion, or political affiliation.

Cyberspace allows for free communication and the expression of opinions. However, current social media is frequently used to promote violent messages, comments, and hate speech.

While there has been an increase in global attention to online harassment in higher education (HE) in recent years (Andy Phippen and Emma Bond, 2020, as cited in Dey, 2023), there is still a significant gap in academic research examining the specific experiences of online sexual harassment within Indian universities. According to Abreu and Kenny (2017), while some study has been conducted, the majority of it has focused on heterosexual and cisgender individuals. The lack of studies on sexual minority and gender-expansive youth (i.e., LGBTQ+) indicates that this group is more vulnerable to cyberbullying than their heterosexual peers. Furthermore, the unique experiences of LGBT people in these settings have been largely overlooked, highlighting the necessity for a more comprehensive and rigorous inquiry into online harassment among varied student groups.

According to Kumar, Gill, and Verma (2024), "queer" (represented by the letter "Q" in LGBTQ+) is an umbrella term that encompasses a wide range of sexual orientations and gender identities. It includes people with sexual orientations or gender identities that do not fall into the traditional categories of "straight" or "cisgender." This phrase encompasses everyone on the spectrum of sexual and gender diversity, and it is frequently used to describe those who do not comply with societal expectations around gender and sexuality. It can also be tied to the experiences of intersex people, whose bodies do not conform to traditional conceptions of male and female.

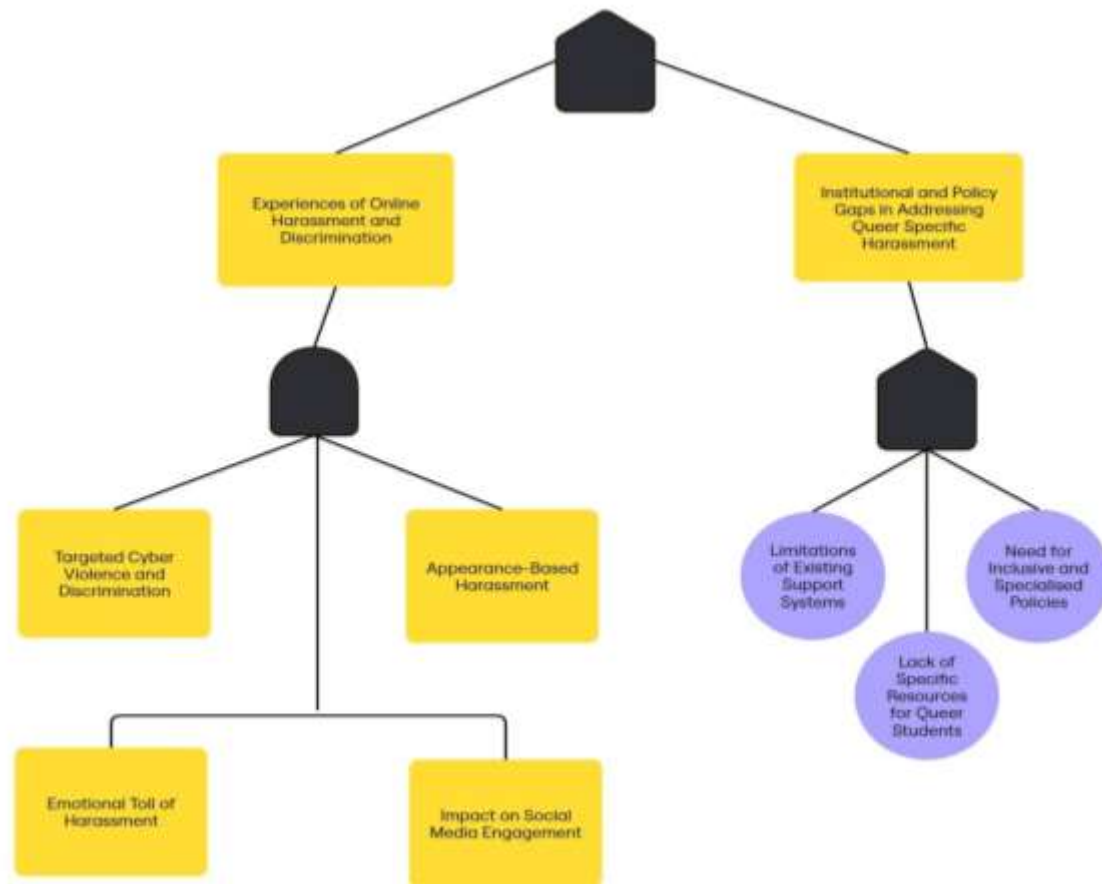
In keeping with the American Psychological Association (2015), the term 'queer' refers to all non-heterosexual and non-cisgender sexual and gender minorities. The term is constantly evolving and is now being recognised as an individual sexual identity within the expanding spectrum of nontraditional sexual and gender minority identities, which include asexual, pansexual, and others, as well as traditional identities (here it refers to lesbian, gay, or bisexual) (Russell, Clarke, & Clary, 2009; Smalley, Warren, & Barefoot, 2016; Watson, Wheldon, & Puhl, 2019, as cited in Das and Sutar (2024). According to Indian law as mentions by Senthilkumar (2022), "queer" refers to a person who identifies as non-binary or gender-fluid

