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What Do We Know About Cyber Harassment Among Females? A Systematic Review and Thematic Synthesis

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Abstract

The rapid expansion of digital communication has transformed harassment, creating new forms of victimization that disproportionately affect females. This study examines patterns of victimization, offender behaviour, and responses to cyber harassment among females. A systematic review and thematic synthesis were conducted to identify common themes across existing research. Eight articles published between 2020 and 2026 were included following a structured search and screening process using JSTOR, SAGE Journals, and Academic Search Complete. Four major themes emerged: gendered and normalized online harassment, psychological and emotional harm, victim vulnerability and targeting, and barriers to reporting and support. The findings indicate that cyber harassment is shaped by gender norms, social inequality, individual vulnerabilities, and online environments.

Keywords: Cyber Harassment, Females, Cybercrime, Online Victimization, Cyber-Sexual Harassment, Systematic Review, Thematic Synthesis.

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1. Introduction

Cyber harassment among females has become an increasing concern in today's digital society, especially with the widespread use of social media and online communication. As technology continues to grow, it has created new opportunities for interaction, but it has also introduced new forms of victimization that disproportionately affect women and girls (Patel & Roesch, 2022; Henry & Powell, 2018). Unlike traditional forms of harassment, cyber harassment can occur at any time, reach a wide audience, and often allow offenders to remain anonymous. These characteristics can make it more difficult for victims to escape or control the situation and may increase the emotional and psychological impact of their experiences.

Cyber harassment can take different forms, including cyber sexual harassment, image-based abuse, unwanted sexual messages, online stalking, threats, and other gender-based forms of digital victimization. It generally involves the use of digital communication or online platforms to threaten, intimidate, sexually harass, or otherwise harm another individual through harmful or repeated online behaviors (Henry & Powell, 2018; Patel & Roesch, 2022). Ayub and Malik (2020) explain that cyber harassment includes harmful behaviors that occur through digital platforms and online interactions. Henry and Powell (2018) similarly describe technology-facilitated sexual violence as including behaviors such as unwanted sexual communication, explicit images, and online coercion. These forms of harassment demonstrate how technology can be used to extend harmful behavior beyond traditional physical settings.

The issue is particularly important for females because online harassment is often connected to gender, sexuality, appearance, and social expectations. Research has identified unwanted sexual messages, unsolicited explicit images, image-based abuse, and other forms of gender-based online harassment as important forms of technology-facilitated victimization affecting women and girls (Durán & Rodríguez-Domínguez, 2022; Patel & Roesch, 2022; Ringrose et al., 2021). Women who have a visible online presence, including athletes, journalists, scientists, and other professionals, may also face forms of harassment because of their participation in public digital spaces (Kavasoğlu et al., 2024; Koirala, 2020). These experiences raise broader concerns about gender inequality, safety,

participation, and the ability of women to use digital spaces without fear of harassment.

Cyber harassment can also affect different groups of females in different ways. Adolescents may experience image-based harassment within peer relationships and social media environments (Martínez Román et al., 2025). Female university students may encounter harassment in social environments where cultural expectations and stigma can make reporting difficult (Ayub & Malik, 2020). Women in professional and public-facing positions may experience harassment because of their visibility and participation in online discussions (Kavasoğlu et al., 2024; Koirala, 2020). Research has also suggested that some minority populations may face elevated risks of sexual harassment, indicating that vulnerability can be influenced by identity as well as gender (Smith et al., 2020).

The consequences of cyber harassment extend beyond the immediate online interaction. Previous research has associated technology-facilitated harassment with psychological and emotional difficulties, including anxiety, fear, distress, embarrassment, and reduced confidence (Henry & Powell, 2018; Iroegbu et al., 2024). Some women may also change how they use digital platforms because of their experiences. They may block offenders, reduce their online participation, avoid public discussions, or rely on informal support rather than formal reporting systems (Ayub & Malik, 2020; Durán & Rodríguez-Domínguez, 2022). These responses suggest that cyber harassment can influence not only individual well-being but also women's participation in digital and public spaces.

Reporting is another important concern. Victims may hesitate to report cyber harassment because of stigma, victim-blaming, fear of negative judgment, or a lack of confidence that reporting systems will produce meaningful consequences (Ayub & Malik, 2020; Kavasoğlu et al., 2024). In some cases, victims may believe that blocking the offender or seeking support from friends is more effective than using formal systems (Durán & Rodríguez-Domínguez, 2022). These barriers can make cyber harassment less visible and may contribute to continued victimization.

Although previous studies have examined particular forms of cyber harassment and specific populations, the findings are spread across different research areas and contexts. Studies have examined female university students, adolescents, women receiving unsolicited explicit images, female athletes, sexual minorities, and women in professional and public settings. However, there remains a need to bring these findings together to identify common patterns in female cyber



harassment, including how victims are targeted, the effects of harassment, factors associated with vulnerability, and responses to victimization.

A systematic review can help organize this scattered evidence and provide a broader understanding of what is currently known about cyber harassment among females. Examining the findings across studies can also identify common themes and gaps in the existing research. This is important for criminal justice because understanding patterns of victimization can help inform prevention, reporting, intervention, and policy responses.

