

**FEAR OF CYBERCRIME: CHALLENGES AND PERCEPTIONS  
(A FIELD STUDY AMONG STUDENTS)**

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*The present study examines how direct and indirect cyber victimization impacts fear of cybercrime. The statistical population of this study consists of a number of students in University of Tehran, with a sample of 350 students selected through simple random sampling carried out from September 1 to December 2, 2018. Our findings indicated a high rate of direct victimization in financial crimes for men as well as direct victimization in sexual offenses, nuisance, and threats of committing financial offenses for women. Furthermore, indirect victimization of women as a result of sexual offenses was significantly greater than men. A high level of fear of sex crimes in cyberspace was observed among women. Although men and women differ in terms of the type as well as the rate of victimization, the users rarely adopt preventive measures in the cyberspace.*

**Introduction.** *Fear of Crime.* A survey-based framework for studying victimology was developed. This framework was used to clarify victims' experiences, confrontation with these experiences, fear of crime, and its different dimensions in connection to news stories covered by the media. Thus, surveys served as a cause leading to the emergence of a phenomenon known as public fear of crime (Gunther, 1991:4).

However, fear of crime has generally received little attention in the history of Criminology, with no major figure of criminology in the nineteenth century regarding this topic as an issue worth the attention; the situation, however, seems to have started to change in the early twentieth century. Apparently, many researchers adhered to the idea that the conventional, yet thought-provoking, concepts of fear of crime were directly related to objective risks, and this led them to assume that the approaches to controlling fear of crime were dependent on strategies resulting in controlling crimes. Although the serious consequences of victimization had been revealed to criminologists, none of them strongly believed that fear *per se* can act as a debilitating factor. However, five decades ago (in the 1960s), the US President's Commission on Law Enforcement and Administration of Justice profoundly influenced the course of criminological research conducted in those years, fundamentally shifting the criminological attention to [psychological] consequences of crime, by making a minor, yet thorough, observation: "The most harmful effect of violent crimes has been fear, an issue that should not be underestimated." In their attempt to completely understand social [and psychological] consequences of crime, they found that attentions should not be simply focused on those directly victimized by crime because although these direct victims are undoubtedly important, one must also bring into focus those suffering from indirect victimization as a major issue in studies on fear of crime (War, 2000: 452).

A range of surveys quickly came into play to establish the strengths and weaknesses of this viewpoint ultimately leading to the perception that fear of crime is much more evident than real victimization and, thus, responses to this type of fear were shaped through a wide range of normative cautious behaviors that defined a set of certain cultural elements changing the lifestyle in its own particular way (Ibid: 424).

A range of components including gender, age, victimization record, and indirect victimization influences fear of crime. As the present study focuses on the role played by gender and victimization in fear of cybercrime, we briefly present a review of literature on this topic.

Studies on the link between gender and fear of crime consistently found that, compared to men, women are more worried about the criminal phenomenon, with a study conducted in England over the past 25 years indicating a trend of higher level of fear of crime among women compared to men which continues to persist today (Krista, 2006: 12). An interesting point to note in these studies as well as in the statistics reported by the police is the contradictory trends of victimization and fear of crime among men and women. More specifically, women tend to be less victimized than men because of their social roles, cautious behaviors, and other factors while they report higher levels of fear (Schaut, 2006: 8). One explanation focuses on physical and social vulnerability of women noting that women have been socialized into viewing themselves weaker than men and less capable of confronting attacks that induce high levels of fear. Socialization experiences provide another explanation for this difference among the two genders. Since most researchers of fear of crime use self-report questionnaires to identify the level of fear and because women express their fear more easily, they are more likely to report their fear while men regard expression of fear as a sign of weakness. Another acceptable explanation for gender-based differences in level of fear asserts that women are extremely fearful of sexual assault, and in particular of rape. This fear permeates into all areas of their lives leading to reports of higher

levels of fear. The argument goes that women link rape to thousands of crimes (theft and other crimes) as they believe that, for them, victimization in any type of crime is likely to lead to rape as well. This explanation, known as “shadow of sexual assault hypothesis” has been supported by many studies (Lee, 2012: 54).

