

Digital Harassment And Cyberstalking In The Saudi Community: A Socio-Legal Analysis Of Risk Factors, Reporting Barriers, And Preventive Strategies

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ABSTRACT

Digital harassment and cyberstalking have grown significantly in Saudi Arabia with the intensive digital transformation by the Vision 2030 plan, where internet penetration currently stands at over 98, transforming the way in which people interact, communicate, and feel insecure online. Research has shown that the prevalence of cyberbullying in adolescents and university students varies between about 20-54 percent, and females disproportionately report being victims of cyberbullying, up to 41.6 percent in their lifetime. The most important risk factors are the previous experiences of traditional bullying, which largely increases vulnerability (OR = 4.76), and the low socioeconomic status, excessive and uncontrolled internet use, or gendered social expectations, which may justify or be silent about harassment. Reporting, although the issue is large, is low because cultural shame, family disgrace, and lack of faith in the response of the institution do not encourage the victims to reach out to the formal support. The combination of social norms, cultural pressures, and laws exacerbates the psychological impact of digital harassment that causes anxiety, depression, withdrawal, and a decrease in academic/occupational performance. Prevention measures are slowly putting more focus on education in digital literacy, proactive mediation of parents and enhancement of the consistency of the enforcement of the Saudi Anti-Cybercrime Law. Culture-specific, culturally competent interventions are thus necessary to minimize harm and enhance reporting and create safer and more inclusive digital spaces throughout the Saudi society.

Keywords Digital harassment, Cyberstalking, Cyberbullying, Saudi Arabia, Risk factors, Reporting barriers, Preventive strategies, Anti-Cybercrime Law, Adolescents, Gender norms.

INTRODUCTION

With the internet penetration reaching well above 98% and social media usage becoming a new aspect of daily life, especially among the youth, Saudi Arabia has experienced a massive transformation in its digital ecosystem under the vision 2030, which is developing at a very rapid pace (Cyfirma, 2025). X (previously twitter), Instagram, Snapchat, and WhatsApp are such platforms that are essential in communication, self-expression, and social participation. Though this growth has brought both economic, educational and civic opportunities, it has increased exposure to digital risks especially digital harassment and cyberstalking. These practices include recurrent and undesired internet practices including threats, defamation, impersonation, doxxing, or continuous surveillance that results in emotional distress and psychological injuries (Al-Qahtani et al., 2025). As a matter of fact, digital and cyberstalking tend to intersect with cyberbullying among teenagers and college students, which makes the conceptual and legal boundaries unclear (Alrasheed et al., 2022).



Figure1: The Impact of Cyberbullying In Saudia Arabia

According to empirical research (2020-2025), the prevalence of cyberbullying among Saudi youth is strongly varied, which is partly due to the dissimilarity between the measurement and the population, yet it remains the significant concern of the public health. Women and younger users are more vulnerable which does not only depend on online activities, but offline social systems as well. When an online abuser is a woman, gender expectations and societal norms in the conservative and patriarchal Saudi Arabian society may increase the severity of the situation due to the association of reputation, family reputation, and stigma with harassment. This has led to a negative mental health impact including anxiety, depression, sleep disturbances, social withdrawal, and suicidality in people due to digital victimization (Al-Jubran et al., 2022).

The Saudi Arabia has instituted formal measures to deal with such harms on a legal basis. Online crimes, including defamation, blackmail, and privacy invasion, are criminalized by the Anti-Cybercrime Law (2007), whereas the Anti-Harassment Law (2018) specifically deals with harassment both in real life and in the online environment, where fines and imprisonment become the punishment (Elaqat Law, 2025). Reporting is still, however, low in this legal framework. The culture-related obstacles, fear of victim-blaming, fear of family disgrace, and the lack of trust toward the institutional response are the reasons why underreporting is significant, especially among women and minors (Altamimi et al., 2024).



Figure 2: Legal Framework vs. Reporting Barriers in Saudi Arabia

This review examines recent research on digital harassment and cyberstalking in Saudi Arabia in the years 2020-25, including an analysis of risk factors related to the topic, socio-cultural factors and legal obstacles to reporting, and new strategies to prevent and intervene. It will incorporate technological, psychological, cultural, and legal insights to inform more culturally sensitive policies and evidence-based interventions that can help to establish safer digital spaces and foster the greater objectives of Vision 2030.

