

An exploration of cyberstalking among social media users: Perceptions, prevalence and characteristics

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At the time of the project commencing **Rebecca Gunn** was a student at Huddersfield University for the MSc Investigative Psychology. **Dr Calli Tzani** was a senior lecturer for the MSc in Investigative Psychology. **Professor Maria Ioannou** was the Director of Secure Societies Institute, Course Director of the MSc Investigative Psychology and MSc Security Sciences. **Dr John Synnott** was the course co-director of the MSc Investigative Psychology and MSc Security Sciences. And **Dr Anita Fumagalli** was a lecturer in Forensic Psychology at Bath Spa University.

1. Introduction

Online social media platforms are growing, enabling stalkers to find new methods to target victims, giving rise to cyberstalking. Literature defines the crime as the repeated use of the internet, email or alternate electronic communication devices to harass, threaten and generate fear in one or more individuals. Studies (Maple et al., 2011) exhibited behaviours typical of cyberstalking, such as computer monitoring, impersonation, trolling, posting false accusations, creating websites under the victim's name, contacting others when posing as the victim, and most frequently, sending threatening emails.

Moreover, the internet provides a level of anonymity for cyber-stalkers, in which they can communicate with anyone and at any time, without fear of being identified or taking responsibility for their actions (Synnott et al, 2017). Many of such cases have resulted to further threatening communication and victimisation such as sextortion and intimidation (see Gavrilović Nilsson, Tzani-Pepelasi, Ioannou & Lester, 2019).

1.1. Male victims of cyberstalking

There is a relatively small body of research that is concerned with male victims of cyberstalking. This may derive from the persistent argument within the cyberstalking literature that the majority of cyberstalking victims are female. D'Ovidio and Doyle examined in 2003 official police records of the New York City Police Department from 1996 to 2000 and reported 52% of cyberstalking victims were female, compared to males who comprised 35% of the victim population. One common issue with similar data extraction sources is the reliability of police records, which is problematic because some victims may not believe the behaviour to be dangerous enough to report, or victims may be unaware that they are being cyberstalked or due to embarrassment, shame and not wanting peers to find out.

Other researchers argue that cyberstalking is not a gendered crime. Maple et al. (2011) examined experiences of cyberstalking among 109 males and 240 females. Of the male respondents, 87% stated they had been a victim of cyberstalking while 93% of the female respondents reported being victimised by a cyber-stalker. This study implies that cyberstalking is not a crime specific to a certain gender.

1.2. Perceptions of stalking

Several studies examined the impact of a pre-existing relationship between the offender and their victim, and the perceived severity of offline stalking. When the stalker and

victim are strangers rather than ex-partners or acquaintances, the stalking is perceived as more serious. In contrast, Dennison and Thomson (2000) failed to find a significant effect of the victim-offender relationship on the perceived severity of stalking. Additionally, victim-offender relationships had no significant effect on constituting the behaviour as stalking. Nevertheless, the finding that stalking scenarios depicting two strangers are perceived as more severe than stalking cases between ex-partners, remains prominent in the related literature.

Furthermore, Scott et al. (2015) assessed the gender of victims and offenders on stalking perceptions: vignettes portraying a male stalker targeting a female were perceived as the most serious. Additionally, participants were more likely to believe the stalking required police intervention when the stalker was portrayed as male rather than female. Finally, discrepancies exist among male prevalence rates and the dismissal of their claims by police, while due to the universal rise of active social media users, it is vital to examine whether offline stalking perceptions can be applied to cyberstalking. Therefore, taking into account previous research gaps and limitations, the present study aims to provide a further investigation into victims' experiences, explore social media users' experiences and perceptions of cyberstalking, and explore male victims' experiences.

2. Method

Through opportunity sampling, 198 participants (144 females and 54 males) ranging in age from 17 to 65 ($M = 32.24$, $SD = 13.06$) were recruited via the social media. In regard to relationship status 36.9% reported being in a relationship, 31.8% reported being single (31.8%), with 26.3% married and 2.5% divorced.

2.1. Materials

2.1.1. Perceptions of cyberstalking

Six cyberstalking vignettes were created, each depicting a typical case of cyberstalking between two fictitious individuals, Ben and Lucy. The selected cyberstalking behaviours reflected frequent forms of online harassment reported in the ECHO group report (Maple et al., 2011) such as direct threats through email, creating false profiles to contact the victim and attacking others online when posing as the victim.

2.1.2. Experiences of cyberstalking

To measure prevalence, a definition of cyberstalking was exhibited on a survey which was consistent with the definition presented in the cyberstalking literature. To gather information on specific cyberstalking behaviours, a list of 24 common cyberstalking behaviours were presented. For each behaviour, participants were asked whether they have had this done to themselves and whether they have engaged in this behaviour towards somebody else, thus displaying 48 yes/no questions.