On the other hand, it should be noted that recently there has been a translocation of many forms of crimes into the cyberspace. The penetration of cyberspace into the contemporary society has reshaped a significant portion of victimization and offenses. The term “cyberspace” was coined in a science fiction written in 1982. Since then cyberspace – known as a non-physical, virtual place – has been a reflection of virtual realities in an electronic environment (Masoudi, 2004: 16). However, the first cybercrime was committed in 1820 in France when Joseph Marie Jacquard invented a device known as loom in his textile mill which allowed the repetition of a series of steps in the weaving of special fabrics. The invention of this device spread worries among Jacquard’s employees as they perceived it as a threat to their job and livelihood. In the first recorded cybercrime, they committed an act of sabotage to stop this device from functioning (Sekgwathe, 2011: 172). The number of offenders and victims in cyberspace has increased with the growing prevalence of cyberspace, different forms of social and communication networks, and developing trades in this space. The limited insignificant control over cyberspace has made it a favorable place for highly motivated offenders to meet unprotected victims. Therefore, users of cyberspace can be classified into different types of targets depending on their activities, motivations, and reasons for using cyberspace, including doing trade, downloading files, and using social networks.

*Methodology and Data Analysis.* The present study was conducted on 350 male and female students, with the mean age of 24.22 years, selected from a number of law colleges in Tehran. The participants were first asked about the extents to and the ways in which they used cyberspace. We found that 32% of the participants use cyberspace for more than two hours, with 76% primarily spending their times on social networks and messaging platforms, such as WhatsApp, Telegram, and Instagram as the top activities in terms of the time spent, followed by other activities like emailing, using browsers, online shopping, etc.

As seen in Figure 1, women received sex offers/sexual suggestions and experienced sexual insults and threats respectively 16 and 5 times as many as men did. Compared to women, men experienced more cases of such crimes as internet fraud, data-destroying viruses, and hacking.

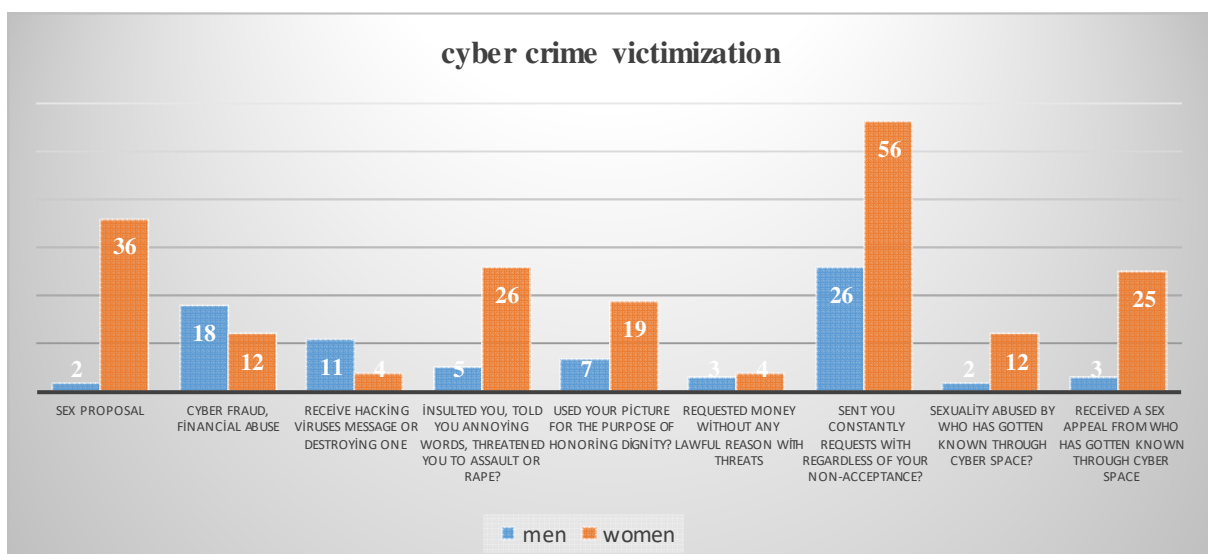


Figure 1. – Direct victimization \*Numbers denote the answer “yes” to the questions

Figure 2 represents indirect victimization. A person’s lifestyle may be affected by indirect victimization through interaction with other victims. Cautious behaviors, growing spread, increasing requests for punishments, and social pessimism caused by fear of crime are among the direct or indirect consequences of fear of crime. Here, we asked participants if they have ever learned about cyber victimization of their friends or relatives. As seen in Table 2, women experienced indirect victimization of sex proposals 21 times as many as men did while the number of incidents of indirect victimization by abuse of a woman’s personal image was 5 times the number found for abuse of a man’s personal image. The only categories in which men experienced slightly higher levels of indirect victimization were hacking and destroying of cyber data.