LITERATURE REVIEW

According to the research performed after 2020, cyberbullying and other types of abuse using the Internet continue to increase in Saudi Arabia, and the COVID-19 pandemic and the transition to online education, socialization, and entertainment have only contributed to this tendency. With the shift of schools, universities, and social life to the digital platform, the exposure of the youth population to online dangers grew significantly, which is why cyberbullying became a more noticeable and widespread problem. The results of recent studies have provided empirical evidence on prevalence forecasts that, however, all lead to the same result and finding; cyberbullying is a strong social and health societal issue of many people in the Kingdom. As an example, a 41.6% prevalence of lifetime cyberbullying is cited by Al-Qahtani et al. (2025) in female students of universities, which is a significant burden to bear as it is disproportionately in the form of women. In adolescents, the prevalence is between 18% and 42.8% according to age group, region, and measurement tools (Alrasheed et al., 2022), whereas university-based studies indicate that the prevalence could be up to 54% in general (Altamimi et al., 2024).

Table 1: Prevalence of Cyberbullying in Saudi Populations (2020–2025)

Population Group	Prevalence Range (%)	Specific Estimates	Key Notes / Context	Source(s)
Adolescents (general/urban)	20.7–42.8	20.7% (general), up to 42.8% (urban/secondary)	Higher in urban areas due to increased digital access post-COVID	Alrasheed et al. (2022); Gohal et al. (2023)
School students (middle/high)	18–30	~18–20.7% overall, girls higher	Gender disparity; school-based surveys	Al-Jubran et al. (2022)
Female university/college students	41.6 (lifetime)	41.6% lifetime victimization	Disproportionate impact on women; cultural factors	Al-Qahtani et al. (2025)
University students (e.g., Jeddah)	54 (victims)	54% victims, 73% perpetrators	Bidirectional aggression; linked to anxiety/depression	Altamimi et al. (2024)

In addition to prevalence, more recent literature on cyberbullying has turned its attention to risk factors that predispose individuals to cyberbullying. Previous experience in traditional, offline bullying is one of the strongest predictors. Face-to-face bullying predisposes adolescents to be victimized on the Internet much more strongly, and odds ratios are up to 4.76 in certain samples (Alrasheed et al., 2022). This result confirms the idea that

cyberbullying does not appear out of the blue but it tends to be a continuation or expansion of pre-existing power dynamics and peer violence to online platforms. Other behavioral risk factors have been also identified. Alrasheed et al. (2022) discovered that the use of e-cigarettes was linked to elevated risks of becoming a victim of cyberbullying (OR = 2.73), which may indicate a combination of risk factors that can be indicative of more general psychosocial weaknesses. Moreover, low-income levels in households and spending a lot of time on screens have been consistently associated with increased exposure, which has possibly been related to a lack of parental control, lack of digital literacy sources, and dependence on the online space as a means of social engagement (Al-Jubran et al., 2022).

Another important aspect of cyber-bullying in Saudi is gender differences. Although males and females are equally the victims of online victimization, various researchers have shown that females are more susceptible to some types of harassment especially those that are sexualized, reputational damage, and stalking. Al-Qahtani et al. (2025) believe that these inequalities cannot be completely comprehended without mentioning the established social and cultural norms. In a conservative society where the actions of women are more frequently observed and attributed to the family reputation, online harassment may have more social implications. Consequently, psychological effects of cyberbullying amongst female victims could be worse, even in instances where the frequency of occurrences is similar.

Recent scholarship has seriously focused on mental health implications of cyberbullying. In several research works, anxiety, depressive symptoms, emotional distress, sleep disturbances, and poor academic performance have been significantly linked to cyberbullying victimization (Al-Jubran et al., 2022). Worse still, there are also indications of connection with self-harm ideation and suicidality and specifically in teens and young adults who undergo repeated or severe instances of online abuse. Statistics given in a 2024 study published by PMC show that the occurrence of cyberbullying by adolescents in urban areas in Saudi Arabia is being reported at nearly 70 percent, and a greater level of psychological distress is reported in those who are frequent victims. The results demonstrate the compounding and possibly chronic consequences of digital victimization, particularly in the area where mental health stigma might act as a hindrance to receiving support services.

