

Cybercrime and Mental Health: A Secondary Data-based Analysis

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Abstract

The rapid expansion of digital technologies has intensified exposure to cybercrime, with growing evidence that online victimization and perpetration are closely linked to mental health outcomes across different populations. This paper synthesizes secondary data from peer-reviewed journals indexed in Scopus, ScienceDirect, Web of Science, PubMed, and other major databases, alongside official reports, to examine the bidirectional relationship between cybercrime and mental health. It focuses on three interrelated domains: (a) mental health consequences of cyber-victimization, such as cyberbullying, online harassment, cyberstalking, identity theft and financial fraud; (b) psychological profiles, motivations and disorder correlates among cyber-offenders; and (c) implications for policy, prevention and mental-health-informed cyber governance. Systematic reviews and meta-analyses show that cyber-victimization is strongly associated with depression, anxiety, stress, post-traumatic stress symptoms, low self-esteem and suicidal ideation, even after controlling for traditional offline bullying. Studies on adult cyber abuse highlight persistent trauma, distrust of technology and perceived institutional neglect, while research in low- and middle-income contexts links cyber-victimization among university students and adolescents to elevated odds of common mental disorders. Emerging literature on cybercriminals suggests that some offenders exhibit personality traits, impulsivity, substance use and mental health issues that may interact with online environments to facilitate offending. The paper argues for integrated responses that connect cybercrime victim support, mental health services and digital literacy, with particular attention to vulnerable groups and the post-pandemic rise in cybercrime. It concludes with suggestions for multi-sectoral interventions, trauma-informed policing and research gaps, especially in the Global South.

Keywords: Cybercrime, Mental Health, Cyber-victimization, Cyberbullying, Psychological Impact, Digital Governance

Introduction

The digitalization of everyday life has changed how individuals work, learn, socialize and access services, but it has also created a fertile terrain for cyber-dependent and cyber-enabled crime. From cyberbullying and online hate speech to phishing, identity theft, romance scams and ransomware, cybercrime increasingly targets individuals rather than only organizations, often with profound psychological consequences that go beyond financial

loss. While criminological research has traditionally focused on technical and legal aspects of cybercrime, recent studies has foregrounded its mental health dimensions, including emotional trauma, anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress among victims, as well as psychological factors influencing offenders and cybersecurity professionals.

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated these trends as work, education, health care and social interaction moved online, coinciding with documented surges in cybercrime globally. Narrative reviews in psychiatry have highlighted that mental illness may increase vulnerability to cybercrime, while cyber victimization can exacerbate pre-existing conditions, creating a vicious cycle of risk. At the same time, systematic reviews and meta-analyses on cyberbullying and cyber-victimization have established robust associations with depression, anxiety, stress and suicidality among adolescents and young adults. However, fragmentation persists between criminology, psychology, psychiatry and policy studies, and there are significant gaps regarding adult populations, cross-cultural contexts and low- and middle-income countries.

Against this backdrop, the present paper undertakes a secondary data-based analysis of the theme "Cybercrime and Mental Health," drawing on peer-reviewed articles from Scopus-indexed and related databases, as well as relevant governmental and institutional reports. It aims to synthesize evidence on (a) mental health impacts of different forms of cybercrime; (b) mental health and psychological characteristics among cyber-offenders and other actors; and (c) implications for policy, prevention and support systems. The paper is particularly relevant for public administration, cyber governance and mental health policy, including in contexts like India where cybercrime against women and children is rising and the government has invested in national reporting portals and helplines.

Research Methodology

This paper is based on secondary data analysis, synthesizing existing empirical studies, systematic reviews and policy documents on cybercrime and mental health. The research followed a structured, though not fully systematic, review approach, focusing on high-quality sources from major academic and policy repositories.

Data sources and search strategy

Databases consulted included Scopus, ScienceDirect, Web of Science, PubMed, Wiley Online Library and ProQuest, using combinations of keywords such as "cybercrime," "cyberbullying," "cyber-victimization," "online harassment," "cyberstalking," "identity theft," "digital fraud," "mental health," "depression," "anxiety," "PTSD," and "suicidal ideation." Filters were applied to prioritize peer-reviewed journal articles, systematic reviews, meta-analyses and longitudinal or large cross-sectional studies published roughly between 2010 and 2025, with a particular emphasis on studies that explicitly examined mental health outcomes in relation to cybercrime exposure or behavior.

