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Research Paper

Investigating Cyber Victimization Patterns in Female College Students

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ABSTRACT

This study delves into the experiences of cybercrime among female students, aiming to understand the multifaceted factors contributing to their susceptibility to online threats by investigating sociodemographic characteristics, online behaviour, personality traits, and self-control. The study illustrated that cybercrime victims exhibit more frequent social media browsing, increased viewership of explicit pornographic content websites, a higher usage public Wi-Fi without security measures, and higher digital misconduct in comparison to non-victims. Through Latent Class Analysis (LCA), Class 2 participants emerge as distinct, characterized by extensive social media activity, frequent use of unsecured public Wi-Fi, involvement in unauthorized media distribution, attempted account access through password guessing, file tampering, and a high frequency of cybervictimization. These findings underscore the intricate nature of cybercrime vulnerability and emphasize the imperative for targeted interventions and preventive measures prioritizing education and awareness campaigns, implementation of digital literacy programs.

Keywords: *Cyber deviance, online behaviour, personality traits, self-control*

In the digital age, the internet has become an integral aspect of daily life, offering numerous benefits alongside avenues for criminal activity. Cybercrime encompasses any illicit actions facilitated through computer technology, ranging from the use of computers as tools to perpetrate crimes to the commission of offenses solely in the digital realm (DeTardo-Bora & Bora 2016; Henson et al., 2016). The pervasiveness of cyber threats poses significant challenges to governments, businesses, industries, and ordinary citizens alike, with cybercrimes such as online harassment, internet sexual exploitation, cyberbullying, and cyberstalking on the rise (Sudzina & Pavlicek, 2020). Understanding cybercrime and its effects is a complicated issue. One reason for that is that victims don't always have direct contact with the criminals. Some victims may face online harassment or threats, while others may be affected indirectly if their personal data such as credit card information (Näsi et al. 2015; Reyns, 2019). Young people who are the main users of the internet, can provide important information about the negative online experiences (Hawdon, 2021). With over 4.7 billion people online worldwide, its clear that addressing cybercrime is more urgent than ever (Saleem et al., 2021). Gender differences in how victims respond to

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cybercrime add another layer of complexity, with women often dealing with specific challenges and stigma after experiencing online attacks (Leukfeldt & Yar, 2016).

To address cybercrime victimization, researchers are examining different theories, including routine activity theory (Guerra & Ingram, 2022; Herrero et al., 2021; Choi et al. 2019). Routine activity theory, proposed by Cohen and Felson in 1979, suggests that victimization occurs in the presence of triad of motivated offenders, suitable targets, and the absence of capable guardians (Mikkola et al., 2020; Griffith et al. 2023). Another important theory is self -control theory, examines individual self-regulation capabilities (Bossler & Holt, 2010; Louderback & Antonaccio, 2020). People with low self-control, often influenced by poor parenting in childhood, are more likely to take risks that make them more vulnerable to cybercrime (Göttker, n.d.; van de Weijer & Leukfeldt, 2017). Personality traits, including the Big Five traits, also play a role in patterns of cybercrime victimization (Sudzina & Pavlicek, 2020). Understanding cybervictimization is crucial for identifying online threats, safeguarding digital environments, and developing effective strategies to prevent cyberbullying. In view to this, the present study seeks to examine the sociodemographic factors, online vulnerabilities, and personality traits that contribute to cybervictimization in female college students.

METHODOLOGY

Data collection

The present cross-sectional study uses a purposive sampling method to select 300 female college students from Bengaluru, Karnataka, aged 18-25 years, including both undergraduate and postgraduate students. A structured approach was used to assess sociodemographic factors, online behaviours, and psychological traits through google forms. Sociodemographic variables include age, educational attainment, religious affiliation, family structure, residence of family. The online behaviour assessment looked at various digital habits, such as Internet usage for digital communication, gaming online, browsing social media updates, online dating, and E- commerce. Participants were asked to report their average online time as Minimal (0-2 hours), Moderate (3-5 hours), Extended (6-9 hours) and Excessive (10 and more hours). The study also explored vulnerability factors related to online guardianship and cybercrime, including sharing personal information, assessing adult content, using public Wi-Fi, location services, password practices, app permission, and password sharing. Protective measures, such as privacy settings, password changes, and antivirus updates were surveyed to assess participant's awareness of cybersecurity. Additionally, the study examined participants cyber deviant behaviours, such as unauthorized software or media use, inappropriate content viewing, password guessing, unauthorized access, file tampering, and Wi-Fi misuse, to understand their engagement in risky online activities and digital ethics.

