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## Knowledge Exchange Seminar Series (KESS)

# The cyber-victimisation of disabled adults in Northern Ireland: evidence from a mixed-methods study

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### KESS Policy Briefing

*...is a forum that encourages debate on a wide range of research findings, with the overall aim of promoting evidence-informed policy and law-making within Northern Ireland*

## Key points:

- Cyber-victimisation refers to repeated harmful behaviour online, such as harassment, threats, spreading misinformation, sharing private health or political information, or coordinated pile-ons.
- Cyber-victimisation of disabled people is a significant issue in Northern Ireland, with around one in three (30.1%) of participants reporting experience of online victimisation and its impacts.
- Around one in four (23.0%) participants reported experiencing cyber-victimisation during the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighting how periods of heightened vulnerability can shape online harm.
- Cyber-victimisation occurs across multiple digital platforms, including social media, which participants described as both essential for connection and a space where harmful content and abuse can occur.
- 44% of those affected reported disruption to the management of their health, including missed appointments, unintended changes to lifestyle, changes to medications and self-monitoring, impact on mental health and stress-related flare-ups of existing conditions.
- Participants described feeling dehumanised, and stigmatised due to public misinformation and low awareness, often linked to the misrepresentation of disabled people in political and public health messaging.
- Despite these impacts, most participants received no formal support, and none reported incidents to the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI), indicating barriers to recognition, reporting and engagement with justice processes.
- The findings highlight how cyber-victimisation can function as a digital determinant of health and a human rights issue, pointing to the need for coordinated approaches to improve recognition, and pathways for referral and support.
- The research is relevant to current legislative and policy developments, including the Victims and Witnesses of Crime Bill, Section 75 duties, and the Disability Strategy 2025–2035, particularly in relation to how online harms affecting disabled people are recognised and addressed.

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## Why this issue matters

For many disabled people in Northern Ireland, digital spaces are essential for accessing information, maintaining social connections, managing long-term conditions and engaging with services. However, these same spaces can also expose individuals to harassment, abuse and discrimination.

Cyber-victimisation refers to repeated unwanted or harmful communication through digital platforms, including social media, messaging services and online forums. While often understood as an issue of online safety, this research approaches cyber-victimisation of disabled people as a public health issue, due to its impact on physical health, mental wellbeing and daily life.

In a context where one in five people in Northern Ireland is disabled and disability hate crime has reached its highest recorded level in 2022/23, understanding how harm occurs in online environments is increasingly important. While policy and legislation have traditionally focused on offline forms of victimisation, less is known about how online harms affect disabled people and how these experiences connect to health, wellbeing and access to support.

This briefing presents evidence from a mixed-methods study with disabled adults in Northern Ireland, the first study of its kind in the region to examine the nature and impact of cyber-victimisation. It highlights how online harm is experienced, its implications for health and access to support, and its relevance to current policy and legislative developments.

## Research overview

This briefing draws on a mixed-methods study involving 113 disabled adults living in Northern Ireland, combined with qualitative input from 17 participants who experienced cyber-victimisation. Participants were recruited through social media campaigns and non-governmental organisations in Northern Ireland. Data were collected between April and November 2024 using an online survey, followed by interviews or written responses.

The mixed-methods approach enabled both an assessment of the prevalence and characteristics of cyber-victimisation, and deeper insight into participants' lived experiences. The study was funded by the British Academy and conducted in collaboration with Victim Support Northern Ireland and the Hate Crime Advocacy Service. The study received ethical approval from The Open University Human Research Ethics Committee. (HREC 0119). The study is part of a wider programme of research examining cyber-victimisation of disabled people as a societal challenge.

## Key findings

Cyber-victimisation was commonly reported among participants and, for some, was experienced as an ongoing issue, with incidents lasting weeks, months, or in some cases over a year. Overall, 30.1% of respondents described experiencing cyber-victimisation, with 23.0% reporting incidents during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Participants described impacts that extended beyond the online environment. Cyber-victimisation was associated with significant effects on health with 44% of those affected reporting disruption to the management of their health. This included changes to medication routines, reduced engagement with healthcare and support services, and wider disruption to daily activities. This relationship between cyber-victimisation and health management was statistically significant ( $p = 0.049$ ).