In addition, official resources from central government and national agencies were reviewed, such as the National Cyber Crime Reporting Portal of the Government of India, which provides information on types of cybercrime, complaint mechanisms and victim-focused categories, and broader governmental communications on rising cybercrime against women and children. Although detailed mental health statistics are often not disaggregated in such reports, they provide important context for understanding policy responses and institutional frameworks.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Studies were included if they met at least one of the following criteria:

1. Empirically examined mental health outcomes (e.g., depression, anxiety, PTSD, stress, suicidal ideation, self-esteem) among victims of cybercrime such as cyberbullying, cyberstalking, online harassment, doxxing, identity theft or financial fraud.
2. Investigated psychological correlates, mental disorders or personality traits among individuals engaged in cyber offending or problematic online aggressive behaviors.
3. Explored mental health risks in specific groups heavily exposed to digital environments (e.g., adolescents, university students, women, ethnic minorities, people with severe mental illness) in relation to cyber-victimization or cyber abuse.
4. Provided narrative or systematic overviews of cybercrime trends with explicit discussion of mental health impacts or psychiatric concerns, including in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Commentaries without empirical grounding, non-peer-reviewed opinion pieces and purely technical cybersecurity studies without mental health outcomes were excluded. Where multiple studies used overlapping samples or datasets, preference was given to higher-quality designs such as longitudinal studies, meta-analyses and systematic reviews.

Analytical approach

The selected studies were thematically organized into three broad clusters: (a) mental health consequences of cyber-victimization; (b) mental health and psychological aspects of cyber-offenders and other actors; and (c) policy, service and governance responses linking cybercrime and mental health. Within each cluster, findings were compared across age groups, gender and other vulnerabilities, as well as across national contexts, with attention to recurring patterns and divergent results.

Rather than computing new quantitative estimates, this secondary analysis focuses on qualitative synthesis, highlighting directions of association, relative magnitudes where reported, mediating and moderating factors (e.g., mindfulness, rumination, social support), and implications for practice. This approach is appropriate given the heterogeneity of measures, populations and cybercrime types across the literature.

Findings

Mental health consequences of cyber-victimization

Systematic reviews and meta-analyses consistently show that cyber-victimization is associated with a wide range of adverse mental health outcomes, often comparable to or worse than traditional offline bullying. A systematic review of bullying and cyberbullying studies using PICOS criteria across Scopus, ProQuest, ScienceDirect and SAGE databases found that victims exhibit heightened anxiety, stress, depression, low self-esteem, suicidal ideation and suicide attempts, with victim status generally conferring the highest risk compared to perpetrators or bystanders. Meta-analyses that control for traditional bullying indicate that cyberbullying victimization remains uniquely associated with depression, anxiety, lower life satisfaction, loneliness and reduced self-esteem, suggesting that online modalities add distinct harms rather than merely replicating offline aggression.

Longitudinal studies further demonstrate that cyber-victimization predicts later mental health problems over time. For example, research on adolescents has shown that cyberbullying victimization predicts subsequent depression and post-traumatic stress symptoms, with intrusive or maladaptive rumination mediating this relationship. Other longitudinal work indicates reciprocal relations, where depression and problematic internet use can increase the risk of later cyberbullying involvement, thereby creating cycles of vulnerability. These findings underscore the importance of addressing both immediate harm and ongoing cognitive and emotional processes among victims.

Beyond youth populations, adult victims of cyber abuse, including cyberstalking and online harassment, report depression, anxiety, panic attacks, suicidal thoughts and profound impacts on daily functioning. Qualitative studies reveal narratives of hyper-vigilance, fear of being watched, withdrawal from online spaces and relationships, and a pervasive sense of powerlessness when institutions fail to respond effectively. A review of psychological impacts of cybercrime concludes that cyber victims often develop loss of trust, PTSD-like symptoms, frustration, aggression and resort to maladaptive coping strategies, with secondary victims such as family members also exhibiting distress.

