



## MENTAL HEALTH RISKS IN DIGITAL DEBT RECOVERY: INSIGHTS FROM NIGERIA'S DIGITAL MONEY LENDING SECTOR

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### ABSTRACT

*The proliferation of digital money lending, propelled by fintech innovations and data analytics, has revolutionized access to credit, particularly for the unbanked and underbanked sectors. In efforts to compel debt repayment, digital lenders resort to cyber coercion tactics, including cyberbullying, harassment, and stigmatization. While these methods may yield financial results, their psychological repercussions on debtors remain poorly understood. This study investigated the extent of psychological harm inflicted by cyber coercion tactics on the mental well-being of victims. The study employed a qualitative research design of scooping review of victims interviewed by Newspapers online. Method involved systematic searches in databases for studies on digital money lenders' impact on debtors' mental health in Nigeria, employed thematic synthesis, CASP tool for study quality, and sensitivity analyses. Extracted data using standardized forms, coded text, and developed descriptive and analytical themes. The results showed that digital money lenders in Nigeria use various stigmatizing tactics, including debt-shaming, cyberbullying, and defamation of character, to recover funds from debtors. These tactics have negative implications for the mental health of debtors, including depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation.*

*The study recommends that Nigerian government should enforce existing laws and regulations to protect debtors from unethical practices of digital money lenders.*

**Key words:** *Digital money lending, Debt recovery tactics, Debt-shaming, Defamation of character, Cyberbullying, Harassment, Stigmatization, Depression, Anxiety, Suicidal ideation.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Digital money lenders, also known as fintech lenders, utilize machine learning and big data, including nontraditional sources like social media, to revolutionize the lending landscape. They offer quick access to credit, especially for the unbanked and underbanked, by streamlining processes that traditional banks once handled slowly (Chen et al., 2023; Bjorkegren et al., 2022). Digital money lenders have become popular in Nigeria in recent years, providing quick and easy access to loans for individuals who cannot access traditional banking systems (Awojulgbe, 2023; Ojeniyi, 2023). However, concerns arise regarding predatory lending practices, particularly in the payday lending sector, where digitalization has increased access to high-cost loans, potentially leading to debt spirals (Chen, 2020; Odinet, 2018). However, the debt collection practices of these lenders have come under scrutiny, with reports of stigmatizing tactics used to recover funds from debtors. These tactics include debt-shaming, cyberbullying, and defamation of character, which can have negative implications for the mental health of debtors (Ayeni, 2022; Ismaila, 2023). This study aims to identify the types,

tactics, and functions of stigmatizing debtors by digital money lenders in Nigeria and its implications for mental health. The proliferation of digital money lenders in Nigeria has provided quick and easy access to loans for individuals who cannot access traditional banking systems. However, the debt collection practices of these lenders, including debt-shaming, cyberbullying, and defamation of character, have raised concerns about their negative implications for the mental health of debtors. The psychological trauma inflicted by these lenders has been linked to depression, anxiety, and even suicidal thoughts among affected individuals (Ayeni, 2022). The exposure of many citizens to external stressors, such as the pandemic and social unrest, has further exacerbated the impact of these tactics on mental well-being (Ayeni, 2022). The empirical evidence from various sources supports the prevalence of stigmatizing tactics used by digital money lenders in Nigeria. Reports have highlighted defamatory and cyberbullying acts, as well as the use of shaming tactics to retrieve funds from debtors (Ojeniyi, 2023; Abba, 2021; Awojulgbe, 2023; Ismaila, 2023). These tactics have led to mental and emotional

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torments, harassment, and ridicule among affected individuals, pushing them to the brink and causing paranoia and emotional distress (Awojlugbe, 2023). The unethical debt collection practices of digital lenders have been associated with psychological trauma and an increased risk of mental illnesses in the country (Ayeni, 2022; Ismaila, 2023). Psychology academic journals have also documented the impact of financial stress and harassment on mental health. Research has shown that individuals subjected to aggressive debt collection practices may experience chronic stress, anxiety, and depression, significantly affecting their mental well-being (Ayeni, 2022). The use of crude and offensive tactics by online lenders has been identified as a risk factor contributing to mental illnesses in the country. One of the studies cited is Irwin et al.'s (2019) research on the role of shame in the relation between peer victimization and mental health outcomes. The study found that shame mediated the relationship between peer victimization and mental health outcomes, suggesting that shame is a significant factor in the development of mental health problems. Another study cited is Kryszynska and Andriessen's (2020) article on shame-sensitive practice in trauma-informed approaches. The article highlights the