The objective of this study is therefore to examine and synthesize existing research on cyber harassment among females. Specifically, the study seeks to identify common patterns related to victimization, offender behavior, psychological and social impacts, vulnerability, and responses to cyber harassment. By bringing together findings from existing studies, this review aims to provide a clearer understanding of how cyber harassment affects females across different populations and digital environments.

Therefore, this study seeks to answer the following research question: *What do we know about cyber harassment among females based on existing research?*

2. Method

2.1 Review Design

This study employed a systematic review with a thematic synthesis approach to examine existing research on cyber harassment among females. A systematic review provides a structured method for identifying, screening, and synthesizing research on a specific topic. A thematic synthesis allows findings from different studies to be examined together to identify common patterns and themes.

This approach was considered appropriate because research on cyber harassment among females has examined different populations, forms of harassment, and online environments. By bringing these findings together, the review aimed to provide a clearer understanding of common experiences, patterns of victimization, vulnerability factors, psychological and social impacts, and responses to cyber harassment.

2.2 Information Sources

The primary databases used for this study were JSTOR, SAGE Journals, and Academic Search Complete (ASC). These databases were selected because they provide access to scholarly literature related to sociology, criminal justice, cybercrime, interpersonal violence, psychology, and related areas.

SAGE Journals was the most productive database and produced the majority of the relevant articles identified in the search. Academic Search Complete was used to supplement the search with additional research on psychological, behavioral, and social aspects of cyber harassment. JSTOR was also searched; however, it did not produce relevant articles that met the focus of this review and therefore did not contribute any studies to the final sample.

2.3 Search Strategy

The search focused on identifying research that directly addressed cyber harassment among females and related forms of technology-facilitated victimization. The primary search terms were “cyber harassment among females” and “female cyber harassment.” These terms were applied to the title and abstract fields of the databases where this option was available. The use of focused search terms was intended to identify studies that were directly relevant to the research question rather than studies in which cyber harassment was only briefly mentioned. The search strategy was intentionally focused because the purpose of the review was to examine research specifically related to female experiences of cyber harassment. However, studies examining related forms of online victimization were also considered when they provided meaningful evidence concerning female experiences, gendered harassment, or cyber-sexual victimization.

2.4 Eligibility Criteria

The review focused on scholarly research that was relevant to cyber harassment among females or related forms of technology-facilitated harassment and victimization. Studies were considered for inclusion if they addressed cyber harassment, cyber-sexual harassment, technology-facilitated sexual violence, image-based sexual harassment, or a closely related form of online victimization; included females or provided findings relevant to female experiences of harassment; offered substantive research findings or discussion pertinent to the



research question; were published in English; were published between 2020 and 2026; and were available as scholarly journal publications.

Studies were excluded when they were unrelated to cyber harassment or female victimization, did not provide meaningful information relevant to the research question, or fell outside the scope of the review. The inclusion of studies examining broader populations was permitted when those studies provided relevant findings concerning females, gender-related harassment, or specific forms of cyber victimization affecting women and girls. This approach allowed the review to capture evidence from different populations while maintaining its focus on female experiences.

2.5 Publication Period and Language

The search was limited to articles published between 2020 and 2026. This period was selected because digital communication and social media have changed rapidly, creating new forms and patterns of online victimization. Focusing on recent research allowed the review to capture current forms of cyber harassment and recent developments in the understanding of female victimization. Only English-language publications were considered. This criterion was used to maintain consistency in the interpretation and analysis of the selected studies.

2.6 Study Identification and Screening

Across the three databases, 11 articles were initially identified. JSTOR produced no relevant articles, SAGE Journals produced seven articles, and Academic Search Complete produced four additional articles.

The screening process was conducted in several stages. First, titles were reviewed to determine whether the articles were potentially relevant to cyber harassment and female victimization. Articles that were clearly unrelated to the research question were excluded at this stage. Second, abstracts were reviewed to determine whether the studies addressed cyber harassment, cyber violence, cyber-sexual harassment, or related forms of online victimization involving females. When the relevance of a study could not be determined from the title or abstract, the full text was reviewed.

The screening process resulted in the exclusion of three articles. Two excluded articles were identified through SAGE Journals and one through Academic Search Complete. These articles were excluded because they were unrelated to the research question and did not address cyber harassment, cyber violence, or female victimization in a meaningful way. Following the screening process, eight articles were included in the final review.

2.7 Data Extraction

Information was extracted from the included studies to identify the main characteristics and findings relevant to the research question. The review focused on information concerning the population studied, type of cyber harassment examined, context of victimization, vulnerability factors, psychological and social effects, offender-related patterns, and responses to harassment. The extracted information was then compared across the eight included studies. Attention was given to findings that appeared across more than one study, as these provided the basis for identifying broader patterns in the literature.

2.8 Study Quality and Relevance

The authors considered the relevance and research-based nature of each article during the screening process. Priority was given to studies that provided empirical evidence, substantive qualitative insights, or research-based analysis related to cyber harassment and female victimization. Articles that only briefly mentioned cyber harassment without providing meaningful findings relevant to the research question were excluded.