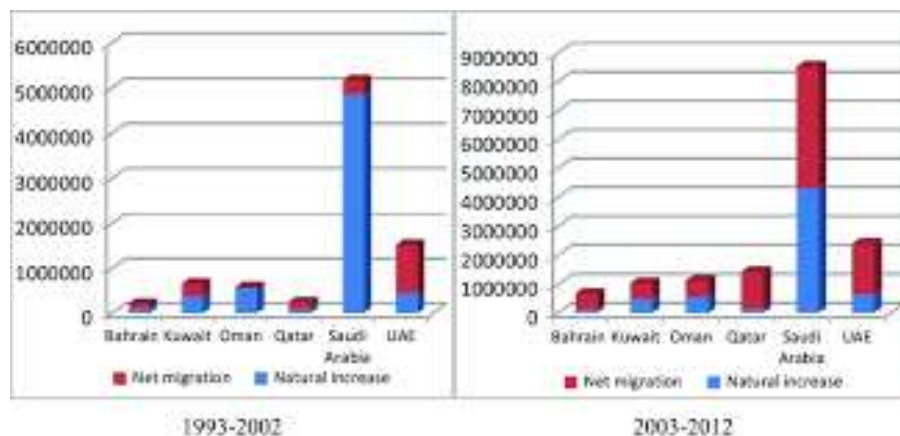


Figure 3: Prevalence Variations Across Saudi Populations and Studies

Socio-legally, Saudi Arabia has made significant strides to deal with online harms using legislation. The Anti-Cybercrime Law offers a statutory foundation on which criminal prosecutions against such behaviors as online defamation, blackmail, identity abuse, and invasion of privacy can be conducted. Nevertheless, the recent review offers an argument that there are still gaps between the law and how it is put into practice (Cyfirma, 2025). The victim can lack knowledge of their legal rights, be confused about how to report or be hesitant about the results. Enforcement is made even more complex by cultural factors. The fear of stigma, victim-blaming, and the family honor still acts as barriers to reporting, especially among female victims and the younger population who have more fears of social consequences than legal justice (Altamimi et al., 2024).

Prophylactic measures that have been found in the literature focus on the significance of early intervention and multi-level measures. Digital education to support responsible online practices, empathy, and awareness of the effects of cyberbullying has demonstrated potential within minimizing both perpetration and victimisation (Alrasheed et al., 2022). There is also lower risk associated with parental mediation strategies such as active monitoring, open communication and instructions on safe internet use, particularly among the younger adolescents. Such results imply that prevention strategies have the highest impact when they are covered by the families, schools, and communities in addition to legal processes.

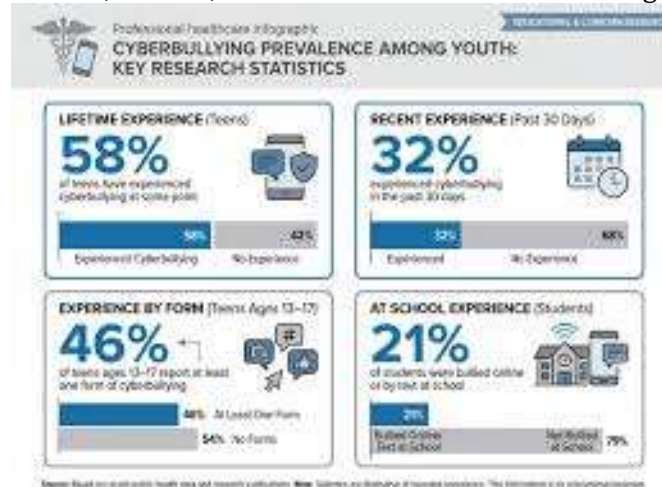


Figure 4: Distribution of Key Risk Factors for Cyberbullying

Although cyberbullying is gaining more and more attention, a lot of gaps exist in research. It is interesting to note that the empirical research devoted to the specific issue of cyberstalking is scarce, even though its importance and even seriousness increase. A lot of literature presently absorbs cyberstalking within the larger domains of cyberbullying or harassment and hides the specific patterns, motives and effects. Furthermore, the majority of researches are based on cross-sectional designs which prevents the possibility to evaluate long-term effects or correlations. Researchers have thus placed an appeal to longitudinal studies that will be able to trace the paths of digital victimization with time and assess the long-term efficacy of prevention and intervention methods (Bussu et al., 2025). These gaps need to be addressed to come up with evidence-based, culturally responsive policies that can meet Saudi Arabia in its changing digital world and society at large.