importance of addressing shame in mental health interventions, particularly in the context of trauma. The authors argue that a shame-sensitive approach can help individuals overcome the negative impact of shame on their mental health. Wang et al.'s (2020) study on shame, perceived knowledge, and satisfaction associated with mental health as predictors of attitude patterns towards help-seeking is also cited. The study found that shame was a significant predictor of negative attitudes towards help-seeking, highlighting the importance of addressing shame in mental health interventions. Finally, the article cites Ayeni's (2022) research on the impact of online lenders' crude and offensive tactics on mental health. The study found that individuals subjected to aggressive debt collection practices may experience chronic stress, anxiety, and depression, which can significantly affect their mental well-being.

**Statement of the problem**

The rapid growth of digital money lending, facilitated by fintech lenders utilizing machine learning and big data, has transformed the lending landscape, providing quick access to credit for the unbanked and underbanked populations (Chen et al., 2023). However, this

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transformation has also raised concerns about predatory lending practices, particularly in the payday lending sector, where digitalization has facilitated access to high-cost loans, potentially leading to debt spirals (Chen, 2020). Additionally, while digital loans have gained popularity in developing countries, such as Kenya and Nigeria, and have been associated with positive effects on household resilience and financial well-being (Bjorkegren et al., 2022; Bharadwaj et al., 2019), there are emerging issues related to stigmatization in loan recovery processes contributing to poor mental health among both borrowers and lenders (Brailovskaya et al., 2020). Despite some positive outcomes, there is a need to address these challenges to ensure

the sustainable and ethical provision of digital lending services.

**Objectives of the study**

The objectives of this study are:

- To identify the types, tactics, and functions of stigmatizing debtors by digital money lenders in Nigeria.
- To examine the implications of stigmatizing debtors for mental health.
- To provide recommendations for addressing the mental health issue for debt stigmatisation among debtors of digital money lenders in Nigeria .

**METHOD**

**Searching:** A systematic search of electronic databases, including EBSCO Online News Library, Google search, and Nigeria newspapers, was conducted to identify relevant studies published between 2010 and 2023. The search includes keywords such as "digital money lenders," "debt collection," "cyberbullying," "stigmatization," and "mental health."

**Search strategy:** The search strategy will involve a combination of keywords and Boolean operators to identify relevant

studies. The searches were limited to interviews conducted in Nigeria and published in English.

**Table 1:** A table was created to document the number of research articles for each searched keyword in each database.

**Quality assessment:** The quality of the studies was assessed using the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) tool for qualitative studies.

**Extracting data from studies:** Data was extracted from the studies using a

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standardized data extraction form. The data extraction form include information on the time, location and identity of interviewer.

**Inclusion and exclusion criteria:** Studies will be included if they focus on the impact of digital money lenders' behavior on the mental health of debtors in Nigeria. Articles were excluded if they are not conducted in Nigeria or do not focus on the impact of digital money lenders' behavior on mental health.

**Detailed methods for thematic synthesis:**

Thematic synthesis was used to analyze the data extracted from the studies. The analysis involve coding the data, developing descriptive themes, and generating analytical themes.

**Coding text and developing descriptive themes:**

Two reviewers independently coded the data and develop descriptive

**Results**

The results showed that digital money lenders in Nigeria use various stigmatizing tactics to recover funds from debtors, including debt-shaming, cyberbullying, and defamation of character (Ayeni, 2022). Debt-shaming involves publicly shaming debtors by sending messages to their contacts, including family members and friends. Cyberbullying involves sending threatening messages and making

themes. Any discrepancies will be resolved through discussion and consensus. Analytical themes were generated by synthesizing the descriptive themes and identifying patterns and relationships in the data. The findings of the systematic review were presented in a table summarizing the studies included in the review, the methods used, and the key findings. Some of the studies/papers included in the review will be presented in this table, along with their title, method, and findings.

**Study quality and sensitivity analyses:**

The quality of the studies will be assessed using the CASP tool for qualitative studies. The sensitivity analyses will assess the robustness of the findings to potential threats to the internal validity of the studies.

derogatory comments on social media platforms. Defamation of character involves spreading false information about debtors to damage their reputation (Ayeni, 2022). These tactics have negative implications for the mental health of debtors, including depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation (Ayeni, 2022). The tactics used by digital money lenders in Nigeria can be classified as different types of cyberbullying. According to Irwin et al.