2.9 Data Synthesis

The findings of the eight included studies were examined comparatively to identify recurring patterns across different populations and forms of cyber harassment. The analysis focused on similarities and differences in the experiences of female victims, the forms of harassment identified, factors associated with vulnerability, psychological and emotional consequences, and responses to victimization.

The findings were first reviewed within individual studies and were then compared across studies. Similar findings were grouped, and recurring patterns were developed into broader themes.



This process resulted in four major themes:

1. Gendered and Normalized Online Harassment
2. Psychological and Emotional Consequences
3. Victim Vulnerability and Targeting
4. Barriers to Reporting and Support

These themes were used to organize the findings and provide an integrated understanding of what existing research shows about cyber harassment among females. Because the included studies examined different populations and forms of cyber harassment, the purpose of the synthesis was not to produce a statistical estimate of prevalence. Instead, the analysis focused on identifying common patterns and experiences across the available literature.

3. Results

3.1 Search and Study Selection

The database search identified 11 articles across JSTOR, SAGE Journals, and Academic Search Complete. JSTOR produced no relevant articles, while SAGE Journals produced seven articles and Academic Search Complete produced four additional articles. After the initial search, the titles and abstracts were reviewed to determine their relevance to cyber harassment, cyber violence, and female victimization. Three articles were excluded during the screening process. Two were identified through SAGE Journals and one through Academic Search Complete. These articles were excluded because they were unrelated to the research question and did not address cyber harassment, cyber violence, or female victimization in a meaningful way.

Following the screening process, eight articles were included in the final review. The selected studies examined different populations and forms of cyber harassment, including female university students, women receiving unsolicited explicit images, adult women experiencing cyber-sexual harassment, female athletes, adolescents, professors and students, sexual minorities, and female scientists.

3.2 Characteristics of Included Studies

The eight included articles examined cyber harassment and related forms of technology-facilitated victimization across different populations and settings. Although the studies differed in their specific research questions, they provided relevant information about female experiences, gendered harassment, psychological consequences, vulnerability, and responses to online victimization.

Table 1. Included Studies

Study	Population or setting	Main focus	Relevance to present review
Ayub and Malik (2020)	Female university students	Cyber harassment and social adjustment	Female experiences of cyber harassment and its relationship with self-efficacy and social adjustment
Durán and Rodríguez-Domínguez (2022)	Women	Unsolicited explicit images	Unsolicited explicit images as a form of sexual cyber-violence and associated emotional responses
Iroegbu et al. (2024)	Adult women	Psychological impact of cyber-sexual harassment	Psychological consequences associated with cyber-sexual harassment
Kavasoğlu et al. (2024)	Turkish female athletes	Instagram visibility and harassment	Online visibility, gender expectations, and harassment
Martínez Román et al. (2025)	Adolescents	Image-based sexual harassment and abuse	Victimization, perpetration, and normalization of image-based sexual behaviors



Study	Population or setting	Main focus	Relevance to present review
Pineda-Marín et al. (2025)	Professors and students	Cyber-sexual harassment scale	Cyber-sexual harassment within academic settings and power relationships
Smith et al. (2020)	Sexual minority populations	Sexual harassment	Risk of sexual harassment among sexual minorities
Samer et al. (2021)	Female scientists	Online harassment	Gender-based harassment directed toward women in scientific and public communication

The studies covered a range of populations, from adolescents and university students to professional women and female athletes. They also examined different forms of cyber harassment, including unwanted sexual images, cyber-sexual harassment, image-based abuse, and gender-based online harassment. This diversity allowed the review to identify patterns that appeared across different contexts.

3.3 Summary of Studies

1. Ayub, S., Malik, F. (2020). Experiences of Cyber Harassment and Social Adjustment in Female University Students: Moderating Role of Self-Efficacy. *Pakistan Journal of Psychological Research*, 35(3), 523-544. <https://doi.org/10.33824/PJPR.2020.35.3.28>

This study was conducted to examine how cyber harassment affects female university students, specifically focusing on their ability to socially adjust. The authors explain that cyber harassment has become a growing global issue due to

increased use of social media and digital communication. They also highlight that women are more likely to be victims and often do not report these experiences due to cultural and social pressures (p. 524–525). The purpose of the study was to understand the relationship between cyber harassment, self-efficacy, and social adjustment.

2. Durán, M., & Rodríguez-Domínguez, C. (2023). Sending of Unwanted Dick Pics as a Modality of Sexual Cyber-Violence: An Exploratory Study of Its Emotional Impact and Reactions in Women. *Journal of interpersonal violence*, 38(5-6), 5236–5261. <https://doi.org/10.1177/08862605221120906>

This study was conducted to explore a growing form of cyber sexual violence, receiving unsolicited explicit images, and to better understand its emotional impact on women. The authors explain that advances in technology and social media have created new opportunities for harassment, particularly against women, yet this specific behavior has not been widely researched (p. 5236–5237). The purpose of the study was to examine how common this experience is, what emotional responses it produces, and what social or psychological factors may influence those reactions.