As stated by (Das & Sutar, 2024), while sexual orientation discrimination is a violation of the Indian Constitution, discussing the queer community is frequently deemed taboo and informal, preventing it from gaining traction. Because of the aforementioned causes, the issues that India's LGBT population faces are poorly recorded. The majority of research in this subject is health-related, focussing on HIV and sexually transmitted diseases while ignoring noncommunicable diseases and mental health concerns.

The present work aims to fill the knowledge gap by using empirical data collected as part of a larger PhD study, with a focus on amplifying the voices of students—particularly queer students—to better understand their experiences with online sexual harassment. As Dey (2023) points out, understanding online sexual harassment as a structural issue linked to greater gender equality challenges and a form of gender-based violence highlights the urgent need for comprehensive solutions. A 16-year-old Indian boy committed suicide after receiving constant internet abuse for uploading selfies in saris and makeup. This terrible story highlights the vulnerability of LGBTQ+ youth, especially in online spaces where perpetrators can act without repercussions. The emotional and psychological consequences of such abuse can drive queer students to isolation, anxiety, and even self-harm. The young boy's death is an upsetting example of the crucial need for safer, more welcoming environments for queer students in educational institutions, both online and offline (Firdous & Sarkar, 2024).

There is a significant cultural and historical difference in the societal acceptability of sexual minorities in India, there is a need for an exclusive study of the Indian queer population. There is insufficient material to support a knowledge of the emotional, behavioural, and other patterns in the queer population when it comes to dealing with cyberbullying, particularly in India.

The concept map below is a visual representation of the thematic framework discussed in the following section, organising key themes and sub-themes related to the experiences of online harassment and discrimination, particularly those affecting queer people, and highlighting institutional and policy gaps in addressing queer-specific harassment to help make the ideas clearer and easier to understand.



## Experiences of Online Harassment and Discrimination

### *Targeted Cyber Violence and Discrimination:*

Harassment of youth and young adults based on their sexual orientation or gender identity/expression has long been an issue, and as technology has advanced, these bullying behaviours have moved online. Although homosexuality was decriminalised in India in 2018, there is still a significant lack of social acceptance, resulting in a long-term mental health crisis among the LGBTQ community. The majority of study on this problem has focused on Western countries, leaving a gap in research particular to India. The combined impact of cyber violence and identity-based discrimination on queer students in India is apparent with many reporting harassment mixed with homophobic or transphobic remarks (Das & Sutar, 2021). Personal accounts, for instance, one student from a private university emphasises the terrible reality for queer people in India. Despite the legal decriminalisation of homosexuality, deep-rooted homophobia and transphobia persist in India's patriarchal society, making it difficult for people to fully explore their identities for fear of additional bullying. This student described how they felt uncomfortable after receiving a sexist and homophobic insult. Their words were: *"Just once I want to feel like a normal student irrespective of my sexuality."* The constant stigma and online harassment they endure have a negative influence on their mental health, making cyber violence and discrimination a global issue that must be addressed urgently.