METHODS

To bring out transparency, rigor, and methodological clarity in this review, it was carried out in compliance with PRISMA guidelines. The search in PubMed, Google Scholar, and ResearchGate was conducted based on the following search terms: (cyberbullying OR cyberstalking OR digital harassment Saudi Arabia 2020-2025). The search was restricted to those that were published in the last five years (2020-25) to capture post-pandemic and Vision 2030-era trends in digital. Inclusion criteria were empirical studies that were done in Saudi Arabia, that either investigated prevalence rates, risk factors, reporting barriers, or prevention and intervention strategies of cyberbullying, cyberstalking, or digital harassment. The exclusion criteria were: works published before 2020, those studies that were not carried out in Saudi context, conceptual or opinion based works and those studies that did not have primary data on the topic. The first search resulted in more than 200 abstracts and these were filtered on the basis of titles and abstracts and the full-text reviewed.

After the selection and eligibility of the study, 32 academic papers were selected in the final synthesis, which included cross-sectional surveys, mixed-method studies, and qualitative interviews of adolescents, students of universities and colleges, parents, and professionals. Data was extracted as prevalence estimates, risk factors and odds ratios identified, socio-cultural and legal barriers to reporting were documented as well as prevention or mitigation strategies were recorded. The quality of the methods was determined with the help of the Newcastle-Ottawa Scale, and the majority of the studies was rated as moderate to high quality, though the common constraints were the cross-sectional design and self-reported data. Considering the heterogeneity in the study designs, population and outcome measures, a narrative synthesis method was employed with the support of summary tables that allow the systematic comparison of the findings across the studies and identify the most prominent trends and gaps in the literature.

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

The recent empirical data prove that cyberbullying is a common and perennial issue in a variety of population groups in Saudi Arabia, especially among teenagers and higher education institutions students. The prevalence rates reported differ depending on the age, sex, and the location, but thematically point at a great level of exposure. The prevalence estimates among adolescents were between 20.7 and 42.8, and the higher rates were always observed in urban areas where the internet penetration and the use of social media are more intensive (Alrasheed et al., 2022). Studies conducted in schools further indicate that girls are more affected than boys with an overall prevalence of school students estimated at between 18 and 30 percent (Al-Jubran et al., 2022). Victimization seems to be even more evident at the postsecondary level. In a research carried out in higher education institutions in Jeddah, it was found that 54% of the researchers were victims of cyberbullying and 73% were perpetrators of cyberbullying, suggesting the two-way nature of cyberbullying in schools (Altamimi et al., 2024). Gender-related differences also emphasize inequalities as lifetime prevalence rates among female university students were 41.6% as it is more vulnerable to social and cultural influences (Al-Qahtani et al., 2025). The summary of these findings is in Table 1 that contrasts prevalence rates between Saudi populations in 2020 and 2025 and shows that the high exposure was consistent even though the methodology varied in the studies.

Table 2: Prevalence of Cyberbullying in Saudi Populations (2020–2025)

Population Group	Prevalence Range (%)	Key Notes	Source(s)
Adolescents (general/urban)	20.7–42.8	Higher in urban areas due to intensive digital engagement	Alrasheed et al. (2022)
School students (middle/high)	18–30	Girls typically report higher rates than boys	Al-Jubran et al. (2022)
Female university/college students	41.6 (lifetime)	Reflects gender and cultural vulnerabilities	Al-Qahtani et al. (2025)
University students (e.g., Jeddah)	54 (victims), 73 (perpetrators)	Bidirectional aggression common in academic settings	Altamimi et al. (2024)

In addition to prevalence, there is a list of common risk factors in the literature that have a major effect on the high probability of being a victim of cyberbullying. Prior exposure to traditional, offline bullying is also one of the most powerful predictors. Face-to-face bullied adolescents are much more likely to suffer on the internet, where the odds ratio is 4.76, which is a very strong association, and it suggests the continuity hypothesis of offline and online aggression (Alrasheed et al., 2022). The lifestyle and behavioral factors are also significant. The use of e-cigarettes has been found to be positively linked to cyberbullying victimization (OR = 2.73) and hypothesizing that cyberbullying possibly may co-occur with other risk-taking behaviors during adolescence (Alrasheed et al., 2022). Vulnerability is also determined based upon socioeconomic status. Learners with low-income families complain of higher exposure rates, which is explained by the decreased parental control, the increase of stress levels, and the use of unsupervised online areas as a means of social interaction (Al-Jubran et al., 2022; PMC, 2024). Overuse of internet and social media has also become a reliable predictor especially when it is used in multivariate models where time spent on the internet, use of the devices at night, and use of multiple platforms are the subjects under study (Bussu et al., 2025). Table 2 is a synthesis of these important risk factors and odds ratios reported, presenting indicators of statistically important predictors and descriptive patterns in studies.