3. 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. <https://doi.org/10.1177/08862605241231615>

This study was conducted to examine the psychological effect of cyber sexual harassment on adult women. The authors explain that although in-person sexual harassment has been widely studied, cyber sexual harassment has not received the same level of attention, even though the use of digital communication continue to increase. They point out that online harassment can be more harmful because it can occur instantly, repeatedly, and often anonymously, which makes it harder for victims to escape or control the situation (p. 3424–3425). The purpose of the study was to determine whether experiencing cyber sexual harassment is



associated with negative mental health outcomes such as anxiety, depression, trauma, and body image concerns.

4. Kavasoglu, İ., Eratlı Şirin, Y., & Uğurlu, A. (2024). A Space of One's Own? The Tensions of Being Visible on Instagram for Turkish Female Athletes. *Communication & Sport*, 12(2), 347-369.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/21674795231154913>

This study was conducted to explore how female athletes experience cyber harassment on social media, particularly Instagram. The authors explain that while social media provides opportunities for visibility, branding, and self-expression, it also exposes women to increased risk of harassment and gender-based violence. They wanted to better understand how cultural expectations, gender roles, and societal norms influence these online experiences, especially within a patriarchal society like Turkey (p. 347). The purpose of the study was to examine how female athletes navigate both empowerment and risk while maintaining an online presence.

5. Martínez Román, R., Lameiras Fernández, M., Adá Lameiras, A., & Rodríguez Castro, Y. (2026). Analysis of Image-Based Sexual Harassment and Abuse in Adolescents' Socio-Affective Relationships. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 41(3-4), 816-840.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/08862605251315767>

This study was conducted to examine how adolescents experience and understand image-based sexual harassment and abuse in online environments. The authors explain that the rise of social media and digital communication has created new forms of sexual violence, particularly through the sharing of images without consent. They also emphasize that many adolescents do not recognize these behaviors as harmful or as a form of abuse, which makes the issue even more concerning (p. 816-817). The purpose of the study was to explore both victimization and perpetration among adolescents and to better understand the motivations behind these behaviors.

6. Pineda-Marín, C., Vallejo-Medina, P., Guillén-Riquelme, A., Gonzalez-Ferrer, J., & Montesano, A. (2026). Design and Validation of the Cyber Sexual Harassment Scale-Professor Student. *Violence Against Women*, 32(2), 532-544. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10778012251319306>

This study was conducted to develop and validate a scale that measures cyber sexual harassment between professors and students. The authors explain that while sexual harassment has been widely studied, there is limited research focused specifically on online harassment within academic settings, particularly involving power dynamics between professors and students (p. 532-533). The purpose of the study was to create a reliable tool that can be used to better understand and measure this form of harassment.

7. Smith, D. M., Johns, N. E., & Raj, A. (2022). Do Sexual Minorities Face Greater Risk for Sexual Harassment, Ever and at School, in Adolescence? : Findings From a 2019 Cross-Sectional Study of U.S. Adults. *Journal of interpersonal violence*, 37(3-4), NP1963-NP1987. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260520926315>

This study was conducted to examine whether sexual minorities are at a greater risk of experiencing sexual harassment compared to heterosexual individuals. The authors explain that previous research has shown higher rates of victimization among sexual minorities, but there is limited research specifically focused on harassment, especially during adolescence (p. NP1964). The purpose of the study was to better understand these disparities and identify patterns of harassment across different groups.

8. Samer, C., Lacombe, K., & Calmy, A. (2021). Cyber harassment of female scientists will not be the new norm. *The Lancet. Infectious diseases*, 21(4), 457-458. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S1473-3099\(20\)30944-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/S1473-3099(20)30944-0)

This article was written to highlight the growing issue of cyber harassment directed toward female scientists, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. The



authors explain that women in science are already underrepresented in media and leadership roles. And when they do participate in public discussions, they are often targeted with harassment. This harassment is not focused on their research, but instead on their appearance, credibility, and gender. The authors wanted to bring awareness to how these experiences can discourage women from speaking publicly and contributing to scientific discussions (p. 457). The purpose of the article is to show how cyber harassment can silence women and negatively impact the spread of accurate scientific information.

3.4 Thematic Synthesis

The findings of the included studies were examined across populations and forms of cyber harassment to identify recurring patterns. Four major themes emerged from the synthesis: gendered and normalized online harassment, psychological and emotional consequences, victim vulnerability and targeting, and barriers to reporting and support.

3.4.1 Gendered and Normalized Online Harassment

Cyber harassment among females is strongly influenced by gender and is often normalized within online environments. Several of the included studies show that women and girls are specifically targeted through behaviors such as unsolicited explicit images, sexualized messages, image-based abuse, and other forms of gender-based online harassment (Durán & Rodríguez-Domínguez, 2022; Martínez Román et al., 2025; Kavasoğlu et al., 2024). Durán and Rodríguez-Domínguez (2022) found that 48.1% of women in their study reported receiving unsolicited explicit images. This finding highlights how widespread this form of sexual cyber-violence can be. Although recipients may experience anger, embarrassment, discomfort, or other negative reactions, the behavior continues to occur frequently.

