

Introduction:

Social Learning Theory (SLT), principally associated with Albert Bandura and extended in criminology by Ronald, argues that behavior — including criminal or deviant conduct — is learned through social interaction, modelling, and reinforcement rather than being purely biologically determined. When applied to cyber harassment SLT explains how online abusive behaviour is acquired, transmitted and maintained within digital environments. This theory therefore provides a useful analytical lens to understand the proliferation of cyber harassment in Pakistan and design preventative interventions.

Key Propositions of Social Learning Theory:

1. Differential Association:

Individuals learn values, techniques, and motives for deviant behaviour through interaction with others. The frequency, duration and intensity of these interactions shape learning.

2. Definitions:

People acquire favourable or unfavourable definitions towards normative behaviour. If online hostility is framed as justified, humorous, or normative, it becomes more likely.

3. Differential Reinforcement: Behaviour is shaped

People acquire ~~fav~~ by rewards and punishments. Positive social feedback (likes, shares, peer approval) reinforces harassment; lack of sanction or impunity reduces deterrence.

4. Imitation / Modelling:

People copy behaviors displayed by influential models — peers, celebrities, politics figures, or prominent online accounts — especially when those models appear to gain status or avoid punishment.

5. Long Cognitive Processes:

Attention, retention, reproduction and motivation mediate whether observed behaviour is learned and enacted. Online platforms ~~the~~ heighten attention/retention through repetitive exposure.

How SLT explains rising trends of Cyber harassment in Pakistan.

- 1. Virtual learning environment:** Social media platforms act as arenas where abusive scripts and tactics (trolling, doxxing, meme-based shaming) are repeatedly observed and easily imitated. Frequent exposure normalize such conduct.
- 2. Peer group reinforcement:** Group chats, follower communities and private online forums provide immediate social reinforcement (approval, status elevation) for harassing posts, strengthening learned behavior.
- 3. Role of anonymity and weak sanctions:** Perceived anonymity and low probability of detection/punishment act as negative reinforcement for restraint. Where legal or institutional responses are slow or uncertain, harassment is rewarded de-facto.
- 4. Cultural and gendered learning:** Offline patriarchal attitudes and gender norms learned in families and communities are transferred online; these provide definitions that justify harassment especially against women, journalists, and ~~no~~ minorities.

5. **limitation of influential model:** When public figures, opinion leaders, or popular content creator engage in aggressive rhetoric without consequences, followers are likely to imitate such behavior.

Strengths and limitations of SLT in this Context.

Strengths:

- Offers a clear micro-Social mechanism explaining how harassment spreads (learning, imitation, reinforcement).
- Explains variation across groups: individuals embedded in pro-harassment online networks are more likely to engage.
- Suggests practical ~~inven~~ interventions (change models after reinforcement structures.)

Limitations:

- Tends to underplay structural factors such as poverty, political manipulation, or platform governance which also shape behavior.

Does not fully explain why only some exposed individual engage — individual differences (personality, self-control) and situational triggers matter.

(Policy implications / Recommendations)

1. **Counter-modelling and positive campaigns:**
Promote respected online role models who denounce harassment and model respectful conduct.
2. **Modify reinforcement structures:** Platforms and communities should reduce rewards for abusive content (demote, label, remove) and increase visible sanctions.
3. **Digital literacy and moral education:**
Teach critical media literacy and online ethics to reduce uncritical imitation and shift definitions.
4. **Strengthen legal responses and reporting:**
Improve speedy and visible enforcement so perceived impunity declines.

Community policing and moderation:

Support grassroots reporting networks and Platform-Community partnerships to alternation to alter normative climate in local digital spaces.

Conclusion:

Social Learning Theory provides a robust framework to understand how cyber harassment is acquired, normalized and perpetuated in Pakistan's online spaces. By focusing on modeling, definitions and reinforcement, SLT points to interventions that can reduce harassment - from changing online role model and reducing rewards for abuse to strengthening sanctions and improving digital literacy.