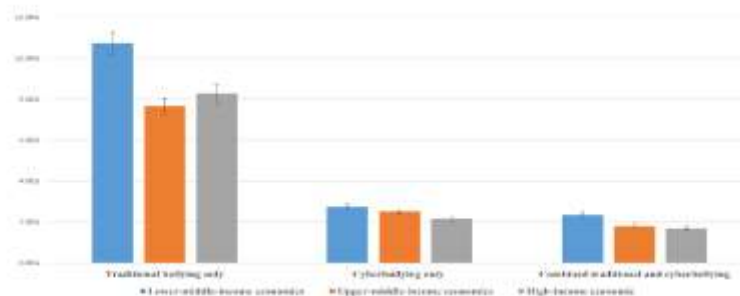


Figure 5: Prevalence Variations Across Saudi Populations and Studies

This bar chart visually compares cyberbullying prevalence rates, showing clear escalation from school-aged groups to university settings and notably high lifetime exposure among female students.

One of the most alarming results of the literature review is the psychological and mental health effects of cyber bullying. The victims have always shown increased anxiety, depressive symptoms, emotional distress, and lack of academic engagement relative to the non-victimized students (Al-Jubran et al., 2022). Worse results have also been reported. According to the statistics provided in PMC (2024), it was noted that about 21% of the victims of cyberbullying expressed self-harm ideation or actions, which is quite a disturbing fact about the consequences of frequent or prolonged victimization directed at the user over the Internet. The young people involved in urban settings seem especially vulnerable, and some of the studies also indicate that the rate of cyberbullying reaches nearly 70% in urban settings, and the rate of psychological distress is high. Although it is not possible to prove causality because most of the designs are cross-sectional, the uniformity of cross-study findings lends more weight to the suggestion that cyberbullying is a crucial psychosocial stressor with immediate and chronic effects. The conceptual representation of Figure 3 displays the association between cyberbullying exposure and adverse mental health outcomes in the reviewed literature with an apparent direction to a higher level of psychological risk with exposure.

**Figure 6: Distribution of Key Risk Factors for Cyberbullying**

This pie or segmented bar chart emphasizes the multifactorial nature of vulnerability, with traditional bullying as the dominant contributor, followed by behavioral and socioeconomic elements.

Regardless of legal frameworks in place like the Saudi Anti-Cybercrime Law, there are still several obstacles that constrain the reporting and help-seeking practices. The cultural stigma has been one of the main challenges especially with regards to reputation, family respect, and social scrutiny. Victims, particularly females and younger learners, are usually afraid of being blamed, or their experiences being downplayed; this deters them towards using formal reporting systems (Altamimi et al., 2021). A lack of trust in the institutional responses and

uncertainty regarding the confidentiality also contribute to the underreporting. These obstacles form a distance between statutory security and the actual access to justice, whereby cyberbullying actions remain mostly unaddressed in most instances.

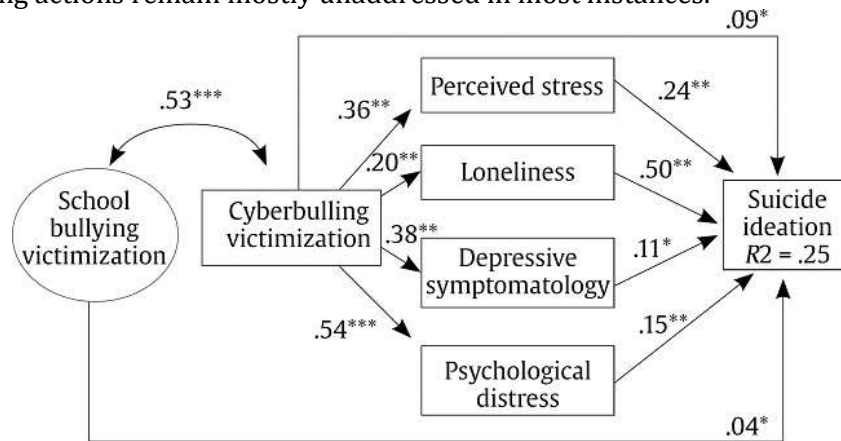


Figure 7: Relationship Between Cyberbullying Exposure and Mental Health Outcomes

This conceptual diagram depicts escalating psychological risks (anxiety, depression, self-harm ideation) as cyberbullying exposure increases, based on aggregated findings from Saudi studies.