The brief Self-Control Scale (BSCS), a 13-item Likert scale, was used to measure individual differences in self-control, assessing impulse control, ability to delay gratification, and focus on long term goals despite temptations (Manapat et al 2021). The Big Five Inventory (BFI), a 10-item Likert scale, was used to assess five key personality traits such as openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism, providing insights into individual behavioral tendencies (Rammsted & John 2007).

Pilot testing was conducted to validate the survey instrument and identify and resolve technical issues or question ambiguities. The Google Form link was shared across multiple online channels to facilitate data collection, adhering to a clear timeline and sending

reminders to encourage participation. At the end of the survey, 316 responses were collected, with a refusal rate of 5.1%, resulting in an overall study sample of 298 participants. The present study was approved by Institutional Ethical Committee approval. Informed consent was taken from the study participants. Exclusion criteria include male students, individual with significant visual, hearing, or intellectual impairments, as well as non-English speakers.

Statistical analysis

After survey completion, responses downloaded from Google Forms were coded and anonymized to prevent personal identification. The distinction between the cyber victim and non-cyber victim groups was assessed using the chi-square test. Risk factors were computed using binary logistics for variables showing significant differences in the chi-square test. The analysis was conducted using SPSS version 24. Latent Class Analysis (LCA) was applied to study the relationship between cybervictimization, internet usage patterns, vulnerability factors, and digital misconduct. By analysing responses to statistically significant categorical variables of the studied digital behaviours. The LCA analysis was performed in Jamovi version 2.5.3

RESULT

Cybercrime Victimization

The present study, indicate that 13.22% of female students have reported instances of unauthorized access to their credentials, while 10.62% have documented illicit alterations to their computer files. Moreover, 7.41% of respondents have encountered data loss attributable to malicious software such as viruses, worms, or trojans, with 7.80% citing electronic theft of credit card information. Concerning internet obscenity, a substantial 28.72% of respondents encountered explicit or offensive content online. Furthermore, 25.25% of individuals have reported being subjected to online bullying, experiencing harassment across various digital platforms including chat rooms, social media, and instant messaging applications. Additionally, 18.5% of respondents disclosed instances of online stalking, wherein perpetrators exploit social media and internet resources to monitor their activities, causing distress and infringing upon their privacy.

Sociodemographic variables

In the present study, there was no distinction found among cybercrime victims and non-victims concerning sociodemographic factors, including age group (p=0.152), educational attainment(p=0.094), religious affiliation (p=0.586), family structure(p=0.959), and residential location (p=0.280) (Table 1).

Table 1. Sociodemographic attributes of individuals affected by cybercrime and those who have not experienced cyber victimization

Variable	Non-victims N=152	Cybercrime Victim N=146	P value chi square test or t test
Age cohort			
18- 20 years	100 (65.8%)	110 (75.3%)	0.152
21-22 years	45 (29.6%)	29 (19.9%)	
22-25 years	7 (4.6%)	7 (4.8%)	
Educational attainment			
Undergraduates	103 (67.8%)	112 (76.7%)	0.094
Postgraduates	49 (32.2%)	34 (23.3%)	

Religious Affiliation			
Hinduism	78 (51.3%)	76 (52.1%)	0.586
Minority (Christianity/Jainism Buddhism/ Islam)	61 (40.1%)	62 (42.5%)	
Atheist	13 (8.6%)	8 (5.5%)	
Family Structure			
Joint Family	112 (73.7%)	106 (72.6%)	0.959
Nuclear Family	30 (19.7%)	29 (19.9%)	
Others (Solo-parent family/Step family/Orphan)	10 (6.6%)	11 (7.5%)	
Residence of family			
Urban	111 (73%)	115 (78.8%)	0.280
Rural	41 (27%)	31 (21.2%)	