The normalization of harmful online sexual behavior is also evident among adolescents. Martínez Román et al. (2025) found that adolescents may not always recognize image-based sexual harassment and abuse as harmful or as a form of abuse. This suggests that some forms of online harassment can become normalized through peer relationships and everyday digital communication. Kavasoğlu et al. (2024) provide another perspective by examining female athletes

and their experiences of being visible on Instagram. Social media can provide opportunities for visibility, self-expression, and professional development, but increased visibility can also expose women to gender-based harassment. Cultural expectations and gender roles influence how women are perceived and treated in these online environments.

The experiences of female scientists further demonstrate that cyber harassment can extend into professional and public spaces. Samer et al (2021) highlight how women in science may be targeted because of their appearance, gender, or credibility rather than the substance of their work. Such harassment can discourage women from participating in public discussions and can affect their willingness to communicate online. Taken together, these studies suggest that cyber harassment among females is not only a technological problem. It is also connected to gender inequality, sexualization, social expectations, and online norms that can make harmful behavior appear acceptable or routine.

3.4.2 Psychological and Emotional Consequences

A second major theme across the studies is the psychological and emotional impact of cyber harassment on female victims. Women who experience online harassment may report anxiety, fear, embarrassment, anger, discomfort, emotional distress, and reduced confidence (Iroegbu et al., 2024; Durán & Rodríguez-Domínguez, 2022; Kavasoğlu et al., 2023; Ayub & Malik, 2020). Iroegbu et al. (2024) specifically examined the psychological impact of cyber-sexual harassment and found that these experiences were associated with negative psychological outcomes, including anxiety, trauma, depression, and concerns about body image. These findings demonstrate that cyber-sexual harassment can have consequences that extend beyond the immediate online interaction.

Durán and Rodríguez-Domínguez (2022) also found that women commonly experienced anger, embarrassment, and discomfort after receiving unsolicited explicit images. These findings are important because unsolicited sexual content can sometimes be dismissed as a relatively minor form of online misconduct. The emotional responses reported in the study indicate that recipients may experience these interactions as harmful and distressing. Kavasoğlu et al. (2024) found that female athletes could experience fear and anxiety in response to online harassment, particularly when online interactions created concerns about safety outside the digital environment.



Ayub and Malik (2020) found that cyber harassment can affect self-efficacy and social adjustment among female university students. These findings suggest that cyber harassment may influence not only emotional well-being but also how victims interact socially and perceive their ability to manage their environment. The experiences of female scientists provide an additional example of the broader social consequences of cyber harassment. Persistent harassment can discourage women from participating in public discussions and may result in self-censorship.

Overall, the findings show that cyber harassment can have serious psychological, emotional, and social consequences. Victims may become more cautious in their online activities, reduce their participation in digital spaces, or change how they communicate with others.

3.4.3 Victim Vulnerability and Targeting

The third theme concerns the factors that make some females more vulnerable to cyber harassment than others. The studies indicate that victimization is influenced by age, social visibility, identity, peer relationships, and power differences. Martínez Román et al. (2025) identified adolescents as an important population in research on image-based sexual harassment and abuse. Adolescents may be particularly vulnerable because of frequent social media use, peer influence, and social pressures associated with relationships and online communication.

Female university students are another important population. Ayub and Malik (2020) found that female students experience cyber harassment within social environments where cultural and social pressures may discourage reporting. Pineda-Marín et al. (2025) highlight the role of power relationships in academic settings. Their study focuses on cyber-sexual harassment between professors and students and demonstrates the importance of examining how institutional relationships can shape opportunities for harassment.

Smith et al. (2020) found that sexual minorities face greater risks of sexual harassment compared with heterosexual individuals. This suggests that vulnerability may be shaped not only by gender but also by social identity and minority status. Kavasoğlu et al. (2024) demonstrate another form of vulnerability associated with online visibility. Female athletes who maintain a public presence

on social media may experience greater exposure to unwanted attention and gender-based harassment.

These findings demonstrate that cyber harassment victimization is influenced by specific social and situational factors. Certain groups may have greater exposure to potential offenders or may face greater difficulties in avoiding harmful interactions.

3.4.4 Barriers to Reporting and Support

A final theme across the studies concerns the barriers victims face when reporting cyber harassment and seeking help. Several studies indicate that women do not always use formal reporting systems and may instead rely on informal coping strategies or attempt to remove themselves from the interaction. Ayub and Malik (2020) found that cultural and social pressures can prevent female university students from reporting cyber harassment. Fear of stigma, victim-blaming, and negative judgment may discourage victims from seeking formal assistance.

Durán and Rodríguez-Domínguez (2022) found that women may use informal coping strategies such as blocking the sender or talking to friends after receiving unsolicited explicit images. Kavasoğlu et al. (2024) also identified concerns about the effectiveness of reporting mechanisms. Victims may be less willing to report harassment when they do not believe that reporting will result in meaningful action or consequences for offenders.