Studies from low- and middle-income countries demonstrate similar patterns. A cross-sectional survey among Bangladeshi university students found that cyber-victimization was closely linked with depression and anxiety, with multivariable models showing significantly higher odds of these conditions among those exposed to online harassment and cyberbullying. Research on female adolescents in Nepal documented notable prevalence of cyberbullying victimization and associated depression, anxiety and stress, signaling that cyber-related mental health issues are not confined to high-income digital societies. Studies on women's experiences of cyberbullying and online harassment highlight heightened risks of depression, social withdrawal, self-harm tendencies and deterioration in academic or work performance.

Cybercrime, pandemic shifts and psychiatric concerns

Narrative reviews in psychiatry emphasize that the COVID-19 pandemic intensified both reliance on digital technologies and exposure to cybercrime, with important implications for mental health. One such review notes that as work, schooling, shopping and even mental health consultations moved online, cybercrime surged worldwide, with human factors such as personality traits, online behaviors and attitudes to technology critically shaping vulnerability. The authors argue that people with pre-existing mental illnesses may be particularly at risk because they might have impaired judgment, social isolation, or cognitive difficulties that make recognizing and responding to cyber scams more difficult.

Further, the same review highlights that cybercrime victims can experience long-term psychological and financial consequences, which in turn may exacerbate psychiatric symptoms. For example, victims of financial fraud may develop depression, shame and hopelessness, while victims of online exploitation or doxxing may experience chronic anxiety and hyper-arousal. Post-pandemic analyses of cybercrime trends in the UK underscore that cyber-dependent crimes against individuals, such as hacking and online fraud, spiked during periods of strict lockdown, and that the mental health impact of these crimes may equal or exceed their monetary costs.

Emerging work on patterns of internet use among people with severe mental illness suggests complex relationships: high internet use may be associated with poorer self-reported mental health, yet digital technologies can also serve as sources of social support and mental health information. This duality reinforces that mental health and cybercrime cannot be examined in isolation from broader digital life, especially when considering telepsychiatry and online mental health services that may themselves be vulnerable to data breaches or cyberattacks.

Psychological motivations and mental health issues in cyber-offending

While the victim perspective dominates much of the literature, there is growing interest in psychological factors and mental health issues among cyber offenders. A review of psychological motivations and mental health issues in cybercriminal behavior suggests that certain offenders exhibit mental health problems, personality disorders, substance use disorders and histories of trauma that may interact with online contexts. These conditions do not deterministically cause cybercrime, but they may shape motivations, risk-taking, impulsivity and empathy deficits that facilitate offending in digital environments.

Meta-analyses of cyberbullying perpetration have found that aggressors often report higher levels of externalizing problems, moral disengagement, low empathy and sometimes depressive symptoms, indicating that some perpetrators also experience psychological distress. Especially among adolescents, roles of victim and perpetrator can overlap, creating complex profiles of victim-perpetrators whose mental health needs are distinct from those of pure victims or pure aggressors. Studies on adult cyber abusers similarly show that some perpetrators justify their behavior as entertainment, retaliation or identity exploration, while

others may be driven by ideological hatred or misogyny, with underlying psychological vulnerabilities.

There is also a small but growing literature on the mental health of cybersecurity professionals and law enforcement officers dealing with cybercrime, highlighting risks of burnout, secondary trauma and moral injury when exposed to disturbing online content such as child sexual abuse material or violent extremism. Although empirical data remain limited, this line of work points to the need for occupational mental health support within cyber policing and digital forensics units.

Vulnerable groups and intersectional risks

The reviewed literature indicates that certain groups face disproportionate mental health risks from cybercrime. Adolescents and young adults, who are typically heavy users of social media and online gaming, show high prevalence of cyberbullying involvement and associated mental health problems. Frequent social media use is associated with higher rates of bullying victimization, persistent sadness or hopelessness, and suicide risk indicators, including suicide planning and attempts. Within youth populations, LGBTQ+ individuals, ethnic minorities and young women often report higher rates of online harassment, hate speech and sexualized cyber abuse, which correlate with anxiety, depression and self-harm behaviors.