Digital Behaviours

The internet usage patterns, including digital communication, online gaming, online dating and e-commerce are similar between cybercrime victims and non-victims. However, when it comes to browsing social media updates, cybercrime victims exhibit higher usage compared to non-victims (45.2% vs. 32.9%, p=0.003) (Table 2). The average duration spent online was consistent between cybercrime victims and non-victims, with the majority of individuals dedicating moderate time (3-5 hours) followed by extended periods (6-9 hours) engaging with online media (Table 2). The vulnerability factors contributing to online exposure to victimization, such as sharing personal details online, allowing location services on mobile phones, using the same password for multiple accounts, giving access permissions while downloading apps, and sharing passwords, showed similar trends among cybercrime victims and non-victims. However, accessing explicit adult content websites (17.1% vs. 9.2%, p=0.043) and utilizing public Wi-Fi without security (17.8% vs. 6.6%, p=0.030) were observed to be twice as high among cybercrime victims compared to non-victims (Table 2). The evaluation of online guardianship practices revealed that there were no substantial disparities in behaviours such as setting privacy settings, changing passwords, and updating antivirus software between individuals who experienced cyber victimization and those who did not. (Table 2). Instances of digital misconduct ie. utilizing or distributing unauthorized software or media, viewing inappropriate content, accessing accounts through password guessing, tampering with files, and using someone else's Wi-Fi were found to be more prevalent among cybercrime victims compared to non-victims (Table 2).

Table 2. Digital Behaviours between Individuals Affected by Cybercrime and Non-Victimized Counterparts

Variable	**Non-victims N=152**	**Cybercrime Victim N=146**	**P value chi square test**
Internet usage			
Digital communication	71 (46.7%)	74 (50.7%)	0.562
Gaming online	12 (7.9%)	17 (11.6%)	0.330
Browsing social media updates	50 (32.9%)	66 (45.2%)	**0.033***
Online dating	7 (4.6%)	9 (6.2%)	0.614
E- commerce	62 (40.8%)	71 (48.6%)	0.200
Average no. of time spent online			
Minimal (0-2 hours)	22 (14.5%)	18 (12.3%)	0.148
Moderate (3-5 hours)	83 (54.6%)	69 (47.3%)	
Extended (6-9 hours)	34 (22.4%)	50 (34.2%)	
Excessive (10 and more hours)	13 (8.6%)	9 (6.2%)	

Vulnerability factors for online exploitation and cybercrime			
Share personal details online	50 (32.9%)	58 (39.7%)	0.220
Access explicit adult content websites	14 (9.2%)	25 (17.1%)	**0.043****
Utilize public Wi-fi without security	10 (6.6%)	26 (17.8%)	**0.03****
Allow location services on mobile phone	79 (52.0%)	91 (62.3%)	0.071
Use same password for multiple accounts	55 (36.2%)	65 (44.5%)	0.142
Given access permission while app download	79 (52.0%)	86 (58.9%)	0.229
Shared passwords	27 (17.8%)	28 (19.2%)	0.753
Protective measure taken in digital space			
configured the privacy settings	119 (78.8%)	120 (82.2%)	0.462
frequently change passwords	68 (45%)	76 (52.8%)	0.183
frequently update the anti-virus	78 (51.7%)	73 (50.3%)	0.822
Digital misconduct			
Utilized or distributed unauthorized software	19 (12.5%)	33 (22.6%)	**0.023****
Utilized or distributed unauthorized media	41 (27.0%)	68 (46.6%)	**<0.001****
Viewed inappropriate content	28 (18.4%)	45 (30.8%)	**0.015****
Accessed accounts through password guessing	13 (8.6%)	52 (35.6%)	**<0.001****
Unauthorized access	17 (11.2%)	29 (19.9%)	0.053
Tampering with files	12 (7.9%)	29 (19.9%)	**0.004****
Using someone's else Wi-fi	26 (17.1%)	40 (27.4%)	**0.037****

No significant disparities were evident between cybercrime victims and non-victims in terms of extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, and openness to experiences, based on the assessment of the Big Five Personality Traits. Additionally, there were no observable differences in self-control scores between cybercrime victims and non-victims. (Table 3).

Table 3. Differences in Personality Traits and Self-Control among Cybercrime Victims and Non-Victims

Variable	Non-victims N=152	Cybercrime Victim N=146	t Test p value
Personality Traits			
Extraversion	5.84±1.938	6.14±1.818	0.156
Agreeableness	7.19±1.622	6.66±1.675	0.331
Conscientiousness	6.01±1.520	5.55±1.355	0.608
Neuroticism	6.55±1.756	6.58±1.907	0.156
Openness to experiences	6.19±1.346	5.89±1.232	0.267
Self-control score	42.5±7	39.8±7.5	0.500

The application of binary logistic regression to the significant variables identified through chi-square analysis revealed no notable risk. However, online deviance behaviour of Accessed accounts through password guessing and using someone's else Wi-fi showed 1-fold increased non-significant risk (Table 4)

Table 4. Risk of Cybervictimization

Variables in the Equation								
	B	**S.E.**	**Wald**	**df**	**Sig.**	**Exp (B)**	**95% C.I.for EXP(B)**	
							Lower	**Upper**
Access explicit adult content websites	-.248	.411	.365	1	0.546	0.780	0.349	1.746

