

Preventing Online Harassment: Discipline in the Digital World

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The Southeast Asian Conference on Education 2025
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

One of the most significant concerns facing educational institutions nowadays is the issue of online harassment, which poses a significant threat to the well-being of students and educators. To analyze its prevalence and underlying roots, a scoping review was conducted, sourcing 386 articles using EBSCO and Scopus databases. After rigorous screening, 52 articles were considered significant from 2014 to 2024. Three key themes emerged: *the dynamics and nature of online harassment, its impact on individuals and the school community, and technology's role in facilitating and preventing it*. The researchers noticed and established relationships between themes through a systematic literature review and thematic analysis. Findings from this suggest that educational institutions must formulate and implement targeted programs addressing the underlying factors of online harassment. This emphasizes the need for comprehensive strategies leveraging technology in preventing and addressing online harassment. Given the rapid development of technology, continuous observation of the nature of online harassment, and the development of timely and relevant interventions and policies focused on digital citizenship in educational institutions are crucial in ensuring a safe and positive online environment for students and educators.

Keywords: online harassment, cyberbullying, digital citizenship

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Introduction

Education is one of the most important pillars of society and has the potential of transforming lives and shaping nations. The 21st century, driven by technological advancement, has brought significant changes to the education system (Zhao et al., 2024). New ways of communication and learning have appeared in the form of digital tools and platforms, which can be used by teachers as useful tools for improving the quality of the teaching and learning process and, at the same time, act as a source of additional information for students. The evidence presented shows the various advantages that come with the use of technology, such as improved access to information, personalized learning experiences and expanded opportunities for collaboration, irrespective of distance. Nonetheless, it introduces considerable challenges, especially regarding cybersecurity and protection against different issues in the digital world, such as online harassment, which has emerged as a significant issue in educational settings.

Online harassment encompasses a wide range of violent behaviors in the online space characterized by recurring attacks (Celuch et al., 2022). Online harassment includes dangerous behaviors such as cyberbullying, cyberstalking, online threats, and hate speech, which pose a serious threat to the overall safety, well-being, and academic success of both students and educators.

The manifestation of these behaviors can be observed across various activities on digital platforms, such as messaging applications, online forums, gaming environments, and, most of all, social media. A national survey conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2020 revealed that online harassment was observed across different social media platforms, such as Instagram at 63%, Twitter at 24%, WhatsApp at 34%, Facebook at 46%, Telegram at 18%, and Snapchat at 39%. The online harassment index, which involves posting images and videos with comments, was the highest on Instagram (Abarna et al., 2022).

The statistics above prove how this behavior creates a pervasive and persistent atmosphere of intimidation and fear, which may contribute to significant mental health issues among individuals. To further understand this pressing concern, this study aims to analyze the complex nature of online harassment within schools, its impact on teachers and students, and the role of technology in facilitating and addressing it.

A scoping review synthesizes existing or emerging literature on a particular topic and is accomplished through a systematic and iterative process (Mak & Thomas, 2022). Since online harassment is a widespread and complex problem with considerable consequences for students and teachers, a solid understanding of the existing literature is essential to approach this issue properly. Using a scoping analysis of relevant literature, we seek to identify key themes and establish a comprehensive understanding of the problem. This study aims to provide significant insights for educational institutions and technological companies in facilitating the development of effective strategies aimed at preventing and addressing online harassment. Creating a safe and secure digital learning environment enables students and teachers to effectively utilize technology, thereby maximizing its potential while reducing concerns associated with its use.

Methodology

Research Questions

This research is mainly guided by the core question of “*How can schools effectively prevent and address online harassment and foster a safe and secured digital learning environment?*”

From here, the following research questions have been formulated:

- What is the prevalence of online harassment among educators and students as school community members?
- What are the impacts of online harassment on individuals within the school community?
- What is the role of technology in the facilitation and prevention of online harassment within the school community?

Data Sources and Search Strategy

The beginning of data sourcing commenced in August 2024. To enhance the efficiency of the search process, the researchers conducted a thorough review and refinement of the search queries, ensuring that they were closely aligned with the overarching research objectives. This scoping review utilized a comprehensive search strategy to identify relevant literature. The key search terms used by the researchers include "online harassment," "preventing online harassment," "online safety," "digital citizenship," "social media," "school policies," "students," "faculty," and "education." These terms were combined with Boolean operators (AND, OR, NOT) to refine the search and identify articles specifically focused on the role of discipline within the digital world in preventing online harassment.