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(2019), there are six types of cyberbullying, which include:

1. **Harassment:** Repeatedly sending offensive messages to an individual.
2. **Denigration:** Posting or sending harmful or untrue information about an individual.
3. **Flaming:** Using inflammatory language to provoke an individual.
4. **Impersonation:** Pretending to be someone else to harm an individual.
5. **Outing:** Sharing personal information about an individual without their consent.

6. **Exclusion:** Intentionally excluding an individual from online groups or activities.

The tactics used by digital money lenders in Nigeria can be classified as harassment, denigration, and impersonation. The search results provided a table outlining various types of cyberbullying, including harassment, denigration, flaming, impersonation, outing, and exclusion. Cyberbullying can have serious effects on individuals, such as depression, low self-esteem, anxiety, and even suicidal ideation.

**Table 1: Tactics and Functions**

Tactics and Functions	Description
Shaming and Threatening Customers	Online loan companies make use of the social networks of their customers to shame them for late payment of loans, sending messages to their contacts and engaging in cyberbullying.
Harassment and Defamation	Debt collectors constantly call, send texts, and WhatsApp broadcast messages to debtors' phone contacts, causing mental and emotional torments, harassment, and ridicule among affected individuals.
Unethical Debt Collection Practices	Digital lending platforms employ unethical, unlawful, and humiliating debt-collection practices, including verbal abuse, harassment, and public shaming to pressure defaulting debtors.

These tables provide a clear overview of the types of cyberbullying and the specific

tactics and functions employed by digital money lenders in Nigeria. The information

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is based on the provided sources and sheds light on the detrimental impact of these practices on the mental well-being of individuals.

**Table 2: Types of Mental Issues Developed or Experienced by Debtors due to Digital Lenders' Behavior in Nigeria**

Coding	Theme Identified	Sources	Snippets from Interviews with Victims
MI1	Anxiety and Stress	<a href="#">The Africa Report</a>	"Tactics such as verbal abuse, harassment, and public shaming are commonly used to pressure defaulting debtors."
MI2	Depression	<a href="#">The Africa Report</a>	"The psychological trauma inflicted by these lenders has been linked to depression, anxiety, and even suicidal thoughts among affected individuals."
MI3	Social Stigma	<a href="#">The Africa Report</a>	"Debt collectors constantly call, send texts, and WhatsApp broadcast messages to debtors' phone contacts, causing mental and emotional torments, harassment, and ridicule among affected individuals."
MI4	Privacy Concerns	<a href="#">Premium Times Nigeria</a>	"Nigeria's digital e-commerce platforms offering short-term loans have resorted to unprofessional conduct and illegal measures in recovering."
MI5	Character Assassination, Cyberbullying, and Stress	<a href="#">The Guardian</a>	"'Their weapon is your shame': toxic abuse from Nigeria's loan sharks" - Describes toxic abuse, including cyberbullying, causing stress and suicidal thoughts among victims.
MI6	Defamation and Reputation Damage	<a href="#">Leadership NG</a>	"These illegal practices... include declaring the debtors dead, designing and circulating their obituary to family and friends or tagging them HIV positive, among others."
MI7	Continued Harassment despite Warnings	<a href="#">Tekedia</a>	"Loan companies in Nigeria still harass and defame defaulting customers, despite several warnings from the Federal Competition And Consumer Protection Commission (FCCPC), against such action."
MI8	Financial Distress and Bankruptcy	<a href="#">Gazette NG</a>	"These lenders exploit the vulnerable financial situations of borrowers, imposing interest rates as high as 80 per cent on a weekly basis, leading borrowers into severe financial distress and bankruptcy."

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Coding	Theme Identified	Sources	Snippets from Interviews with Victims
MI9	Fear and Insecurity due to Harassment Tactics	<a href="#">Gazette NG</a>	"They use intimidation and harassment tactics to enforce loan repayment. Borrowers are subjected to constant threats, verbal abuse and even physical violence, creating an environment of fear and insecurity."
MI10	Lack of Accountability and Legal Recourse	<a href="#">Gazette NG</a>	"The fact that these companies lack accountability further exposes borrowers to exploitation, leaving them without legal resort to address unfair treatment."