Participants also described impacts on mental wellbeing, including anxiety, distress, and in some cases severe fear and trauma-like experiences.

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*“The impact, it was very, very frightening. I didn’t know who to trust? I was worried for the safety of myself. I was worried for the safety of my children and my family. I was worried that perhaps my children would be targeted if they would be out and about. It had a major impact, to be honest [...] it really, really did. It was a very, very frightening experience.” (Participant 1)*

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Social media platforms were described as both essential for connection and a space where misinformation, hostility and targeted abuse could occur. While experiences took place across a range of digital platforms, participants highlighted how these environments enabled both direct and indirect forms of targeting.

Experiences of cyber-victimisation were shaped by harmful public attitudes towards disability. Participants highlighted stigma, discrimination and narratives that devalue disabled people, including direct attacks on their worth. 56.25% of participants who reflected on motivation perceived the targeting to be driven by disability-related discrimination.

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*“Individual made specific reference to my worth as individual and questioned the purpose of me existing” (Participant 13)*

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Participants also reported that the COVID-19 pandemic influenced their experiences, including being targeted in relation to public health messaging, clinical vulnerability, vaccination and medical exemption. In the Northern Ireland context, some participants described feeling particularly exposed due to the smaller population, alongside the use of health and political narratives to question their legitimacy or value. These experiences illustrate how wider social and policy contexts can shape online harm.

Despite the prevalence and impact of cyber-victimisation, only 22.7% received any form of support, and none reported incidents to the police. Participants described loss of trust, fear of not being taken seriously, and concerns about blame as factors contributing to under-reporting.

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*“Lack of public information and not being treated seriously by police” (Participant 9)*

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## Policy and legislative context

The findings highlight how cyber-victimisation of disabled people sits at the intersection of health, justice and equality, and may not be fully recognised within current policy and legislative frameworks. These experiences raise questions about how online harms are understood within existing systems and how they affect participation, health and access to support.

The proposed *Victims and Witnesses of Crime Bill* seeks to improve the experiences of victims, including vulnerable groups, within the justice system. However, the findings indicate that cyber-victimisation remains largely unreported and unsupported, with none of the participants reporting incidents to the police. This raises questions about whether harms occurring in digital environments are adequately recognised within current reporting, protection and support pathways, despite clear impacts on health and wellbeing.

The consultation also highlights *Section 75 duties*, which require consideration of whether policies have differential impacts on protected groups, including persons with disabilities. The evidence presented in this study indicates that cyber-victimisation can affect disabled people’s health, access to services and engagement with justice processes. This suggests that online harms may contribute to inequalities in how individuals experience and access protection and support.

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The findings also align with the *Disability Strategy 2025 - 2035*, which emphasises reducing barriers to participation and improving access to services. Participants' experiences suggest that digital environments can act as an additional barrier, particularly where exposure to harassment leads to withdrawal from online spaces, reduced engagement with services, and loss of trust in institutions.

The findings point to a potential gap between existing policy aims and lived experience, particularly in how online harms affecting disabled people are recognised, reported and addressed across systems. The *proposed role of the Commissioner for Victims and Witnesses of Crime* may provide an opportunity to consider how cyber-victimisation is recognised within future victim and witness strategies, particularly in relation to groups who may experience barriers to reporting and support.

## Link to wider UK research and Northern Ireland context

This study builds on a wider programme of research at The Open University examining cyber-victimisation of people with long-term conditions and disabled people across the UK. The lead researcher has established this area of research in the UK (Alhaboby et al., 2016; Alhaboby et al., 2017), has provided evidence to the House of Commons ([here](#)), that was cited in Whitehall policy documents and contributed to law reform consultations on communication offences and hate crime laws in England and Wales.