The experiences of female scientists show another consequence of inadequate responses. Persistent online harassment can discourage women from speaking publicly or participating in online discussions. Martínez Román et al. (2025) emphasize the importance of education and awareness in helping adolescents recognize harmful online behavior. Overall, the findings show that reporting barriers exist at both individual and institutional levels. Victims may experience stigma, fear, uncertainty, or a lack of confidence in reporting systems. Improving reporting mechanisms and support structures is therefore essential for addressing cyber harassment among females.

3.5 Cross-Theme Synthesis

The four themes identified in the review are closely connected. Gendered and normalized online behavior can create an environment in which harassment is more likely to occur or be tolerated. At the same time, characteristics such as age,



social visibility, identity, and power relationships can increase vulnerability to victimization.

The resulting harassment can produce psychological and emotional consequences, including fear, anxiety, embarrassment, discomfort, and reduced confidence. These consequences may influence how victims use digital platforms and may lead some women to reduce their online participation or avoid public communication.

Barriers to reporting can further complicate the situation. When victims fear stigma or do not believe that reporting systems will produce meaningful consequences, they may rely on informal coping strategies instead. This can reduce the visibility of cyber harassment and limit opportunities for intervention. The findings therefore suggest a pattern in which gendered online environments, victim vulnerability, harmful experiences, psychological consequences, and reporting barriers interact with one another. Cyber harassment should consequently be understood as a broader form of digital victimization rather than as a series of isolated online incidents.

3.6 Summary of Findings

The systematic review identified four major themes related to cyber harassment among females. First, cyber harassment is frequently gendered and can become normalized within online environments. Second, cyber harassment can have significant psychological, emotional, and social consequences. Third, certain groups may be particularly vulnerable because of age, identity, social visibility, peer relationships, or power dynamics. Fourth, victims may face barriers to reporting and obtaining effective support.

Overall, the findings indicate that cyber harassment among females is a multidimensional form of victimization that involves individual, social, technological, and institutional factors.

4. Discussion

This study aimed to examine what is currently known about cyber harassment among females through a systematic review and thematic synthesis of existing research. The review examined studies addressing different forms of cyber

harassment and related online victimization across several populations. The findings identified four major themes: gendered and normalized online harassment, psychological and emotional consequences, victim vulnerability and targeting, and barriers to reporting and support.

The findings suggest that cyber harassment among females is not simply an extension of traditional harassment into a new technological environment. Digital platforms can create additional opportunities for harassment because offenders can reach victims quickly, repeatedly, and sometimes anonymously. Online content can also be shared with large audiences and remain accessible after the initial incident. These characteristics can increase the reach and persistence of harassment and can make it more difficult for victims to control their experiences.

4.1 Cyber Harassment as a Gendered Form of Victimization

One of the strongest patterns identified in the review is the gendered nature of cyber harassment. The studies examined in this review show that women and girls are frequently exposed to sexualized messages, unsolicited explicit images, image-based abuse, and other forms of gender-based harassment (Durán & Rodríguez-Domínguez, 2022; Martínez Román et al., 2025; Kavasoğlu et al., 2024).

This finding is consistent with previous research on technology-facilitated sexual violence. Henry and Powell (2018) noted that technology can be used to facilitate forms of sexual violence and harassment that reproduce existing gender inequalities. The digital environment does not therefore remove the social conditions associated with gender-based victimization. Instead, existing inequalities can be reproduced through online communication.

The findings also suggest that some forms of harassment become normalized through repeated exposure. This is particularly important for adolescents, who may encounter harmful online sexual behaviors within peer relationships. The normalization of harassment has important implications for prevention. Simply telling women and girls to avoid unsafe online environments may not address the underlying problem. Prevention also needs to address the social attitudes and gender norms that contribute to the acceptance of harmful behavior.

4.2 Psychological and Social Consequences

The second major finding concerns the psychological and emotional effects of cyber harassment. The reviewed studies identified anxiety, fear, embarrassment,



anger, discomfort, trauma, reduced self-efficacy, and other negative experiences among victims (Ayub & Malik, 2020; Durán & Rodríguez-Domínguez, 2022; Iroegbu et al., 2024; Kavasoğlu et al., 2024).

These findings are important because cyber harassment can sometimes be viewed as less serious than face-to-face harassment because the offender and victim may not be physically present in the same location. The evidence reviewed in this study challenges this assumption. Harm can occur even when the interaction takes place entirely through digital communication. The psychological effects may also continue after the online interaction ends. Victims may change how they communicate, reduce their online activity, avoid public discussions, or become more cautious about interacting with others.

The findings concerning female scientists and other highly visible women are particularly important in this respect. When women withdraw from online discussions because of harassment, the consequences extend beyond individual victims. Harassment may reduce women's participation in professional and public spaces.

4.3 Vulnerability and Targeting

The third theme shows that cyber harassment is not experienced equally by all females. Age, social identity, online visibility, peer relationships, and power differences can influence vulnerability. Adolescents may be vulnerable because of frequent social media use and peer influence. University students may experience harassment within environments where social and institutional relationships affect their ability to respond. Female athletes and other public-facing women may experience increased exposure because their work requires them to maintain an online presence.