Women and girls are recurrent targets of cyberstalking, non-consensual image sharing, deepfake pornography and misogynistic trolling, leading to substantial psychological distress. Governmental data in countries like India show rising cybercrime against women and children, prompting the creation of specialized reporting portals and categories, although mental health responses remain underdeveloped. University students, especially in low- and middle-income settings with rapid digitalization, also face heightened exposure to scams, cyberbullying and online harassment, which are linked to common mental disorders.

People with pre-existing mental illnesses form another vulnerable group in the mental health. Psychiatric literature stresses that such individuals may be more susceptible to cyber fraud, online exploitation and privacy breaches, and that cyber victimization may worsen symptoms or disrupt therapeutic relationships. Conversely, stigma and fear of being blamed or judged can deter them from reporting cybercrime or seeking help, further entrenching harm.

Discussion

The secondary data analysis underscores that cybercrime and mental health are intertwined in complex, bidirectional ways. Cyber-victimization acts as a significant psychosocial stressor that can trigger or aggravate depression, anxiety, PTSD, suicidal ideation and other mental health problems, with longitudinal evidence indicating causal pathways mediated by cognitive and affective processes such as rumination and hopelessness. At the same time, individuals with existing mental health vulnerabilities may be at heightened risk of certain

cybercrimes, creating feedback loops where mental illness both increases exposure to cyber harm and is exacerbated by it.

The literature reviewed suggests that online forms of aggression and crime can have psychological impacts at least as severe as face-to-face counterparts, partly because of the persistence, reach and anonymity of digital interactions. Cyberbullying content can be shared widely, archived indefinitely and accessed at any time, contributing to chronic stress. Cyberstalking and online harassment can invade what are normally safe spaces, blurring boundaries between public and private life, while identity theft and financial fraud can undermine a sense of security and competence.

From a theoretical standpoint, integrating routine activity and lifestyle exposure theories of cybercrime with stress-coping and trauma frameworks in psychology offers a useful lens. Individuals whose daily routines involve high levels of unsupervised or unprotected online activity may be more exposed to motivated offenders and suitable digital targets, while deficits in coping resources, social support or digital literacy may hinder recovery after victimization. In addition, socio-structural factors such as gender inequality, discrimination, and legal-institutional weaknesses shape both exposure to cybercrime and access to mental health support, emphasizing the need for intersectional analysis.

There are also important institutional and policy implications. Governmental initiatives like India's National Cyber Crime Reporting Portal demonstrate recognition of the need for accessible reporting mechanisms and specialized attention to crimes against women and children. However, most cybercrime reporting and investigation frameworks remain primarily oriented toward technical and legal dimensions, with limited integration of psychological assessment, trauma-informed interviewing, or routine referral pathways to mental health services. The literature on forensic cyberpsychology calls for closer collaboration among law enforcement, mental health professionals, educators and technology platforms to address these gaps, especially in the post-pandemic digital environment.

The emerging evidence on mental health issues among cyber offenders and professionals engaged in cybercrime control further complicates the picture. While it would be misleading to pathologize cybercriminal behavior wholesale, acknowledging that some offenders struggle with mental health problems or maladaptive personality traits can inform rehabilitative approaches and risk assessment tools. Likewise, recognizing secondary trauma, burnout and moral distress among investigators and digital forensic analysts dealing with disturbing content highlights the need for organizational mental health policies within cyber policing units.

Suggestions

Drawing on the reviewed evidence, several suggestions emerge for policy, practice and research.

Integrating mental health into cybercrime response systems

First, cybercrime reporting and investigation systems should systematically incorporate mental health considerations. This includes training police and cybercrime units in trauma-informed interviewing, basic psychological first aid and referral protocols, so that victims presenting with distress, suicidal ideation or PTSD symptoms are promptly connected to appropriate services. National portals and helplines can integrate information about mental health resources, including crisis helplines and online counseling services, alongside technical guidance on evidence preservation and legal procedures.