### *Appearance-Based Harassment:*

Appearance-based harassment frequently targets individuals based on their physical appearance or how they express their gender or sexual identity, resulting in body shaming and discrimination. Many queer individuals have reported experiencing such harassment, particularly on platforms like Instagram, where comments not only criticise their appearance but also sexualise their relationships. Sexualisation and fetishisation are ongoing concerns in the queer community, where people are reduced to objects of desire because of their sexuality or physical characteristics.

Harmful stereotypes, such as the portrayal of lesbian relationships as hypersexual, particularly in pornographic media, have normalised the notion that romantic female partnerships exist primarily for male satisfaction. This not only obscures the complexities of bisexual and non-binary experiences, but also invites invalidation from outsiders. For example, lesbian women are frequently told, "You just need a real man," as if their identity were a phase or experiment (Sharma, 2023).

Public expressions of gender nonconformity may also draw unwanted attention. A queer student at an Indian university described how even wearing nail paint and earrings on the metro drew attention and judgement. Their story demonstrates

how non-binary gender expression remains policed in public areas, causing daily discomfort and anxiety.

Additionally, transgender people, particularly hijras, experience even more systemic prejudice in India. Many individuals are forced to beg or engage in sex work due to a lack of economic opportunities. Legal protections remain inadequate—the maximum term for sexual violence against a transgender person is only two years, compared to seven for women (Tavernini, 2020).

These interconnected forms of fetishisation, objectification, and legal injustice continue to have a negative impact on the emotional and social well-being of queer people, particularly those who are already marginalised in their communities.

#### *Emotional Toll of Harassment:*

Online harassment can have a significant emotional impact, often resulting in self-doubt, unhappiness, and a lowered sense of self-esteem. For example, one of the personal narratives states that *"A friend of mine, who is openly part of the queer community, frequently receives hateful comments and DMs on Instagram, such as being called mentally ill or told that he deserves to die. Initially, these statements profoundly saddened him, prompting him to cry despite having a private profile"*. Unfortunately, this type of harassment is not unusual. In India, the LGBTQ+ population experiences significant societal rejection and structural neglect, which contributes to stigma affecting their physical, psychological, and sexual health (Saraff et al., 2022). Emotional effects of such rejection include guilt, low self-esteem, identity conflict, loneliness, and self-blame. Interpersonal variables such as a lack of sensitivity and empathy from family and peers worsen these issues. According to Warren Kealy-Bateman (2018), there is a significantly higher prevalence of depression, anxiety, and suicide among LGBT people in India. Emotions, particularly those provoked by cyberbullying, have a significant impact on an individual's perception, behaviour, and entire identity.

Cyberbullying usually leads to severe emotional distress, particularly increased levels of stress, depression, and anxiety (Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004, as quoted in Das & Sutar, 2024). The idea of "minority stress," first articulated by Winn Kelly Brooks in *Minority Stress in Lesbian Women* and further refined by Ilan Meyer in 1995, is an important paradigm for understanding the psychological toll that the queer community faces. Meyer's Minority Stress Theory explains how chronic exposure to stigma—both internalised and externally imposed—combined with discrimination and violence causes chronic psychological strain. This model emphasises the conflict between minority groups' beliefs and those of the dominant culture, pointing out five primary sources of minority stress: victimisation, discrimination, heteronormative societal standards, stereotyping and prejudice, and systematic bias. These factors are especially relevant when studying how queer people in India experience and respond to cyberbullying. (Das & Sutar, 2024).