The study employed two significant databases: Scopus and EBSCOhost. The selection of Scopus is attributed to its extensive coverage of diverse academic disciplines and its stringent indexing methodologies. The inclusion of EBSCOhost expands the search parameters, thereby facilitating access to a broader range of relevant research, encompassing scholarly articles from diverse academic journals.

Similar search terms were utilized in the EBSCOhost database as well. In the preliminary phase of the research methodology, researchers systematically screened abstracts to assess and eliminate articles deemed irrelevant. This approach was implemented to optimize the search process and improve overall efficiency.

Given the fact that the area of online harassment is characterized by both constant technological and social changes, identifying relevant literature is crucial. Technological advancements and shifts in social behaviors can significantly affect the online environment making previous research findings invalid or insufficient. Thus, a careful identification of the sources, prioritizing the most recent ones, is necessary to understand the most current knowledge of this vast and dynamic issue. This is supported by an article published by Charlesworth Author Services (2021) which states that time period is one of the most important factors to consider when planning a literature review. With this, filters are employed to ensure that the year of publication is from 2014-2024. In addition, a filter was made to limit the searches to publications using the English language.

Citation Management

To enhance the efficiency of the research process, the researchers employed Mendeley, Google Sheets, and Google Drive as tools for the organization and management of all identified journal articles. The collaborative practice made by the researcher enabled the systematic identification and elimination of duplicate entries, improving the overall efficiency of the scoping review. The implementation of a meticulous screening procedure, characterized by a thorough examination of the titles and abstracts of each article, facilitated the selection of only the most relevant literature for inclusion in the final dataset.

Eligibility Criteria

A screening process was initiated to ensure that the scoping review is narrowed down to online harassment in educational institutions where the target is students and teachers. Given the rapid changes brought by technological advancements integral to the explored topic, the researchers decided to include literature published within the last ten years to ensure the research's relevance and timeliness. Research conducted in languages other than English was excluded. However, studies published from various countries were included, provided they directly addressed the topic of online harassment within educational settings. Research that deviated from the scope of online harassment in educational settings, such as studies on online harassment in other contexts (e.g., workplaces, community-based) or those focusing on unconventional forms of online harassment (e.g., revenge porn), were excluded. Only articles deemed directly relevant to the topic of "online harassment to students and teachers in educational settings" were included.

Title and Abstract Relevance Screening

The initial screening process focused primarily on the article titles for the benefit of time and resources. Articles with relevant titles according to the inclusion criteria were taken through the abstract screening stage. The abstracts were reviewed by two investigators who excluded studies they considered non-relevant or beyond the scope of the review. After this process of independent screening, both researchers met and discussed the remaining articles to come up with a final list of the studies to include in the study.

Screening Results

Our database keywords search found 386 articles were eligible for inclusion in title screening with filters employed to ensure that the year of publication is from 2014-2024 and in the English language. Of the 386 articles, 52 were retained following the criteria set. All identified studies were meticulously compiled into a single, shared spreadsheet for comprehensive data management. The two researchers collaboratively edited and updated the spreadsheet to ensure data accuracy and consistency. Key data fields include title, year of publication, assigned codes, and corresponding theme. Thematic analysis was employed as the primary method for identifying and interpreting patterns within the collected data.