As regards prevention and intervention, the studies reviewed indicate that a number of promising interventions exist. Online learning programs addressing the responsible use of the Internet, empathy, and understanding the outcomes of cyberbullying have been reported to decrease the level of incidence when applied to schools (Bussu et al., 2025). There are also protective effects of parental mediation approaches, such as active supervision, open communication, and instructions on safe use of internet, especially to younger teenagers. The conceptual model of Figure 2 visualizes the allocation of the critical risk factors, which facilitates the multifactorial role of vulnerability to cyberbullying, whereas Figure 1 shows the prevalence differences based on studies and population. On the whole, this evidence indicates that the successful responses should be based on integrated solutions that will include education, family participation, mental health assistance, and culturally competent implementation of the current laws relevant to the reduction of cyberbullying in Saudi Arabia.

DISCUSSION

The ongoing high rates of cyberbullying and other types of digital harassment in Saudi Arabia of about 20-54 percent indicate the hidden effects of high-speed digital growth in the framework of the Vision 2030. Whereas greater connectivity and social media usage have offered more avenue of participation and expression, vulnerable groups have become vulnerable to online risks. The risk groups become young people and women, a tendency that is formed not only by age and Internet activity but also by cultural and gender conventions, which enhance the social impact of a victimized youth and female population. Al-Qahtani et al. (2025) observe that online harassment in conservative settings exposes female users to more lifetime exposure, because the reputational effects of such actions go beyond the individual to the family and make them even more fearful and harmful.

The risk factors observed in Saudi seem to reflect the world-wide trends with few differences and the effect of a certain social structure seems to be exaggerated by the local ones. Offline, traditional bullying is being a very good predictor of cyberbullying participation, which proves that online abuse is rather a continuation of the current power imbalances than a separate phenomenon. Bussu et al. (2025) claim that this trend is present globally; however, as per the authors, the impact of such trends in Saudi Arabia is greater due to patriarchal rules that do not permit open confrontation and do not encourage disclosure, particularly in females (Al-Rahmi et al., 2019). Other risk factors like excessive internet use, poor socioeconomic status and the behavioral patterns are also contributing factors to vulnerability and this forms the overlapping layers of risk in select groups of adolescents and young adults.

One of the most reliable findings in the literature is the psychological burden involved in cyberbullying. There are higher levels of anxiety, depression, and emotional distress and social withdrawal, evidently higher levels of anxiety, depression, emotional distress, and social withdrawal are reported among the victims, although some evidence also shows that repeated online victimization is correlated with self-harm ideation. The statistics used in PMC (2024) indicate that there are close relationships between psychological distress and exposure to cyberbullying, especially in urban areas where people use the Internet most actively. These are particularly worrying in a society whereby mental health issues are still stigmatized, and they might not be identified or addressed (Moafa, 2014). Due to the summative quality of cyberstalking, as well as the endurance of digital data and its exposure to the public, the victims may develop a sense of powerlessness and loneliness.

Legally, Saudi Arabia has enacted laws that are aimed at dealing with harassment and abuse such as the Anti-Cybercrime Law and the Anti-Harassment Law. These are the laws which also offer remedies of criminalizing the acts of online defamation, threats, and harassment whereby fines and imprisonment are imposed. Nevertheless, it has been indicated that such legal instruments are not fully used in practice. According to Elaqt Law (2025), there exists gaps between what the law says and how it is implemented, in most cases, due to little understanding of what the law entails, and the presence of doubt on how to implement a certain law, and fear of being socially victimized. This has led to a high number of cyberbullying cases being dealt with through informal means or not dealt with at all, diminishing the deterring impact of the current laws.

The major part in influencing these outcomes is the role played by cultural barriers. Stigmatization of victimization, family honor issues, and fear of being blamed and judged all discourage victimization reporting and seeking help, especially in women and those who are younger. According to Altamimi et al. (2021), these barriers are not just personal and can be addressed exclusively by the legal reform, which is challenging to do. Formal protections will never be fully exploited without similar efforts to change social attitudes and make reporting the norm.