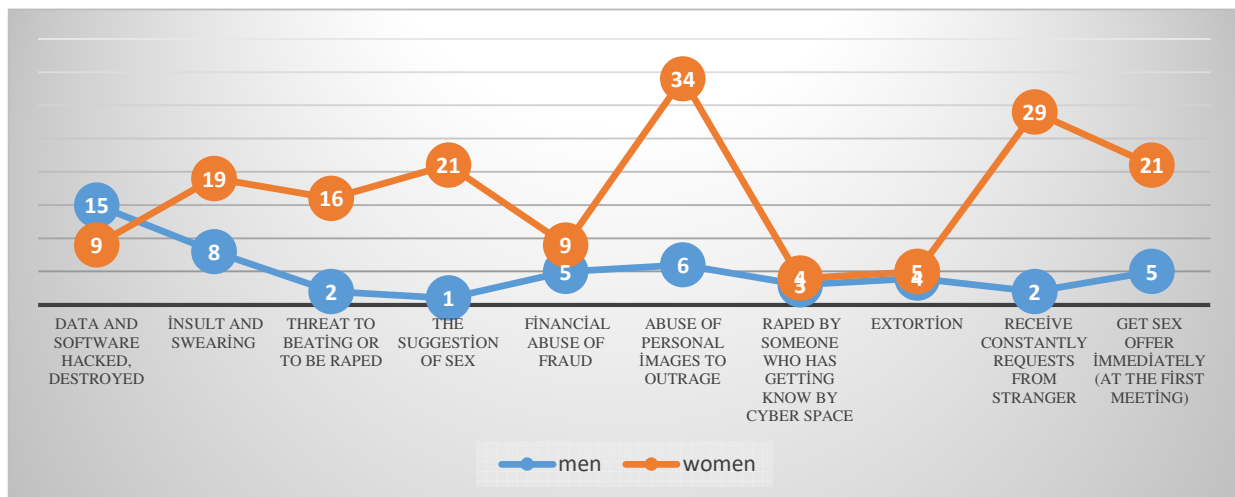


Figure 2. – Indirect victimization \*Numbers denote the answer “yes” to the questions

Table compares fear of cybercrime among men and women. The data indicate that compared to men, women are more fearful of such behaviors as abuse of their personal photos, cyberstalking (repeated messages and requests received from an unknown person), online shopping without receiving the purchased items, sexual offers, insults, and sexual harassments by someone they meet through cyberspace.

Table. – Fear of cybercrimes among men and women

| In general, Regarding   | I'm not worried |       | I'm somewhat worried |       | I'm almost worried |       | I'm very worried |       |
|---|-----------------|-------|----------------------|-------|--------------------|-------|------------------|-------|
|   | men             | women | men                  | women | men                | women | men              | women |
| 1. Someone steals, destroy or manipulate my information, Data...                              | 18              | 36    | 28                   | 20    | 33                 | 26    | 21               | 18    |
| 2. Someone use my picture of private information for the purpose of outrage                   | 45              | 22    | 34                   | 24    | 12                 | 20    | 9                | 34    |
| 3. Someone send me request continuously with Regardless of your non-acceptance                | 87              | 28    | 9                    | 36    | 4                  | 20    | 0                | 16    |
| 4. Buying goods or service without delivery   | 29              | 16    | 41                   | 31    | 14                 | 23    | 16               | 30    |
| 5. Someone offers me sex  | 92              | 34    | 7                    | 36    | 0                  | 14    | 0                | 16    |
| 6. Someone insulted me or Threat to beating   | 88              | 44    | 6                    | 30    | 6                  | 21    | 0                | 5     |
| 7. Getting know someone from cyberspace who asking me to for an appointment                   | 98              | 82    | 2                    | 4     | 0                  | 8     | 0                | 0     |
| 8. somebody Requested money without any lawful reason   | 88              | 91    | 10                   | 5     | 2                  | 4     | 0                | 0     |
| 9. Getting know someone from cyberspace who is going to rape or Touch my body without consent | 98              | 27    | 2                    | 36    | 0                  | 16    | 0                | 21    |
| 10. Getting know someone from cyberspace who offer me sex in the first meeting                | 99              | 51    | 1                    | 14    | 0                  | 20    | 0                | 15    |

Conclusion

Translocation of crimes into cyberspace has brought fear of crime to this space. Although many victims of cybercrime will never know about their victimization, the growing spread of crime in cyberspace has intensified fear of direct and indirect cyber victimization. Our findings suggest higher levels of victimizations among women caused by such behaviors as abuse of their personal images, insults, and threats of sexual assaults. Therefore, fear of sexual threats and related behaviors is stronger in women compared to men. In addition, women experience higher levels of indirect fear of crime than men do, except for the cases of hacking and destroying data and information.