

# Cyber Harassment and Mental Health Outcomes among College-Going Women in India: A Narrative Review

Vaswati Mahato<sup>1</sup>, Dr. Shabana Azmi<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Research Scholar, Department of Psychology, Sidho Kanho Birsha University, Purulia

<sup>2</sup>Assistant Professor, Department of Psychology, Sidho Kanho Birsha University, Purulia

## ABSTRACT

The internet continues to expand rapidly, and a growing number of young women have access to smartphones. This has produced new opportunities and challenges. Students can learn and make friends anytime and anywhere in the 21st century. Smartphones and the internet have evolved every aspect of life in some way. Yet, with all these innovations and greater numbers of users surfing the internet, the prevalence of cyber harassment cases (including stalking, online abuse, body shaming, trolling, unwelcome messages, deep faked pictures, videos, and financial fraud) has also jumped up a lot. Women in college, especially in places like West Bengal where there are a lot of different cultural backgrounds, are more susceptible because of long-lasting gender roles, family surveillance, and not enough protections from institutions. The objective of this narrative review study is to examine the exposure of college-going women to internet harassment and to investigate the effects of cyber harassment on their mental health, particularly in the context of contemporary situations in West Bengal. The research is predicated on a comprehensive review of literature published from 2015 to 2025. Results indicate that women subjected to cyber harassment exhibit significant levels of sadness, anxiety, trauma, body image dissatisfaction, social isolation, and academic disruption. In West Bengal, worries about honor, blaming the victim, and not enough psychological help on campus make these problems worse. The assessment points out key holes in long-term and intervention-based research and recommends for campus regulations that take gender into consideration, programs designed to improve digital literacy, and mental health support systems that are easy to use. Addressing cyberbullying in higher education is crucial for protecting the mental health of young women and promoting equitable online engagement.

**Keywords:** Cyber harassment, college-going women, mental health

## 1. Introduction:

Since the 20th century, young adults have easily adapted to the digital environment. It's clear that digital platforms are currently the best venues to meet people. The government has made it easier for citizens to get involved in digital activities by starting programs like Digital India. The internet is cheaper and cellphones are easier to buy. With only one click, you may study, build community, shop, and send money. NDTV's latest report reveals that India has more than 950 million internet users, and roughly 548 million of them are active users from rural areas. More and more young people are going online. About 57% of users are 15 to 24 years old, and 52% are 25 to 44 years old. Cyber harassment has become a big problem

for society and mental health, especially for young women, as more and more people use the internet. Cyber harassment is a broad phrase that includes many kinds of abuse that can happen when people utilize digital media. Stalking, internet abuse, body shaming, trolling, unwanted sexual and verbal abuse, uploading pictures without permission, and stealing money are all examples of these. A growing number of people are using digital platforms, and harassment is moving from the real world to the virtual world. According to the National Cyber Crime Reporting Portal (NCRP), cybercrime against women rose by 118% between 2020 and 2024, going from 22,188 to 48,475. These online threats are happening to girls and students who are regularly on social media. Researchers have shown that false beliefs about women often stop victims from reporting events and getting help. Recent research demonstrates that cyber harassment is associated with negative outcomes related to depression, anxiety, trauma, and distorted body image (Iroegbu et al., 2024). Moreover, persons experiencing cyber sexual harassment may suffer from alcohol use, substance abuse, depression, anxiety, and even suicidal ideation (Reed et al., 2019). These findings suggest that increased digital involvement and cyber harassment, along with declining mental health, present psychological hazards for young women in higher education.

## 2. Objectives of the study:

1. To assess forms of cyber harassment experienced by college-going students
2. To explore mental health consequences due to cyber harassment, including anxiety, depression, stress and reduced self-esteem among young women

## 3. Methodology:

This research employed a narrative and qualitative methodology for the review of cyber harassment against women. This research focused on the following components, including the previous literature and research article news reports available from the government and scholarly journals, to capture the real structure of cyber harassment among young college-going students.

## 4. Limitations:

This research relies on secondary data sources, which can present certain challenges related to accuracy and reliability. As a result, the findings may not adequately capture the diverse socio-economic backgrounds of young adults, limiting the overall representation and understanding of this demographic group.

## 5. Discussion and Findings of the study:

### Objective 1: To assess forms of cyber harassment against college-going students

#### Discussion 1: forms of cyber harassment

India has seen a lot of technological advancement after initiatives like Digital India, but till now, due to a lack of digital literacy, half of its population does not even know the proper use of the internet and smart gadgets (Sankhwar & Chaturvedi, 2018). Most of the people use the internet only for entertainment purposes, like social media sites (Facebook, Instagram, YouTube), chat rooms, Skype, WhatsApp, Dating sites, gaming apps, etc. As a result, they easily become the victims of cyber harassment. Cyber criminals access personal information and personal details through technological tools and blackmail, threaten people via email, chat and so on. The major cyber crimes faced by young women are as follows:

- **Cyberstalking:** Cyberstalking is the most repeated form of cybercrime, which involves threats via email and messages, continuous monitoring through social media platforms and observing victims' online activities. In this case stalker does not threaten the victim physically but through online messages and emails. Nowadays this cyber stalking has become a more common form than physical stalking because of the anonymity of online interaction by criminals (NCRB,2016 ).
- **Defamation:** Defamation refers to posting or sharing someone's false defamatory information publicly on digital platforms. This may harm victims' dignity and reputation, and disgrace them in front of society (Zakaria & Harun, 2020 ).
- **Trolling:** Trolling in the online platform is posting content or comments that are offensive, provoking against the victims. Although public sometimes takes this cyber act casually, but for the victim is become emotionally provoking and disturbing for their reputation (Griffiths, 2014, Mao, & Hu, 2025).
- **Body shaming:** Body shaming is a type of act that targets people's physical appearance, such as body weight, skin tone and objectifying body parts. This kind of act destroys people's self-esteem. As a result, they suffer from psychological distress, self-doubt and negative body image(Zhang et al.,2024, Hewage & Thanthriwatta,2025).
- **Non-consensual image sharing:** Non-consensual image sharing is posting someone's private or intimate picture publicly on a social media platform without their consent, with the intention of humiliating, threatening, or exploiting the victim. Most of the time, someone very close to the victims commits this type of heinous crime to take revenge and annoy them ( Citron & Franks, 2014).
- **Cyber sexual harassment:** Cyber sexual harassment involves a threat to women and children through publishing their pornographic materials on porn websites. Often, criminals harass women with unwanted, disturbing sexual conversations, sexually explicit messages or offensive sexual comments on digital platforms.
- **Morphing:** Morphing takes place by editing an original picture of a girl, so that it looks completely or mostly different picture. Often, cyber criminals access pictures of victims and morph them with another objectionable picture and blackmail those girls that they will release those pictures in open web (Singh, 2024). Celebrities have become the most victims of this type of cybercrime.( Nandhini & Vijay, 2022)
- **Phishing:** Phishing is a cybercrime technique in which attackers impersonate legitimate organizations or individuals through emails, messages, or fake websites to trick victims into revealing sensitive information such as passwords, financial details, or personal data (Nurse, 2018)

The prevalence of cybercrimes in India is rising at an alarming rate. A significant factor contributing to this trend is the reluctance of many victims to report these incidents. This hesitation often stems from social stigma associated with being victimized, as well as a deep-seated mistrust in law enforcement and the legal system. Consequently, numerous women choose to suffer in silence, enduring the emotional and psychological toll of these crimes rather than seeking help or justice. This situation highlights the urgent need for increased awareness, support systems, and reform within the legal framework to encourage reporting and provide protection for victims.

**Objective 2: To explore mental health consequences due to cyber harassment, including anxiety, depression, stress and reduced self-esteem among young women**

**Discussion 2: Mental health consequences due to Cyber harassment**

In this digital age, cyber harassment has emerged as a considerable source of stress, especially for young women who are frequently targeted on online platforms. Cyber crimes such as stalking, trolling, and cyber

sexual harassment are significantly associated with adverse mental health consequences, including stress, anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation, and panic attacks (Stevens et al., 2021).

**Anxiety** is one of the most common adverse mental health responses to cyber harassment. Victims often report persistent fear, hypervigilance and insecurity due to an unpredictable, disgusting environment of online platforms. Researchers indicate that repeatedly cyber victimization may lead to chronic anxiety disorders (Sinclair et al., 2012).

**Depression** is another troublesome mental health condition associated with cyber harassment. Victims often report feelings of sadness, hopelessness, helplessness, as well as social withdrawal behaviour. Research found that young women and adolescents are more prone to depression symptoms (Mishna et al., 2018, Gu et al., 2024).

**Stress** level also increases after experiencing the incident, and due to the constant availability of the internet, harassers can target the victim anytime, anywhere, which is disturbing for the victim. This continuous stress may result with sleep disturbances, difficulty in concentrating and emotional dysregulation (Doghan, & Arshad, 2023).

**Reduced self-esteem** is observed when harassers start to attack the victim's personal identity and appearance; repeated negative perception of the public can destroy the victim's self-worth.

**Suicidal Ideation and Self-Harm** are the most severe consequences associated to cyber harassment. If the harassment level becomes extremely intolerable to the victim. When they experience being trapped, powerless, and humiliated, leading to extreme emotional responses. Research has shown a strong association between cyber sexual harassment and suicidal ideation among young women (Stevens et al., 2021).

Apart from depression, anxiety, stress, and lack of self-esteem, victims also suffer from other psychological and behavioural disturbances, including Social Isolation and Loneliness, Sleep Disturbances, Emotional Dysregulation, Post-Traumatic Stress Symptoms (PTSS), Academic and Cognitive Difficulties. These outcomes are often faced by victims due to the invasive nature of digital platform abuse.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Cyber harassment has a negative effect on the mental health of its victims. Victims typically endure this mental pressure in silence due to the fear and embarrassment of being revealed to society. Some people can totally cope with this misfortune, but some cannot get rid of the memory attached to that trauma. After going through these forms of stress, many people have mental health problems. Researchers say that victims often can't deal with the strange, irrational and aggressive behaviour of harassers. For example, women lose their confidence and fear of losing their dignity, which can lead to feelings of isolation and hopelessness. Several victims say that since the crime, they have had symptoms of despair and anxiety. Young ladies don't feel good about their self-image.