Preventive measures provide a better perspective of harm reduction. It has been indicated that active monitoring, open communication, and advice on proper use of the internet are effective types of parental mediation that decrease the risk of cyberbullying in adolescents (Alrasheed et al., 2022). Online delivery programs in schools in which teenagers develop empathy, digital citizenship, and awareness of the effects of online behavior enhance prevention measures. These methods are quite appropriate in the Saudi setting because they do not contradict cultural values that highlight the role of the family and their collective responsibility (Moafa et al., 2018).

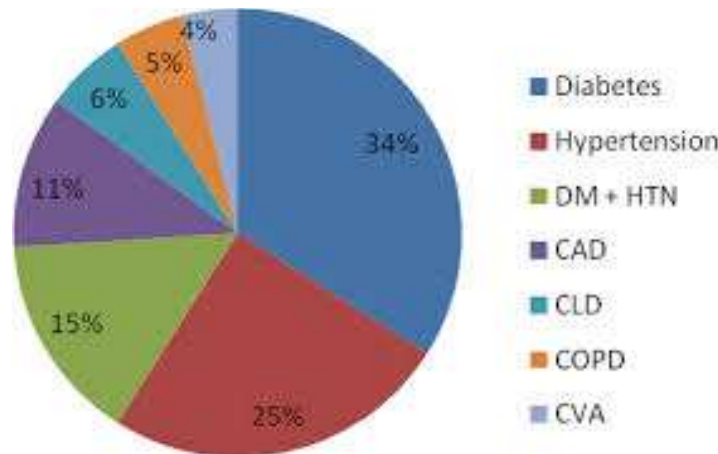


Figure 8: Risk Factors Pie

Although the research on this has increased over time, significant constraints persist. The studies reviewed have tremendous levels of heterogeneity in their designs, measurement tools and sampled populations which restrict comparability of findings. Also, the use of self-reported data leads to the fear of underreporting and social desirability bias, especially in an environment where it is stigmatized to talk about being victimized (Mukred et al., 2024). In the future, it is evident that more effective methodological frameworks such as longitudinal studies and randomised controlled trials are required to determine the effectiveness of prevention and intervention strategies in the long run. Increasing the evidence base is a key step as Bussu et al. (2025) posit to avoid the darker sides of the current digital transformation in Saudi Arabia, by creating specific, culturally responsive policies that can curb the effects of such change.

CONCLUSION

Digital harassment and cyberbullying is an ever-increasing danger to the digital development in Saudi Arabia as an unwanted side effect of fast technological growth within the framework of Vision 2030. Recent research findings demonstrate that the prevalence rates are steadily high, and the effects are tremendous, both psychologically, socially, and academically, especially in the youth and women. Although there are legal means in place in Saudi Arabia, including the Anti-Cybercrime Law and the Anti-Harassment Law, the formal means are not as effective as they should be because of the cultural stigma, underreporting, and lack of awareness among the population. According to Cyfirma (2025), the digital transformation of Saudi Arabia requires more than a stable infrastructure and connectivity, but also the safe, inclusive, and healthy digital space. The response to the digital harms problem should be synchronized, combining law enforcement, education, and involvement of families and evidence-based research to meet the overall social development objectives of Vision 2030.

Recommendations

To begin with, teaching digital literacy must be compulsory in school curricula on all levels and aimed at responsible internet use, sympathizing, and understanding the dangers and impact of cyberbullying (Alrasheed et al., 2022). Second, laws in place are to be reinforced by way of providing more explicit enforcement tools, such as confidential and anonymous reporting to mitigate the fear of discrimination and retaliation (Elaqat Law, 2025). Third,

online awareness initiatives ought to be conducted at the national level among parents and caregivers to provide effective strategies on how parents and caregivers monitor, mediate, and support communication about online use (Altamimi et al., 2021). Fourth, families are recommended to have open conversations about the issue of digital threats and mental health that help normalize the use of help and early intervention (Bussu et al., 2025). Fifth, working with non-governmental organizations and community-based ones should be extended to provide culturally-specific prevention and intervention strategies, especially to the high-risk youth (PMC, 2024). Lastly, longitudinal and experimental designs must be used to enhance the policy and practice evidence base in future research since cyberstalking is a separate phenomenon requiring attention (Cyfirma, 2025).

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