Figure 1: Search and Scoping Procedures Used in EBSCOhost

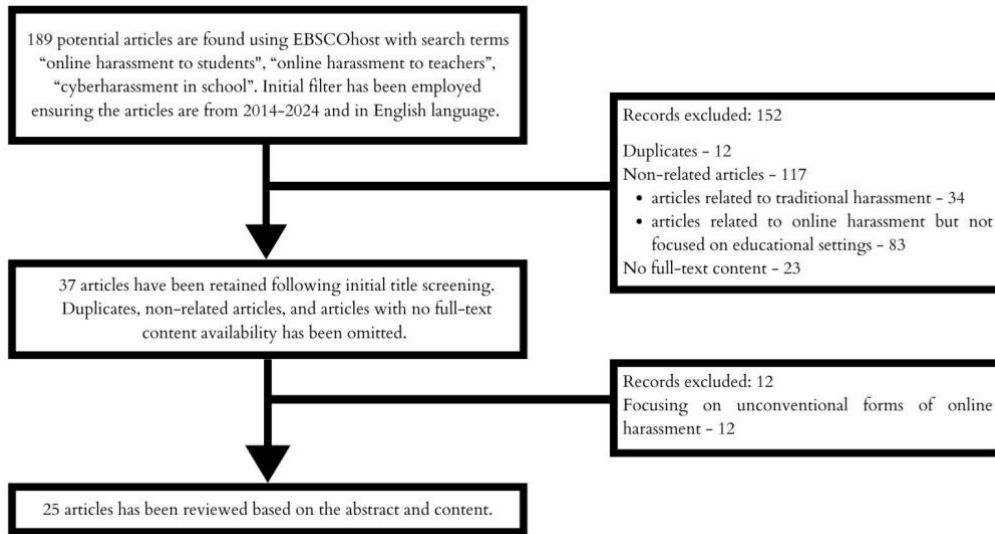
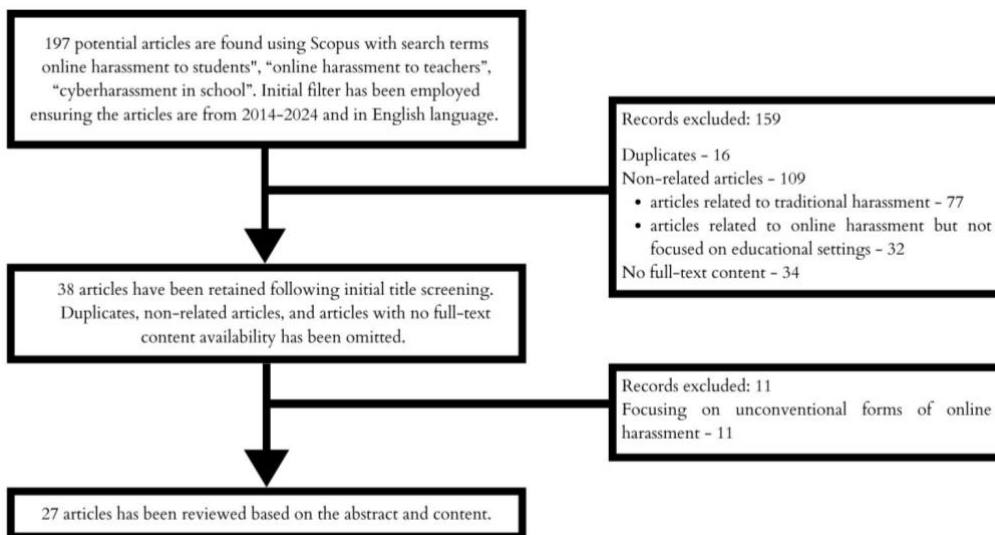


Figure 2: Search and Scoping Procedures Used in Scopus



Results and Discussion

The 52 articles underwent an abstract review and content screening to examine the complex issue of online harassment within educational settings. Through the use of thematic analysis, we were able to identify three themes that tackle the dynamics, impacts, and complex role of technology in this phenomenon. This process started with a title screening, followed by an abstract review of the selected articles, content screening, and detailed coding and categorization of relevant information by the two researchers. From this, the three themes were developed: *Dynamics of Online Harassment within the Educational Settings*, *The Impacts of Online Harassment*, and *Technological Challenges and Interventions to Online Harassment*. These themes, derived from the codes presented below, provide a structured guide to understanding the complexities of online harassment in educational contexts.

Table 1: Codes and Themes

Code	Themes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Prevalence of Online Harassment ● Online Harassment of Students ● Online Harassment of Faculty 	Dynamics of Online Harassment within the Educational Settings
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Psychological Impacts ● Academic Impacts ● Social Impacts 	The Impacts of Online Harassment
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Facilitation of Online Harassment ● Prevention of Online Harassment 	Technological Challenges and Interventions to Online Harassment

Understanding the complex nature of online harassment within educational settings requires an in-depth assessment of the various factors that contribute to its occurrence and manifestation, beginning with the oversight of the *dynamics of online harassment within educational settings*.

Several studies discuss the mechanisms and circumstances that facilitate online harassment. For instance, Sari et al. (2024) pointed out that “overposting” is a major factor that causes online harassment, especially among the faculty. In another study, Peluchette et al. (2015) provide concrete evidence of the extent to which content shared on social media weakens a person’s resistance to online harassment. Their research shows that personal posts, especially those that may be provocative or contain negative information and the content shared by an individual’s friends on the same social network platform, raise the chances of online harassment. This underlines the interrelation of online social networks and their effect on the harassment experiences of individuals.