Second, there is a need to develop multidisciplinary cyber-victim support centers that combine digital forensic assistance, legal counseling and psychosocial support. Such centers could collaborate with mental health professionals, NGOs and community organizations to provide both immediate and long-term support, especially for victims of sexualized cyber abuse, cyberstalking and hate speech, who often face intense stigma and trauma.

Prevention through digital literacy and resilience building

Prevention strategies should go beyond technical cybersecurity awareness to include digital emotional literacy, coping skills and resilience training, particularly in schools, universities and workplaces. Programs that teach adolescents and young adults how to manage online conflicts, respond to cyberbullying, seek help and support peers have shown promise in reducing both victimization and perpetration. Incorporating mindfulness, self-compassion and adaptive coping components, as suggested by longitudinal research on mindfulness as a mediator between cyberbullying and depression/anxiety, may further strengthen protective effects.

Digital literacy initiatives for adults, including women entering the workforce and older adults, should address recognition of scams, privacy protections, safe social media practices and avenues for redress, while also normalizing help-seeking for psychological distress following cyber incidents. For people with severe mental illness, tailored psychoeducation on safe internet use, recognition of online exploitation and pathways for support could be integrated into routine psychiatric care.

Mental health support for offenders and professionals

For individuals involved in cyber offending, especially youth and first-time offenders, interventions should incorporate psychological assessment and, where indicated, treatment for underlying mental health issues, trauma or substance use, alongside restorative and rehabilitative components. School-based and community programs that address aggression, empathy, moral reasoning and online behavior norms may reduce cyberbullying perpetration and its associated harms.

Cybersecurity professionals, moderators and law-enforcement personnel regularly exposed to disturbing digital content require structured mental health support, including debriefing, counseling access, workload management and organizational cultures that reduce stigma

around psychological distress. Occupational health policies should recognize cyber-related secondary trauma as a legitimate risk and provide safeguards accordingly.

Research gaps and future directions

Several research gaps warrant attention. First, more longitudinal and cross-cultural studies are needed to understand causal pathways between different forms of cybercrime and specific mental health outcomes, including in under-researched regions of the Global South. Second, there is limited evidence on adult populations outside student samples, particularly regarding financial fraud, identity theft, revenge porn and workplace cyber harassment, and their long-term psychiatric sequelae. Third, research on mental health among cyber offenders and cybercrime professionals remains nascent, calling for robust designs that avoid stigmatization while illuminating risk and resilience factors.

Finally, interdisciplinary frameworks that integrate criminology, cyberpsychology, public health and human rights are necessary to guide comprehensive policy responses. Such frameworks should consider the structural determinants of both cybercrime and mental health, including digital divides, gender-based violence, economic precarity and legal protections, and evaluate the effectiveness of integrated interventions at scale.

Conclusion

Secondary data from peer-reviewed journals and official reports make it clear that cybercrime is not only an issue of data security, financial loss or legal regulation, but also a significant and growing public mental health concern. Cyber-victimization across forms such as cyberbullying, cyberstalking, online harassment, identity theft and digital fraud is consistently associated with depression, anxiety, stress, PTSD-like symptoms, low self-esteem and suicidal ideation across diverse populations and contexts. The COVID-19 pandemic has intensified both exposure to cybercrime and the salience of mental health vulnerabilities, particularly among adolescents, young adults, women, marginalized groups and people with existing mental illnesses.

At the same time, emerging evidence on psychological factors among cyber offenders and professionals dealing with cybercrime underscores that mental health must be considered at multiple levels of the cyber ecosystem. Current institutional responses, while advancing in terms of reporting portals and legal provisions, have yet to fully integrate trauma-informed practices, psychosocial support and interdisciplinary collaboration. Bridging this gap will require coordinated efforts across law enforcement, mental health services, education systems, civil society and technology platforms.

For scholars and policymakers, the theme "Cybercrime and Mental Health" offers a critical lens through which to reimagine cyber governance as not only a technical and legal endeavor but also a public health and human rights imperative. Future work should deepen empirical understanding, especially in under-studied settings, and design, implement and

evaluate integrated interventions that protect digital rights, reduce cyber victimization and promote psychological well-being in an increasingly connected world.

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