The findings concerning sexual minorities also demonstrate the importance of considering overlapping forms of vulnerability. Smith et al. (2020) found that sexual minorities face greater risks of sexual harassment than heterosexual individuals. These findings have implications for criminal justice responses. A general approach to cyber harassment may not adequately address the needs of different victim populations. Prevention and support programs should consider the specific circumstances that increase exposure to harassment.

4.4 Barriers to Reporting

The fourth theme concerns the difficulty victims may face when reporting cyber harassment. The review indicates that women may rely on blocking offenders, speaking with friends, or avoiding the online environment rather than using formal reporting mechanisms (Ayub & Malik, 2020; Durán & Rodríguez-Domínguez, 2022).

Victims may fear stigma or victim-blaming, may not know where to report an incident, or may believe that reporting will not lead to meaningful action. When victims do not trust reporting systems, they may decide that informal coping strategies are safer or more practical. This creates an important problem for criminal justice systems. Official reporting statistics may not reflect the full extent of cyber harassment because many incidents remain unreported. Underreporting can make the problem appear smaller than it is. Improving reporting systems therefore requires more than simply creating an online reporting mechanism. Victims need systems that are accessible, understandable, responsive, and capable of providing meaningful assistance.

4.5 Role of Online Environments

The findings also highlight the role of online environments in shaping cyber harassment. Digital platforms provide offenders with opportunities to communicate directly with victims, distribute harmful material, and reach large audiences. The ability to communicate repeatedly and the possibility of anonymity can reduce some of the immediate social consequences associated with face-to-face harassment. At the same time, online platforms can provide victims with tools for protection, including blocking, reporting, and restricting communication. However, the effectiveness of these tools depends on how accessible and responsive platform-based systems are.

The findings therefore suggest that responsibility for reducing cyber harassment cannot rest entirely with victims. Broader responsibility also exists among social media platforms, educational institutions, employers, policymakers, and criminal justice agencies.

4.6 Implications for Criminal Justice

The findings have several implications for criminal justice. First, cyber harassment should be recognized as a significant form of victimization rather than being treated as a minor consequence of online communication. The psychological



and social effects identified in the reviewed studies demonstrate that online harassment can have serious consequences. Second, criminal justice professionals need to understand the different forms cyber harassment can take. Unwanted explicit images, image-based abuse, sexualized communication, threats, stalking, and gender-based harassment may occur through different platforms and may require different responses.

Third, law enforcement and victim-support agencies should consider the reasons why victims may not report incidents. Improving awareness of reporting options is important, but it is equally important to ensure that victims receive appropriate responses after reporting. Finally, prevention should address the social conditions that normalize harassment. Education concerning consent, respectful online communication, digital citizenship, and gender-based violence may help reduce harmful behaviors, particularly among younger users.

4.7 Contribution to the existing literature

This review contributes to the existing literature by bringing together findings from studies that examine different forms of cyber harassment and different populations of females. Individual studies often focus on a specific form of harassment or a particular group, such as adolescents, university students, female athletes, or professional women. Examining these studies together makes it possible to identify patterns that extend across these different contexts.

The review shows that gender, vulnerability, psychological harm, and reporting barriers are closely connected. It also demonstrates that cyber harassment should not be understood only as an individual online interaction. It is influenced by broader social norms, gender expectations, power relationships, and characteristics of digital environments. At the same time, the relatively small number of studies included in the review shows that the evidence base remains limited. More research is needed to examine cyber harassment across different populations, cultures, platforms, and forms of victimization.

4.8 Implications for Future Research

Future research should examine cyber harassment among females using larger and more diverse samples. Research should also include populations that remain

less visible in the existing literature and examine how experiences differ across cultural and social contexts. Longitudinal research would be useful for understanding the longer-term effects of cyber harassment. More research is also needed on repeat victimization, the relationship between online and offline harassment, and how cyber harassment may escalate into other forms of victimization.

Future studies should also evaluate the effectiveness of existing reporting mechanisms. Understanding why victims choose to report or not report incidents can help identify weaknesses in current systems and improve victim support. Finally, additional research should examine the role of social media platforms in preventing and responding to harassment. Platform policies, moderation systems, reporting mechanisms, and responses to complaints may influence both the continuation of harassment and victims' willingness to seek help.

5. Policy Implications

The findings of this review have several implications for policy and practice. First, cyber harassment among females should be treated as a significant form of victimization rather than as a minor consequence of online communication. The studies reviewed in this research show that cyber harassment can have psychological, emotional, social, and professional consequences for victims.

Second, reporting systems should be made easier to access and use. Victims may avoid formal reporting because of stigma, fear of victim-blaming, uncertainty about where to report, or a lack of confidence that action will be taken. Law enforcement agencies, educational institutions, and online platforms should therefore provide clear and accessible reporting procedures. Victims should also receive information about what happens after a complaint is submitted.

Third, social media platforms have an important role in responding to cyber harassment. Platforms should continue to improve mechanisms for reporting harmful content, blocking offenders, and responding to complaints. Rapid responses may be particularly important in cases involving threats, sexual harassment, or the distribution of intimate or explicit material.

Fourth, prevention efforts should include education and awareness. Young people should be taught how to recognize harmful online behavior, understand consent, respond to harassment, and seek assistance. This is particularly



important for adolescents because some forms of image-based and sexual online behavior may become normalized within peer groups.