3. Results

3.1. Perceptions of cyberstalking

Table 1 demonstrates that despite all conditions receiving high perceived severity scores, vignettes depicting an acquaintance victim-offender relationship were perceived as the most severe and ex-partner scenarios were perceived as the least severe. Also, the cyberstalking was perceived as more severe when depicting a male stalker and female victim, in comparison to a female stalker and male victim. When examining overall mean perceived severity scores for each group, strangers comprising of a male stalker and female victim scored highest, while ex-partners consisting of a female stalker and male victim scored lowest.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for perceived severity scores by condition.

Gender of
stalker/victim

		Female stalker and male victim	Male stalker and female victim	Total
Victim-offender relationship	Ex-partner	4.67 (0.87)	5.16 (0.78)	4.98 (0.84)
	Stranger	4.84 (0.89)	5.51 (0.47)	5.20 (0.77)
	Acquaintance	5.21 (0.58)	5.48 (0.58)	5.37 (0.59)
	Total	4.92 (0.81)	5.39 (0.63)	

A 3X2 between groups ANOVA was conducted to explore the impact of victim-offender relationship and gender of victim and offender on perceived severity of cyberstalking. A statistically significant main effect of victim-offender relationship was found, $F(2, 192) = 5.68, p = .004$, with a medium main effect size ($\eta^2 = .056$). A statistically significant main effect was also found for gender of stalker and victim, $F(1, 192) = 22.13, p < .001$, with a large main effect size ($\eta^2 = .103$). Post-hoc comparisons test indicated that perceived severity for acquaintance stalking was significantly higher than ex-partner stalking ($p < .05$). Mean scores between stranger and ex-partner, and stranger and acquaintance were not significantly different. The interaction effect between victim-offender relationship and gender of stalker and victim which did not reach statistical significance, $F(2, 192) = 0.69, p = .240$, with a small main effect size ($\eta^2 = .015$). This indicates that the influence of victim-offender relationship on perceived severity of cyberstalking did not depend on gender of stalker and victim.

Table 2 shows that while all conditions were perceived as highly indicative of cyberstalking, vignettes depicting an acquaintance victim-offender relationship were perceived as characterising cyberstalking more than strangers and ex-partners. Also, vignettes depicting a male stalker and female victim were perceived to characterise cyberstalking marginally more than vignettes depicting a female stalker and male victim. When observing overall mean scores for each group, an acquaintance victim-offender relationship comprising of a male stalker and female victim was perceived as constituting cyberstalking the most,

while ex-partners consisting of a female stalker and male victim received the lowest scores reflecting characterisation of cyberstalking.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for characterisation of cyberstalking scores by condition.

		Gender of stalker/victim		
		Female stalker and male victim	Male stalker and female victim	Total
Victim-offender relationship	Ex-partner	5.52 (0.98)	5.70 (0.66)	5.64 (0.79)
	Stranger	5.67 (0.69)	5.95 (0.22)	5.82 (0.51)
	Acquaintance	5.86 (0.45)	5.98 (0.16)	5.93 (0.31)
	Total	5.70 (0.71)	5.88 (0.42)	

A 3X2 between groups ANOVA was conducted to examine the impact of victim-offender relationship and gender of victim and offender on participants perceptions of the vignettes as indicative of cyberstalking. A statistically significant main effect of victim-offender relationship was found, $F(2, 192) = 4.49, p = .012$, with a medium main effect size ($\eta^2 = .045$). A statistically significant main effect was also found for gender of stalker and victim, $F(1, 192) = 5.74, p = .018$, with a small main effect size ($\eta^2 = .029$). Post-hoc comparisons test revealed that vignettes portraying an acquaintance victim-offender relationship were reported as characterising cyberstalking significantly more than vignettes portraying ex-partners ($p = <.05$; see Table 2 for means). Differences between stranger and ex-partner, and stranger and acquaintance were not significant. The interaction effect between victim-offender relationship and gender of stalker and victim was not statistically significant $F(2, 192) = 0.39, p = .678$, with a small main effect size ($\eta^2 = .004$). This indicates that the influence of victim-offender relationship on the perceptions of the vignettes as characterising cyberstalking did not depend on gender of stalker and victim.

3.2. Experiences of cyberstalking

Concerning victim experiences, the most frequently reported behaviours were ‘receiving an unwanted text message’ (44.2%), followed by ‘receiving unwanted emails’ (29.6%), ‘having their online activity monitored’ (28.6%) and ‘receiving a threatening text message’ (21.8%) (see table 3).