In addition, the study of Rosenberg et al. (2022) shed light on the alarming prevalence of student photos being shared online, often with identifying information. This is a significant privacy issue and raises the question of how this highly available information can be misused. This work also supports further developing data protection strategies and increasing students’ digital literacy in educational institutions.

One of the interesting findings and adding another layer to this issue came from the study of van Baak et al. (2022), who introduced the crucial concept of “neutralization techniques,” which are cognitive mechanisms used by cyber harassers to justify their actions. These techniques, encompassing denial of responsibility, minimization of harm, victim blaming, and appeals to higher principles, enable perpetrators to alleviate guilt and continue their abusive actions. Such psychological processes should be known to design proper prevention measures targeting the origins of online harassment.

These works offer a complex picture of online harassment in educational contexts as a phenomenon that is not only diverse but also complex. By considering over-posting, the effects of social media content, the dangers of data privacy breaches, and the cognitive reasons used by offenders, researchers can design better and more efficient ways of preventing and reducing cyber harassment in educational settings. Therefore, the nature of online harassment and the prevalence of online harassment for both students and faculty members were seen as a pattern from these articles.

Moving beyond the dynamics, it is also equally crucial to examine the *impact of online harassment* on individuals within educational environments.

Cyber aggression and prolonged cyberbullying significantly harm teachers emotionally, physiologically, and behaviorally. The study of Kopecký and Szotkowski (2017) highlights key psychological impacts: anger, sadness, insecurity, and anxiety. These emotions can decrease work motivation and teaching performance. Long-term cyber aggression affects not just immediate feelings but also sustained negative moods, contributing to physical issues like sleep problems, headaches, and reduced immunity. This can also lead to increased conflicts in personal and professional relationships.

For students, the research provides compelling evidence across all three domains. Asio, Dojello et al. (2022) establish that cyberbullying, which is a form of online harassment, is likely to lead to adverse psychological outcomes, including anxiety and depression. This psychological distress may have a ripple effect on learning in that it may affect concentration, motivation, and attendance in school. In addition, it affects a student's social relations and causes isolation, loneliness, and low self-esteem. Lahti et al. (2024) also highlight the relationship between online harassment and adolescent mental health with a focus on social media threats to further stress the psychological effects of this vulnerable population.

Moreover, Arikli (2023) discussed in his study the impact of online harassment on academicians and the significant role of technology, particularly social media platforms, in facilitating these activities. The study revealed that the majority of participants encountered harassment on social networking sites. Furthermore, those facing threats on these platforms sought recourse by reporting and pursuing legal action, including criminal complaints, and advocated for the establishment of a dedicated legal department and digital violence unit within the academic institution to better address and prevent such incidents.

In this issue, technology plays a complex yet crucial role, both in facilitating and preventing such activities. The following literature confirms technology's complex role in *challenges and interventions to online harassment*.

Alim and Khalid's (2019) work is helpful in explaining the hybrid nature of social media platforms. These are useful apps for connection, community building, and raising awareness on various issues, yet they can be used to spread negativity, as well as cyberbullying. This duality is further underlined by the study of Sterner and Felmlee (2019) on cyberbullying on Twitter, which gives an idea of how the platform itself may enable cyberbullying through the fast forwarding of the messages, the amplification of abusive content and the construction of echo chambers that encourage the negative behavior.

At the same time, the articles also show how technology can help reduce online harassment. Silva et al. (2016) show this potential in creating BullyBlocker – an application that aims to identify and prevent cyberbullying on social media. A similar initiative has been done by Lempa et al. (2015) in creating a cyberbullying blocker for Android, and they intend to expand this to IOS in the future. These works are revolutionary as they demonstrate how technology can be used in order to avoid online harassment by identifying and blocking negative behavior with the help of technology.

The literature consistently demonstrates the complex and multifaceted relationship between technology and online harassment. While technology undeniably facilitates the occurrence and

spread of online harassment, it also offers promising avenues for prevention and mitigation. To this end, it is possible to use technology and develop new solutions, provide effective educational programs, and promote digital citizenship to make the online environment safer and more tolerant.

Conclusion

This study aimed to understand how schools can effectively prevent and address online harassment to foster a safe and inclusive digital learning environment. By conducting a scoping analysis on different academic papers and journals, the researchers established a concrete structure and relationship among the themes formed from the related literature's thematic analysis. The academic papers and journal articles mainly examined the dynamics and nature of online harassment, the impact of online harassment on the victims and the school community, and the role that technology plays in the prevalence of online harassment.