Previous research in *England and Scotland* has identified similar patterns, including the role of harmful public attitudes, the use of digital platforms to target disabled people, and impacts on physical health, mental wellbeing and daily life.

The findings from *Northern Ireland* provide additional insight into how these issues are experienced within a distinct policy and social context. In particular:

Participants described how health information and political views were used alongside disability-related targeting, including being labelled a burden on taxpayers.

Some participants reported feeling more exposed due to the smaller population, contributing to concerns about being identifiable or located, and less protected when facing hostile public attitudes.

Experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic further illustrate this context, with participants reporting being targeted both for being prioritised for vaccination and for being medically exempt, with each position used to question their legitimacy or value.

## Issues for consideration: Gaps between policy and lived experience

- How cyber-victimisation is recognised within existing definitions of victimisation, particularly where harms occur in digital environments but have immediate and longer-term impacts on health, wellbeing and daily life.
- Barriers to reporting and support, including lack of trust, fear of not being taken seriously, and concerns about blame, and how current pathways respond to individuals experiencing online harm.
- The extent to which online harms affecting disabled people are reflected within equality frameworks, including consideration of differential experiences and impacts in line with Section 75 duties.
- How digital environments may act as a barrier to participation over time, particularly where individuals withdraw from online spaces that are essential for accessing services, support and social connection.
- The role of public discourse and policy contexts, including public health messaging, in shaping exposure to online harm, particularly during periods of heightened vulnerability such as the COVID-19 pandemic.
- How systems across justice, health and support services recognise and respond to the links between cyber-victimisation and health management, including impacts on engagement with services and outcomes.

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- How emerging policy developments, including the proposed Commissioner for Victims and Witnesses of Crime, may shape longer-term recognition of cyber-victimisation and engagement with under-represented groups.
- The importance of coordinated, cross-sector approaches to addressing online harms affecting disabled people, reflecting the intersection of health, justice and equality.

## RELEVANT PUBLICATIONS BY THE TEAM

Alhaboby, Z.A, Sondhi A (2026). "I fear for what other people are going through": The cyber-victimisation of disabled adults in Northern Ireland. *Disability & Society*, *forthcoming special issue*.

Alhaboby, Z., Rouse, L., Hadley, R., Vijaykumar, E., & Al-Khateeb, H. (2025). Healthcare Consultations for People with Chronic Conditions and Disabilities: Managing Cyber-Victimisation Impact and Training Needs. *Health Services Insights*, 18, 11786329251386909.

Alhaboby, Z.A., Barnes, J., Evans, H. and Short, E., (2023). Cybervictimization of adults with long-term conditions: cross-sectional study. *Journal of medical internet research*, 25, p.e39933.

Alhaboby, Z. A., Evans, H., Barnes, J., & Short, E. (2023). The impact of cybervictimization on the self-management of chronic conditions: lived experiences. *Journal of medical internet research*, 25, e40227.

Alhaboby, Z. A., Al-Khateeb, H. M., Barnes, J., Jahankhani, H., Pitchford, M., Conradie, L. and Short, E. (2021). Cyber-disability hate cases in the UK: The documentation by the police and potential barriers to reporting. 13th International Conference on Global Security, Safety & Sustainability, Virtual. *Advanced Sciences and Technologies for Security Applications*, Springer.

Alhaboby, Z.A., Barnes, J., Evans, H. and Short, E., (2019). Cyber-Victimization of People with Chronic Conditions and Disabilities: A Systematic Review of Scope and Impact. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*, p.1524838017717743.

Alhaboby, Z.A., Barnes, J., Evans, H. and Short, E., (2017). Challenges facing online research: Experiences from research concerning cyber-victimisation of people with disabilities. *Cyberpsychology: Journal of Psychosocial Research on Cyberspace*, 11(1).

Al-Khateeb, H.M., Epiphaniou, G., Alhaboby, Z.A., Barnes, J. and Short, E., (2017). Cyberstalking: Investigating formal intervention and the role of Corporate Social Responsibility. *Telematics and Informatics*, 34(4), pp.339-349.

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