Table 2. *Frequencies of most common cyberstalking behaviours experienced as a victim.*

Highest reported cyberstalking behaviours	N	%
Receiving an unwanted text message	88	44.4%
Receiving unwanted emails	59	29.6%
Having your online activity monitored	57	28.9%
Receiving a threatening text message	43	21.8%
Receiving unwanted sexual images online	39	19.7%
Being trolled	36	18.2%
Having rumours spread about you online	35	17.7%
Receiving unwanted sexual images through texts	35	17.6%
Fake profiles contacting you	34	17.2%
Having your emails hacked	32	16.2%

Regarding perpetrator experiences, the most commonly occurring behaviours inflicted on someone else were ‘monitoring someone’s online activity’ (25.6%), ‘sending someone an unwanted text message’ (13.6%), ‘tracking someone through’ GPS (9.5%) and ‘trolling someone’ (9.5%) (see table 4).

Table 3. *Frequencies of most common cyberstalking behaviours experienced as a perpetrator.*

Highest reported cyberstalking behaviours	N	%
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Monitoring someone's online activity	51	25.8%
Sending an unwanted text message to someone	27	13.6%
Tracking someone through GPS	19	9.6%
Trolling someone	19	9.6%
Hacking into someone's email	11	5.6%
Creating fake profiles in order to contact someone	9	4.5%
Spreading rumours about someone online	7	3.5%
Sending a threatening text message to someone	6	3%
Signing someone up to receive spam emails	6	3%
Taking over or altering someone's online identity	4	2%

Descriptive statistics showed that males ($Mdn = 2.00$; $IQR = 1.00$ to 4.25 ; mean rank = 96.53) scored similarly to females ($Mdn = 2.00$; $IQR = 1.00$ to 5.00 ; mean rank = 101.29). The Mann-Whitney U value was found to not be statistically significant, $U = 3727.50$ ($z = -.53$), $p = .599$, and the difference between males and females was small ($r = .037$). Regarding the number of cyberstalking behaviours experienced as a perpetrator, descriptive statistics showed that males ($Mdn = 1.00$; $IQR = 0.00$ to 2.00 ; mean rank = 114.10) scored higher than females ($Mdn = 0.00$; $IQR = 0.00$ to 1.00 ; mean rank = 94.75). The Mann-Whitney U value was found to be statistically significant, $U = 3153.50$ ($z = -2.38$), $p = .018$, and the difference between males and females was large ($r = .169$).

As can be seen by the frequencies cross tabulated in Table 5, 131 participants reported not being a victim of cyberstalking (66.2%), comprising of 90 females (45.5%) and 41 males (20.7%). 11.6% of participants reported being cyberstalked and 22.2% of the sample reported being cyberstalked but not feeling afraid. To examine the relationship between gender and

prevalence of cyberstalking, a 3X2 chi-square test of independence was conducted, and all expected cell counts were greater than five. There was no statistically significant association between gender and prevalence, $\chi^2 (2, N = 198) = 3.26, p = .196$, therefore indicating the variables under investigation are independent of one another. The association was small, Cramer's $V = .196$.

Table 5. *Crosstabulation of gender and cyberstalking prevalence.*

		Gender		
		Male	Female	Total
Cyberstalking prevalence	Yes	5 (2.5%)	18 (9.1%)	23 (11.6%)
	Yes – did not feel afraid	8 (4.0%)	36 (18.2%)	44 (22.2%)
	No	41 (20.7%)	90 (45.5%)	131 (66.2%)
	Total	54 (27.3%)	144 (72.7%)	198

4. Discussion

4.1. Perceptions of cyberstalking

The study aimed to investigate social media users' experiences and perceptions of cyberstalking. Concerning perceptions, the findings demonstrated that victim-offender relationship significantly impacted perceived severity of cyberstalking, as well as influencing the characterisation of cyberstalking. In fact, acquaintance victim-offender relationship was perceived as significantly more severe than ex-partner cyberstalking vignettes, as well as reporting the scenarios as more indicative of cyberstalking in comparison to ex-partner scenarios. The findings are consistent with the frequent misconception in society and research in the offline stalking literature that found ex-partner stalking scenarios to be rated significantly less severe than stranger and acquaintance stalking. Further research needs to examine more closely the relationship between the Just World Hypothesis and cyberstalking perceptions, as well as suggesting cognitive techniques to reconceptualise the scenario so that the misconception of ex-partner stalking is eradicated.