#### *Impact on Social Media Engagement:*

Online harassment can have a significant negative impact, discouraging students from openly engaging on social media. Fear of backlash, criticism, or unwanted remarks can make individuals hesitant to share posts or express themselves freely. Furthermore, when others share photos of or with them without consent, it can further contribute to feelings of discomfort and invasion of privacy. For example, in one of the personal narratives, a student states, *"Our university is generally very progressive and inclusive, and we even have a Queer Fest. I posted a photo with the drag performer who performed at our event since I was captivated by their beauty. However, because my account is public, there are no filters on the kind of comments I receive. People started posting horrible comments about them and me, even telling me to take down my post if I didn't want to lose followers."* This situation is not unusual, and it represents a broader trend in which queer people encounter extreme online abuse. A tragic example of this, mentioned earlier in the paper, involved a 16-year-old Indian boy who was persistently mocked online after uploading selfies in saris and makeup, leading up to his suicide. This heartbreaking incident depicts the vulnerability of Queer youths, particularly in online spaces where abusers can act without consequences. The emotional and psychological consequences of such harassment can drive queer students to isolation, anxiety, and even self-harm. (Firdous & Sarkar, 2024).

### **Institutional and Policy Gaps in Addressing Queer Specific Harassment**

#### *Limitations of Existing Support Systems:*

There is often a lack of confidence in institutional support systems, such as the Internal Complaints Committee (ICC), particularly among queer students. These organisations are typically viewed as primarily concerned with traditional, heteronormative types of harassment, leaving queer students feeling disregarded. As one student shared, *"Yeah, I've heard about the ICC, but honestly, I don't really trust it. As a queer person, I don't think they'd get what I'm going through. It feels like they only deal with the typical cases, like a guy harassing a girl or something. What about the stuff queer students face? That doesn't even seem to be on their radar."* Research by Abreu and Kenny (2017) highlights that LGBTQ+ participants were often hesitant to report experiences of cyberbullying due to fears surrounding the disclosure of their sexual and gender identities. This aligns with earlier findings by Blumenfeld and Cooper (2010), which also noted concerns about unwanted exposure. Similarly, Cooper and Blumenfeld (2012) found that sexual minority and gender-expansive students frequently chose not to report cyberbullying to officials. Their reasons include a lack of trust in the institution's ability to take significant action, a fear of being misunderstood by the institution, concerns about revenge from the perpetrator, and a perception that



they must deal with the matter themselves.

#### *Need for Inclusive and Specialised Policies:*

Barry (2019) argues that implicit violence manifests through biased educational policies, institutional regulations, curricula, teaching materials, and classroom practices.

There is an urgent need for university policies that clearly and publicly address Queer concerns, particularly issues such as cyber violence and online harassment, to guarantee that campuses—both physical and virtual—are inclusive and sensitive to the unique challenges queer students experience. As one student put it: *"Our universities need to do more than just say they support us. We need systems that actually protect us from things like bullying and harassment online. Right now, a lot of queer students feel invisible or unsafe, especially on social media or class group chats."*

(Karmakar, 2024) states that instances of homophobia and transphobia are still prevalent across Indian college campuses, despite existing legal and institutional safeguards. A 2021 study by the Boston Consulting Group, IIM Ahmedabad, and the Pride Circle Foundation discovered that at least 64% of LGBTQIA+ students—out of 1,700 surveyed—faced harassment or humiliation throughout their college years. Survivors of transphobic harassment can seek redressal through two key mechanisms: the Internal Complaints Committee (ICC), established under the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013 (POSH Act) and mandated by University Grants Commission (UGC) guidelines, and the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019, which penalises harm to the physical or mental well-being of transgender individuals with fines and imprisonment of up to two years. The UGC recommendations also urge higher education institutions to provide workshops and sensitisation programs on gender issues and laws regarding sexual harassment to students, faculty, and staff, as well as properly communicate accessible redressal methods. In 2016, these rights were legally expanded to encompass transgender people. Despite these rules, many institutions still lack functional ICCs. Alarming, the UGC reported zero harassment cases from ICCs across Indian universities in 2022-23, a sharp 100% drop from 103 cases reported the previous year, raising concerns about underreporting, a lack of awareness, and the impartiality of ICCs, whose members are appointed by institutional heads rather than elected.

It is recommended that LGBTQ+ students who have experienced harassment be actively involved in awareness and prevention initiatives. These students, with their informed consent and proper protection from university professionals to prevent further harm, should contribute to content selection, development, and delivery through a peer-led model. This involvement is critical, since research on harassment shows that people are more willing to intervene and take action when they feel connected emotionally to the experiences being recounted (Case and Meier, 2014, quoted in Abreu and Kenny, 2017).