Based on the result of this study, online harassment is pervasive among the school community members, from the students to the teachers. Multiple aspects can lead to people conducting and being a victim of online harassment, like the desire for acceptance, denial that the victims are harmed as the harassment is conducted virtually, and implying that the victims deserve it. The impact of online harassment is also alarming for both students and faculty members. Students who fall victim to online harassment may suffer from severe emotional distress, social isolation, academic difficulties, and even physical health problems. Similarly, faculty members can experience professional harm, emotional distress, and workplace disruption. Lastly, this scoping study also explored the different utilizations of technology in relation to online harassment. Technology can be both a facilitator and an inhibitor of online harassment. Unsecured social media sites and unhealthy digital practices can encourage perpetrators to harass you, while different applications and online peer groups raise awareness to combat online harassment.

The three themes that arise from the scoping study are related; one leads to the other. As has been seen from the various academic papers and journals used to explain the dynamics and nature of online harassment and its effects, the cause and effect of online harassment was quite clear. Technology is important in helping to stop online harassment or, in fact, facilitate the harassment. The way that the current school relies on the internet, social media, and other information communication technologies has helped the technology become important in combating online harassment. Understanding the interconnectedness of the themes of the scoping study is essential in formulating comprehensive measures to address cyberbullying and support safer internet use in learning institutions.

Different institutions and organizations can benefit from the results of this scoping study. First, educational institutions can use the results of this study to create and implement disciplinary policies and practices regarding online harassment. By understanding the nature and the impact of online harassment on the different members of the school community, educational institutions will be properly guided and be research-driven in making or adjusting school policies and promoting initiatives to create a culture of respect both offline and online. Different technological and social media companies can also use this study to create a safer digital environment for their users, especially students and academicians. Cyberbullying, cyberstalking, information phishing, and other forms of online harassment on different social media platforms can be better averted if the companies making policies are well informed on their nature and impact on their users.

To conclude, fostering discipline in the digital world needs to have a holistic approach. It requires clear policies and reporting mechanisms, educational initiatives for all members of the school community, technological safeguards, and a strong commitment to cultivating a safe and respectful learning environment that transcends the digital space for all members of the educational community to thrive.

Recommendation

As this study is focused on technology and technology is time-sensitive due to rapid changes, researchers can build upon this study to produce more fitting and relevant research that can help them address online harassment applicable to the time of the conduct of their study.

A multifaceted approach is needed to address online harassment. This scoping provided a picture of the different aspects we must consider in addressing this issue. For schools to combat and tackle issues surrounding online harassment, they should consider the nature and dynamics of online harassment, the impact on the different members of the school community, and how to utilize technology to prevent these issues. By understanding where the problem of online harassment originates from, educational institutions can eradicate related cases of online harassment from its roots. Schools and universities should also understand how to take advantage of technology to promote a positive online culture and incorporate their school's core values to reach a broader range of students and faculty members. This is crucial and important for schools to develop and foster a safe and inclusive digital learning environment.

Technological challenges can also have technological solutions. AI can be leveraged as a prevention and detection tool. A development of AI-powered tools for the detection and prevention of online harassment, prioritization of privacy-preserving technology for data security, and demand for greater accountability from online platforms to keep their systems safe and secure for all users because, as a service provider, they should continuously develop mechanisms to ensure proper use of their platforms.

Aside from that, educational initiatives should also be present through implementing comprehensive digital literacy programs covering online safety, ethical communication, and the impact of online behavior, including specific training on "neutralization techniques." Providing faculty training on digital citizenship and online harassment management would also be a big help so faculty members can learn to protect students by guiding them and protecting themselves. Parent engagement in online safety and communication workshops is also ideal as they will be equipped with the skills and knowledge to guide their children in navigating the online world - this will strengthen the school and parent partnership.

School administration must also be firm in establishing clear, comprehensive policies against online harassment applicable to all, with easily accessible, confidential reporting mechanisms. They must also ensure consistent policy enforcement and provide support services for victims.

Lastly, educational institutions must foster a climate of respect and empathy online through school-wide initiatives and by challenging harmful norms like victim-blaming and even neutralization techniques. Creating platforms that promote safe spaces for open dialogue about online experiences is also a good addition to the initiative that must be done by every educational institution. These strategies are crucial for creating a safer online learning environment.

Acknowledgment

The researchers would like to express their gratitude to De La Salle University for their invaluable support throughout this study. They also extend their appreciation to their colleagues for their valuable input and insights during the creation of this work. Finally, heartfelt thanks go to their friends and families for their unwavering inspiration and encouragement.

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