Fifth, policies should recognize that some groups may face greater risks than others. Adolescents, university students, female athletes, professional women, and members of sexual minority groups may experience different forms of vulnerability. Prevention and support programs should therefore be adapted to the needs of different populations rather than relying on a single approach.

Finally, criminal justice agencies, educational institutions, social media platforms, and victim-support organizations should work together to address cyber harassment. Cyber harassment occurs within digital environments, but its consequences can extend into education, employment, relationships, psychological well-being, and public participation. Effective responses therefore require cooperation across different institutions.

6. Limitations

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the review was limited to three databases: JSTOR, SAGE Journals, and Academic Search Complete. Relevant studies available through other databases may therefore not have been identified. The limited database coverage may have reduced the number and diversity of studies included in the review.

Second, the search used a relatively narrow set of search terms, including “cyber harassment among females” and “female cyber harassment.” Other studies may have used different terminology, such as technology-facilitated sexual violence, online abuse, image-based sexual abuse, cyber-sexual harassment, online misogyny, or digital harassment. The use of focused search terms may therefore have resulted in some relevant studies being missed.

Third, the review was limited to English-language publications published between 2020 and 2026. Studies published in other languages or before 2020 may have provided additional evidence concerning cyber harassment among females.

Fourth, only eight articles were included in the final review. The relatively small number of studies limits the extent to which the findings can be generalized to all females or all forms of cyber harassment. The included studies also examined

different populations and forms of online victimization, which means that their findings cannot always be directly compared.

Fifth, the included studies differed in their research focus and populations. Some studies focused specifically on females, while others examined broader populations but included findings relevant to female experiences. This variation was useful for identifying broader patterns but also creates limitations when interpreting the findings specifically in relation to females.

Finally, the review relied on findings reported in previously published studies. The quality, methods, samples, and measures of those studies may differ. The findings of this review should therefore be understood as a synthesis of the available evidence rather than as a definitive estimate of the prevalence or overall impact of cyber harassment among females. Future systematic reviews should expand the number of databases searched, use broader search terms, include additional languages where possible, and incorporate a larger and more diverse body of research.

7. Conclusion

This study examined what is currently known about cyber harassment among females through a systematic review and thematic synthesis of existing research. Eight studies were included in the review, and four major themes were identified: gendered and normalized online harassment, psychological and emotional consequences, victim vulnerability and targeting, and barriers to reporting and support.

The findings show that cyber harassment is closely connected to gender, social norms, online visibility, and other factors that can increase vulnerability. Women and girls may experience different forms of online harassment, including unwanted explicit images, cyber-sexual harassment, image-based abuse, and gender-based online attacks. These experiences can produce emotional and psychological harm and may also affect women's participation in digital and public spaces.

The review also shows that reporting remains a significant challenge. Victims may avoid formal reporting because of stigma, fear, uncertainty, or a lack of confidence in existing systems. Improving reporting mechanisms and victim support is therefore an important part of addressing cyber harassment.



Overall, cyber harassment among females should be understood as a broader form of digital victimization rather than as isolated online incidents. Addressing the problem requires attention to individual experiences as well as gender norms, online environments, institutional responses, and criminal justice practices. Future research should expand the evidence base, examine longer-term effects, and evaluate the effectiveness of prevention and reporting strategies.

STATEMENTS

Ethical Approval

Not applicable. This study is a systematic literature review and does not involve primary data collection from human participants, animals, or sensitive personal data. All data analysed were derived from previously published peer-reviewed articles, institutional reports, and grey literature available in the public domain. No ethical approval was required for this research.

Consent to Participate

Not applicable. This study does not involve human participants, surveys, interviews, or any form of primary data collection that would require informed consent. The research is based exclusively on the analysis of existing published literature and publicly available documents.

Consent to Publish

Not applicable. This manuscript does not contain any person's data, images, or identifiable information. All authors have reviewed and approved the final manuscript for publication.

Data Availability Statement

All data analysed during this systematic review are included in this published article. The search strategy, eligibility criteria, and data extraction protocols are fully documented to ensure transparency and reproducibility. The data-extraction workbook used during the review process is available from the corresponding

author upon reasonable request. No primary data were collected, and no datasets were generated or analysed beyond those reported in the included studies.

Authors' Individual Contributions

Shani Allen contributed to the conceptualization and methodology of the study, carried out data collection and analysis, and prepared the original manuscript.

Praveenrao Bolli (Corresponding Author) contributed to the conceptualization, provided theoretical guidance and supervision, critically revised the manuscript for important intellectual content, and gave final approval for submission.

Both authors reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript and agreed to be fully accountable for all aspects of the work.

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Competing Interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Declaration of Generative AI Use

The authors declare that ChatGPT (GPT-5.5-mini) was used in some cases solely for language-related assistance, including grammar checking, spelling correction, and improving manuscript clarity and readability. Generative AI was not used to develop research ideas or contribute to the substantive intellectual content of the manuscript. The authors remain fully responsible for the accuracy, originality, and integrity of the research and the final manuscript.



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