Cybersexual harassment and similar crimes affect students' motivation to do well in school. They do worse in school and lose interest in academics because they doubt themselves. The majority of victims of cyber harassment think that the internet is not a safe place to express all of their personal interests; as a result, they cannot connect with supportive communities and resources. Most of the time, researchers have discovered that the harasser is unknown to the victim, but there are numerous cases where the harasser is known to the victim and is extremely close to them. In this case, the victim doesn't even tell anyone what they're thinking, and because of the stressful circumstances, victims adapt unhealthy coping mechanisms

like ingesting alcohol and using drugs to escape the stress. In the worst scenario, the victim can even try to kill themselves or hurt themselves. It is important to identify the severity of cyber harassment and the impact on mental health, as well as social media sites should develop a transparent privacy policy with the users. And most importantly government need to create an environment where victims feel safe to report their incidents.

### References:

1. Al Doghan, M. A., & Arshad, S. (2023). Cyberbullying and psychological stress among female employees. *International Journal of Cyber Criminology*, 17(1), 166-184.
2. Citron, D. K., & Franks, M. A. (2014). Criminalizing revenge porn. *Wake Forest L. Rev.*, 49, 345.
3. Griffiths, M. D. (2014). Adolescent trolling in online environments: A brief overview. *Education and Health*, 32(3), 85-87.
4. Gu, W., Yu, X., Tan, Y., Yu, Z., & Zhu, J. (2024). Association between weight, weight perception, weight teasing and mental health among adolescents. *Child and adolescent psychiatry and mental health*, 18(1), 39. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13034-024-00730-2>
5. Hewage, G. P., & Thanthriwatta, T. (2025, December). Detecting Body-Shaming Content in Sinhala and Romanized Sinhala on Social Media. In *2025 10th International Conference on Information Technology Research (ICITR)* (pp. 1-6). IEEE.
6. Hafeez, E. (2014). Cyber Harassment and Its Implications on. *Horizons*, 8(2), 29-48.
7. Iroegbu, M., O'Brien, F., Muñoz, L. C., & Parsons, G. (2024). Investigating the psychological impact of cyber-sexual harassment. *Journal of interpersonal violence*, 39(15-16), 3424-3445.
8. JK Policy Institute. (2024). The rise of cyber violence against women and its implications.
9. Mao, Y., & Hu, B. (2025). From trolling victimization to reactive trolling: Moderated mediation effects of online disinhibition and motivations. *Social Science Computer Review*, 43(1), 27-47.
10. Mishna, F., Regehr, C., Lacombe-Duncan, A., Daciuk, J., Fearing, G., & Van Wert, M. (2018). Social media, cyber-aggression and student mental health on a university campus. *Journal of mental health*, 27(3), 222-229.
11. National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) of India-2016 online available [<https://www.ncrb.gov.in>]
12. Nandhini, V., & Vijay, M. (2022). Legal Challenges and Solutions to Cyber Crime in India Against Women. *European Journal of Humanities and Educational Advancements*, 24-28.
13. NDTV. (2025). India's internet user base crosses 950 million.
14. Nurse, J. R. (2018). Cybercrime and you: How criminals attack and the human factors that they seek to exploit. *arXiv preprint arXiv:1811.06624*.
15. Reed, E., Salazar, M., Behar, A. I., Agah, N., Silverman, J. G., Minnis, A. M., ... & Raj, A. (2019). Cyber sexual harassment: Prevalence and association with substance use, poor mental health, and STI history among sexually active adolescent girls. *Journal of adolescence*, 75, 53-62.
16. Sankhwar, S., & Chaturvedi, A. (2018). Woman harassment in digital space in India. *International Journal of Pure and Applied Mathematics*, 118(20), 595-607.
17. Singh, A. (2024) Cyber Crime against Women.
18. Sinclair, K. O., Bauman, S., Poteat, V. P., Koenig, B., & Russell, S. T. (2012). Cyber and bias-based harassment: Associations with academic, substance use, and mental health problems. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 50(5), 521-523.

19. Stevens, F., Nurse, J. R., & Arief, B. (2021). Cyber stalking, cyber harassment, and adult mental health: A systematic review. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*, 24(6), 367-376.
20. Zakaria, Z., & Harun, S. A. (2020, May). Cyber Defamation Awareness Among Adolescent: Case Studies in One Private Institution. In *Journal of Physics: Conference Series* (Vol. 1529, No. 5, p. 052087). IOP Publishing.
21. Zhang, Q., Chen, Q., & Gu, X. (2024). Trolling, cyberstalking, body-shaming, slut-shaming a study on online abuses of social media. *Communications in Humanities Research*, 28(1), 232-241.