#### *Lack of Specific Resources for Queer Students:*

There is an increasing demand for dedicated tools and programs designed specifically for Queer students, particularly sessions that address both cyber violence and Queer issues, in order to build a safer, more inclusive, and supportive learning environment. As one student expressed: *"We don't just need general talks about online safety. Queer students like us need spaces where we can talk openly about the kinds of harassment we face online and how it connects to our identity. It's different for us, we need seminars and sessions that specifically focus on both cyber violence and LGBTQ+ issues"* Research supports this need; for instance, GLSEN et al. (2013), as referenced in Abreu and Kenny (2017), found that many LGBTQ youth actively seek out sexuality-related information online. As a result, the internet becomes an essential platform for youngsters to access information, including those about online harassment, while keeping their privacy and avoiding the risk of being involuntarily exposed.

Additional training for university employees should include information about appropriate state laws governing cybersexual harassment, particularly those that specifically recognise and protect sexual minorities and gender-diverse youths.

## **2. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Online harassment and discrimination against Queer people, particularly teens and young adults, is a serious and widespread issue that has worsened with the growth of digital communication platforms. While the legal landscape in India has improved, societal acceptance of Queer populations remains difficult, with deep-seated homophobia, transphobia, and systemic discrimination worsening the problem. The emotional and psychological toll of online harassment on students, combined with the stigmatisation of their identities and a persistent culture of appearance-based harassment, can have serious mental health implications. From social media platforms to educational institutions, youth from marginalised communities are frequently subjected to negative comments, cyber violence, and exclusion, making it difficult for them to completely express themselves without fear of mockery or harm. This not only has an impact on their mental health, but it also discourages their participation in online spaces and social interactions in general. Harassment has serious emotional implications, with many queer students feeling isolated, self-doubt, anxious, and depressed. These negative emotional experiences, combined with a lack of proper institutional assistance, create an environment in which queer individuals may feel powerless, marginalised, and at increased risk of self-harm or suicide. The terrible stories of students from the community have been driven to despair

as a result of online harassment highlight the urgent need for comprehensive measures to safeguard these individuals from cyber violence and discrimination.

Despite growing awareness of the issue, there is still a major gap in institutional policies and resources dedicated to addressing the unique challenges that Queer students experience. Existing support systems, such as Internal Complaints Committees (ICCs), frequently fail to address the unique requirements of queer students, and there is widespread distrust in these systems. Students are typically afraid to report harassment for fear of being blamed, misunderstood, or receiving inadequate responses. As a result, they may feel pressured to deal with these difficulties on their own, increasing their vulnerability.

To effectively address the issues that queer people face in educational settings, a multifaceted strategy is required, including policy reform, institutional support, and the provision of specific resources. Universities must implement explicit rules to combat cyber violence and online harassment directed at queer communities. These policies should broaden the definition of harassment to cover the particular forms of abuse that occur in digital spaces. To maintain their relevance and effectiveness, such frameworks should be created in collaboration with LGBTQ voices.

Institutions should also set up dedicated support systems, such as counselling services, peer-led support groups, and instructional courses that address both cyber violence and queer-related issues. These tools must be easily accessible, inclusive, and personalised to address a wide range of requirements, while also offering safe spaces for advice and care. The active participation of queer people in the creation and implementation of anti-bullying and awareness campaigns is essential. Peer-led efforts, in particular, have been shown to increase empathy and bystander intervention through emotional resonance.

Furthermore, institutions should create training programs for students, professors, and staff to increase understanding of the consequences of online harassment, the importance of diversity, and allyship tactics. At the policy level, governments must strengthen and enforce legal prohibitions against cyberbullying and harassment of sexual and gender minorities, as well as establish clear institutional and platform-level norms for response and accountability.

There is also an urgent need for additional research, particularly in situations like India, where empirical evidence on the experiences of queer individuals is limited. To inform evidence-based interventions, academic and governmental organisations should prioritise research into the intersections of LGBT identity, online harassment, and mental health. By implementing these steps, universities may create safer, more supportive, and inclusive environments in which all students can succeed, both online and off.

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