The present study also demonstrated that gender of victim and stalker significantly impacted cyberstalking perceptions. Participants exposed to the vignettes depicting a male stalker and female victim reported significantly higher scores for perceived severity in comparison to the conditions exhibiting a female stalker and male victim, as well as being significantly more likely to characterise the scenario as cyberstalking.

The results reflect media portrayals of stalking and research in the offline stalking literature, revealing that stalking is perceived as more severe when the stalker is male, and the victim is female. This perception contradicts the reality that male and female stalkers engage in similar levels of violence.

4.2.Experiences of cyberstalking

Regarding experiences, the present findings highlighted that 66.2% of participants reported not being a victim of cyberstalking, 11.6% reported being cyberstalked and 22.2% of participants reported that they had been cyberstalked but did not feel threatened or afraid. There was no significant association between prevalence rates and gender, indicating that there are no differences in cyberstalking occurrences between men and women in the sample. Yet, differences between males and females in the number of cyberstalking behaviours experienced as a perpetrator were significant. Specifically, despite males and females both reporting that they had engaged in only a small number of cyberstalking behaviours as a perpetrator, men reported engaging in cyberstalking behaviours towards another individual significantly more than women.

The findings pertaining to gender differences in prevalence rates and the number of cyberstalking behaviours experienced as a victim are consistent with those of Maple et al. (2011) which found non-significant differences between men and women. In general, this suggests that that cyberstalking is not a gendered crime and women are not more at risk of

being cyberstalked than men, contradicting previous research which states most cyberstalking victims are female.

Furthermore, results found that monitoring someone's online activity was one of the most frequently reported behaviours experienced as a victim, as well as a perpetrator. This finding is in line with those of previous studies which found monitoring someone's online activity extremely common among ex-partners. Future research should be undertaken to explore participants relationship to their perpetrator, to examine whether monitoring someone's online activity is common among relationships other than ex-partners. While past research demonstrated that one of the most common forms of cyberstalking was sending threatening emails (Hensler-McGinnis, 2008), this was not the case for the present study. This discrepancy could be attributed to the increasing number of social media users each year. Thus, perhaps cyber-stalkers are now focussing on social media to target their victims, rather than through emails which may be perceived as an outdated approach.

4.3.Methodological limitations

Some methodological issues may have impacted the findings and should therefore be considered. Firstly, all vignettes embodied a heterosexual context. While the study does provide insight into perceptions portraying a male and female, the study should be repeated depicting same-sex relationships, to examine whether the automatic biases and frequent misconceptions are prevalent within same-sex cyberstalking, a concept which has not been studied previously and may have vital implications for the legal system.

Even though the present study incorporated ex-partners, strangers and acquaintances into the cyberstalking vignettes, the acquaintances portrayed were solely work-colleagues. In an online context, acquaintances have been defined as individuals who have occasionally met offline but whose communication is generally constrained to passive social media use, such as commenting on posts. Therefore, it would be beneficial to investigate whether alternative

acquaintance relationships receive the same degree of perceived severity as the fictitious work-colleagues portrayed in the present study, and whether they still obtain the highest perceived severity scores in comparison to ex-partner and stranger cyber-stalkers.

Furthermore, the sample size recruited was relatively small, consisting primarily of females. Future research would benefit from a larger inclusion of males.

Future research could expand this current study by exploring narrative roles. Previous studies on narratives have provided valuable information to understand human behaviours across different offenders (Ioannou, Synnott, Lowe & Tzani-Pepelasi, 2018). Incorporating narratives in a such research could provide further insight on the motivation and MO of such behaviour as well as provide further understanding on the offenders' perceptions of their actions.

4.4.Implications

Despite these limitations, the present study examined the extent to which victim-offender relationship and gender influence perceptions of cyberstalking. Findings have implications relating to the understanding of how these factors may possibly affect perceptions within the police force. Further experimental investigations are needed to examine cyberstalking perceptions held by police.

4.5.Conclusion

Consistent with the offline stalking literature, cyberstalking behaviours were perceived to be less serious and less characteristic of cyberstalking when the stalker was an ex-partner or female. Yet, in contrast to previous offline stalking literature, the behaviour was perceived as the most severe and more indicative of cyberstalking when the stalker and victim were acquaintances, rather than strangers. Nevertheless, these findings suggest that in general, society holds automatic biases when perceiving cyberstalking, potentially contributing to unjust decision-making in many areas of society such as the police force and

court proceedings. In addition, findings demonstrated that cyberstalking is not a gendered crime and both men and women can fall victim to being cyberstalked, resulting in vital practical implications for victim support services and clinical interventions. This study has provided a deeper insight into experiences and perceptions of cyberstalking in modern society, adding to the rapidly expanding field of cybercrime within the criminology literature.

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