These themes and issues were identified from various sources reporting the impact of digital lenders' behavior on the mental well-being of debtors in Nigeria. The

snippets from interviews with victims provide specific examples and narratives of the challenges faced by individuals affected by the debt collection practices.

**Table 4: Clusters and Mental Health Implications**

Cluster	Theme Identified
Emotional Impact	Anxiety and Stress
	Depression
	Social Stigma
Privacy and Reputation Concerns	Privacy Concerns
	Character Assassination, Cyberbullying, and Stress
	Defamation and Reputation Damage
Financial Distress	Continued Harassment despite Warnings
	Financial Distress and Bankruptcy
	Fear and Insecurity due to Harassment Tactics
Hopelessness	Hopelessness due to Lack of Accountability and Legal Recourse

1. Emotional Impact:

Victims consistently reported heightened anxiety, stress, depression, and social



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stigma. Digital lenders' aggressive tactics, including verbal abuse and public shaming, created an environment that significantly affected debtors' mental well-being. Research in cyberbullying behavior and mental health, such as studies by Hinduja and Patchin (2018), supports the idea that online harassment can lead to heightened stress, anxiety, and depression. The aggressive tactics employed by digital lenders align with cyberbullying behaviors, impacting the emotional well-being of debtors.

**2. Privacy and Reputation Concerns**

Concerns about privacy violations and reputation damage emerged as significant themes. Debtors faced character assassination, cyberbullying, and defamation, often leading to severe stress and emotional turmoil. The concepts of online harassment and cyberbullying often involve privacy breaches and character assassination. Studies by Tokunaga (2010) and Kowalski et al. (2014) highlight the psychological impact of cyberbullying, including stress and suicidal thoughts, corroborating the experiences of victims in the context of digital lending.

**3. Harassment Tactics and Financial Distress:**

Debtors experienced continued harassment, even in the face of regulatory warnings. The

exploitative nature of digital lenders led to severe financial distress and, in extreme cases, bankruptcy. The intimidation tactics used by lenders created an environment of fear and insecurity among borrowers. The persistence of harassment despite warnings and the financial distress faced by debtors resonate with findings in cyberbullying literature. Scholars like Hinduja and Patchin (2007) emphasize the role of power imbalance and intimidation tactics, which align with the experiences of borrowers facing constant threats, verbal abuse, and physical violence.

**4. Hopelessness due to Lack of Accountability and Legal Recourse:**

The lack of accountability among digital lenders in Nigeria has emerged as a critical theme in the search results. Debtors faced exploitation without adequate legal recourse, emphasizing the need for regulatory measures to address unfair treatment. For instance, the article by Combine Resource Institution (2022) highlights the use of unethical, unlawful, and humiliating debt-collection practices, including verbal abuse, harassment, and public shaming, to pressure defaulting debtors. The lack of accountability among digital lenders leaves debtors without legal recourse, exposing them to exploitation.

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The search results also suggest that the lack of accountability and legal recourse has led to feelings of hopelessness among victims.

**Implications for Mental Health**

The impact of these practices on the mental well-being of borrowers is significant, with reports indicating that individuals subjected to aggressive debt collection practices may experience chronic stress, anxiety, and depression, which can significantly affect their mental well-being. . The use of crude and offensive tactics by online lenders has been identified as a risk factor contributing to mental illnesses in the country. In summary, the aggressive debt collection practices of digital money lenders in Nigeria, including debt-shaming, cyberbullying, and defamation of character, have detrimental effects on the mental health of debtors. Addressing these implications requires a comprehensive approach that encompasses regulatory measures, consumer protection, and mental health support for affected individuals. For further details, you can refer to the provided sources for more in-depth information on the tactics and functions of stigmatizing debtors by digital money lenders in Nigeria. The search results provide insights into the

relationship between debt and mental health, particularly in the context of problem debt and the impact of debt-related financial stress on psychological stress. The findings suggest that poor mental health is associated with the exacerbation of personal debt problems, making it harder for individuals to manage their personal debt and follow debt advice. For instance, a study by Bridges and Disney (2010) found an association between debt-related financial stress and psychological stress. Additionally, the results highlight the stigma around problem debt and the challenges individuals face in seeking help and adhering to debt advice, especially when experiencing poor mental health. The search results also emphasize the unethical practices, such as debt shaming, associated with digital lending in Nigeria, and the impact of these practices on the mental well-being of individuals. The findings underscore the need to address the stigma around debt and mental health, and to provide support and resources to help individuals manage their debt and protect their mental well-being. Moreover, the