Variables in the Equation								
	B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp (B)	95% C.I.for EXP(B)	
							Lower	Upper
Utilize public Wi-fi without security	-1.016	.412	6.091	1	0.014	0.362	0.162	.811
Utilized or distributed unauthorized software	-.012	.419	.001	1	0.978	0.988	0.435	2.247
Utilized or distributed unauthorized media	-.611	.296	4.258	1	0.039	0.543	0.304	0.970
Viewed inappropriate content	-.253	.362	.486	1	0.486	0.777	0.382	1.580
Accessed accounts through password guessing	.275	.527	.272	1	0.602	1.316	0.469	3.697
Tampering with files	-.798	.543	2.158	1	0.142	0.450	0.155	1.306
Using someone's else Wi-fi	.205	.413	.247	1	0.619	1.228	0.546	2.761
Constant	1.969	.580	11.504	1	.001	7.160		

Latent Class Analysis

The LCA model fit was assessed using several indices, including the Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC) value 2311, Akaike Information Criterion (AIC) value 2141, and adjusted likelihood ratio test statistics (e.g., the G^2 statistic p value 0.016). Lower values of these indices indicated better fit. This evaluation aided in determining the appropriateness of the LCA model for capturing the underlying structure of the data (Table 5).

Table 5 Latent class analysis model fit

Class	Log-likelihood	Resid.df	AIC	AIC3	BIC	SABIC	CAIC	Entropy	G^2	G^2 p	χ^2	χ^2 p
4	-1024	977	2141	2187	2311	2165	2357	1.000	414	1.000	1074	0.016

Note. G^2=Likelihood ratio statistic; χ^2=Pearson Chi-square goodness of fit statistic; Entropy=entropy R^2 statistic (Vermunt & Magidson, 2013, p. 71)

The LCA plot visualized the latent class structure identified by the analysis, displaying the probabilities for each observed variable within each latent class. This allowed the visual inspection the patterns of responses and understand the characteristics of each latent class (Figure 1). Class 1: Demonstrated elevated engagement with social media platforms, involvement in the unauthorized use or distribution of software and media, and accessing others' Wi-Fi networks without permission. Class 2: Showed significant social media activity, frequent use of public Wi-Fi without security measures, involvement in unauthorized media distribution, attempting to access accounts through password guessing, tampering with computer files, and experiencing a high frequency of cybervictimization. Class 3: Displayed a pattern of extensive social media usage. Class 4: Engaged heavily with

social media platforms, had moderate exposure to explicit adult content websites, and viewed inappropriate material **(Figure 1)**

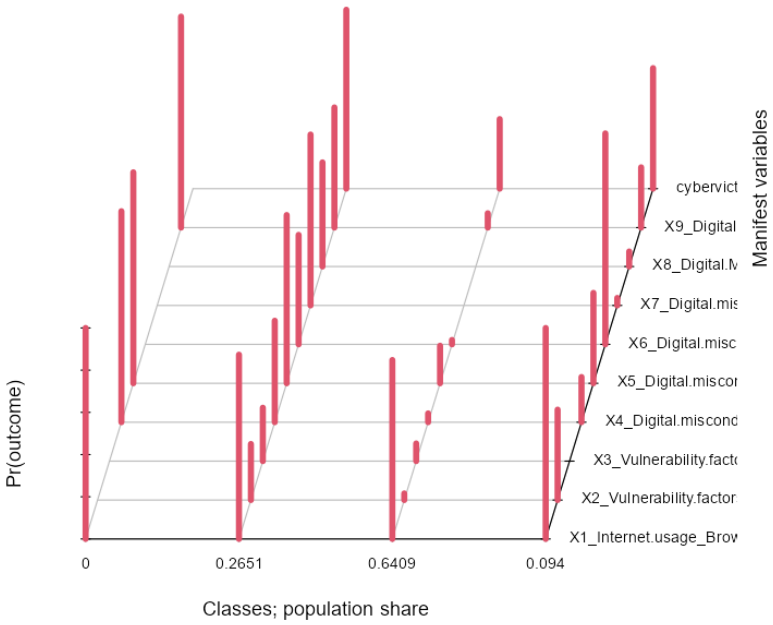

Figure 1. Latent class analysis plot

X1= Browsing social media updates
X2= *Access explicit adult content websites*
X3= *Utilize public Wi-fi without security*
X4= *Utilized or distributed unauthorized software*
X5= *Utilized or distributed unauthorized media*
X6= *Viewed inappropriate content*
X7= *Accessed accounts through password guessing*
X8= *Tampering with files*
X9= *Using someone's else Wi-fi*