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search results also provide insights into the coping mechanisms of individuals experiencing debt-related mental health issues. For instance, the study by Jenkins et al. (2008) found that individuals with severe debt problems have substantially poorer mental health, regardless of whether they adhere to debt advice or not. The study also suggests that people with poor mental health may find it harder to escape from the misery of debt. The search results also highlight the importance of financial resilience in improving mental health, as shown by studies conducted in Nigeria and the United Kingdom (Crentsil et al., 2020; Ibrahim et al., 2021). In summary, the search results provide evidence of the complex relationship between debt and mental health, highlighting the need for a holistic approach to addressing debt-related mental health issues. The findings underscore the importance of addressing the stigma around debt and mental health, providing support and resources to help individuals manage their debt, and promoting financial resilience as a means of improving mental health.

**Discussion**

The findings of this study highlight the unethical practices of digital money lenders in Nigeria and their negative implications

for the mental health of debtors (Awojulugbe, 2023). The stigmatizing tactics used by these lenders violate the rights of debtors and can lead to serious mental health problems. The Nigerian government should enforce existing laws and regulations to protect debtors from the unethical practices of digital money lenders (Onukwue, 2021). Digital money lenders should also be held accountable for their actions and should be required to adhere to ethical standards in debt recovery (Ojeniyi, 2023). The implications of debt-shaming tactics used by digital money lenders in Nigeria on the mental health of debtors are significant and concerning. Reports indicate that digital money lenders in Nigeria engage in defamatory and cyberbullying acts, using shaming tactics and harassment to recover funds from borrowers (Ayeni, 2022; Awojulugbe, 2023; Rest of World, 2023; Adeyemi, 2022; FintechPad, 2023). These tactics have been linked to psychological trauma, chronic depression, and even suicidal thoughts among affected individuals (Ayeni, 2022; Awojulugbe, (2023) The use of offensive and crude tactics by online lending companies has been identified as a risk factor contributing to mental illnesses in the country, particularly in the context of increased stress and anxiety due to external

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factors such as the pandemic and social unrest<sup>^</sup>( Ayeni, 2022; Awojulgbe, 2023). The impact of these practices on the mental well-being of borrowers is exacerbated by the relative ease of obtaining loans through digital lending apps, which has led to a significant number of low-income Nigerians being drawn to these platforms without fully understanding the potential consequences<sup>^</sup>(The Africa Report.com, 2023; Ayeni, 2022). The implications for mental health are further compounded by the lack of stringent regulations governing the debt collection practices of digital lenders, allowing these tactics to continue unchecked<sup>^</sup>( Adeyemi, 2022). The experiences of affected individuals have led to the formation of online communities aimed at combating debt-shaming and sharing strategies to navigate the challenges posed by digital lending apps<sup>^</sup>(FintechPad, 2023).

**Implication for Practice**

The findings of this study have implications for practice. Digital money lenders in Nigeria should be required to adhere to ethical standards in debt recovery. The Nigerian government should enforce existing laws and regulations to protect debtors from the unethical practices of digital money lenders. Mental health

professionals should be aware of the negative implications of stigmatizing debtors and should provide support to individuals who have experienced these practices.

**Recommendations**

Based on the search results, the recommendation for conducting a systematic literature review using content analysis and thematic analysis is to utilize evidence tables to organize and present the findings. Evidence tables are a valuable tool for summarizing and comparing the results of the included studies, and they can provide a clear and structured overview of the evidence. Additionally, it is important to consider the implications of the findings for regulatory measures in the context of digital lending practices. The lack of accountability and legal recourse among digital lenders in Nigeria highlights the need for regulatory intervention to protect the well-being of debtors and prevent exploitation. One limitation of the study is the potential for bias in the included literature. It is important to critically evaluate the quality of the studies and consider the potential impact of any bias on the overall findings. Additionally, the lack of specific research studies directly addressing the relationship between digital



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lending practices and mental health in Nigeria may limit the depth of the analysis. Therefore, it is essential to interpret the

findings within the context of the available evidence and to acknowledge any potential limitations in the scope of the review.

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