DISCUSSION

The gender paradox in cybercrime refers to the disparity between men and women in both perpetrating and experiencing cybercrimes. While men are traditionally perceived as more likely to engage in cybercriminal activities, women often experience higher rates of victimization, particularly in certain forms of cyber harassment and online abuse (Halder & Karuppannan 2012; Kalaitzaki, 2020; Marwah & Ranaut 2023). Cybercrime victimization is notably high, with malware being the most prevalent, affecting 76.69%. Other cybercrimes such as hacking and phishing also show significant rates, with 26.32% and 19.55% of victim-only cases, respectively (Weulen Kranenbarg et al; 2019). Online bullying victimisation (25.25%) included harassment in chatrooms, social media, and instant messengers (Ding et al., 2020), which can have serious psychological and emotional consequences for victims. Online stalking victimisation (18.5%) involved the use of the internet and social media to monitor individuals in an unsettling manner, potentially evoking feelings of invasion of privacy and fear. In the other study (Näsi et al., 2023) Malware and different forms of online harassment are the most common forms of online victimisation, with circa 10% of the respondents reporting victimisation experiences during the past year. The potential reasons for the higher prevalence of "Online Obscenity Victimization" and

"Online Stalking Victimization" in our study could be because of increase, use of social media platform which is very common among college students also online dating and socialising can be a major factor. These aforementioned findings of previous studies, show that online victimization is a complex issue. This underlines the need to address and prevent such problems to help keep people safe and well online. However, other studies have reported much higher rates of cybervictimization that our study.

Sociodemographic factors, such as age, gender, education, and income level, often help explain patterns of cybercrime and who might be at more at risk. These factors usually relate to how people behave online and the risks they face. However, in our study, we did not find any major differences between cybercrime victims and non-victims based on these factors. This suggests that cybercrime is more complex and they we need to look at other influences to create better cybersecurity strategies.

Online behaviour plays an important role in the risk of becoming a victim of cybercrime. People who take risks online such as sharing personal information freely, clicking on suspicious links, or downloading files from unsafe websites, are more likely to be targeted by cybercriminals (Marttila et al. 2021; Kaakinen et al. 2021). Our study also found similar results. Therefore, teaching people about safe online habits, improving digital literacy, and raising awareness about common cyberthreats can reduce the chances of cybercrime and help make the internet safter for everyone.

Personality traits such as extraversion, emotional stability, and conscientiousness can affect how people experience and respond to cybervictimization. Understanding these traits can help improve prevention and support strategies in the digital world. Recent studies (Rodríguez-Enríquez et al. 2019a; 2019b) illustrated that people who are more outgoing and emotionally unstable are more likely to become victims of cybercrime, while those with less conscientious may be at lower risk. However, in our study, we did not find any significant differences in the Big Five personality traits between victims and non-victims. However, our study findings are in accordance to previously conducted large study in Netherlands (Van de Weijer et al., 2017).

A major strength of this study is its focussed examination of cybercrime victimization among female students within contemporary digital environments. By targeting this specific demographic, the research addresses a notable gap in the existing literature and contributes nuanced insights into increasingly relevant area of digital safety. Importantly, these the findings indicate that conventional predictors such as sociodemographic characteristics and personality traits exert minimal influence on victimization outcomes. This challenges traditional assumptions and highlight the need for more targeted prevention strategies that address the unique digital behaviours and experience of female students. However, several limitations should be acknowledged. The relatively small size may constrain the general ability of the results to broader populations. Additionally, reliance on self-reported data introduces the possibility of response bias as participants may underreport or inaccurately represent their online behaviour and experiences with cybercrime. Furthermore, the cross-sectional nature of the study restricts casual interpretation of the observed relationships. To enhance the robustness of the future research, longitudinal designs and qualitative methodologies are recommended, as they can offer deeper insights and better capture the complexities of cybervictimization over time.

CONCLUSION

In summary, our study sheds light on cybercrime victimization among female students in today's digital landscape. We identified patterns indicating higher susceptibility among victims, including increased social media browsing, visits to explicit content sites, and neglectful usage of public Wi-Fi. The traditional factors like sociodemographic and personality traits showed minimal influence. Future research should focus on longitudinal and qualitative studies to address cyber threats effectively and foster digital resilience among all individuals.

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Conflict of Interest

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