

# Cyberstalking, a new crime: The nature of cyberstalking victimization

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## Abstract

The emergence of communication technologies, or “new media,” such as the Internet, has provided an additional conduit and method for stalkers to identify and target their victims. This evolution or transformation of stalking in common discourse is known as cyberstalking. Cyberstalking is a serious predatory behavior that arrives from the evolutionary need for control in the pursuit of resources and reputation. Originally, stalking involved behavioral invasion and referred to nonelectronic means of intrusion (e.g., physical surveillance, mailing letters). Cyber stalking is forensic concern of our society with an increasing tendency, and it is a fact that behaviors and acts of the perpetrator need to be researched more. Cyber stalking is a new form of stalking, despite the fact that the disease issues that differentiate cyber bullying, cyber harassment and cyberstalking are still discussed in the bibliography. Several discussions in literature consider cyberstalking as an extension of physical stalking. The differentiation of cyber stalking as a unique act, albeit sharing some of the characteristics of physical stalking, is an important point for providing a typology of cyber stalkers that can be used efficaciously by investigators. Cyber stalking as well as stalking is generally fueled by power, control and anger from the actions of the victim or, in some cases, from the inaction of the victim. It is estimated that the number of cyber stalking cases will increase as the internet provides a safe place in which the perpetrator can hide his identity, while at the same time is referred as a kind of obsession. The field of stalking has been greatly expanded and improved over the last decade, but cyber stalking remains poorly understood, and there are available fewer researches. Generally cyber stalking includes a range of behaviors that usually start from a perpetrator and it is related to a pattern of harassing or threatening behavior.

**Key Words :** Cyberstalking, victimization, technologies, new media, internet

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## Background

It is commonly known that the rapid growth of Internet from 2000 onwards, the access and its availability resulted in significant progress in several fields of society [1-8]. The expected benefits of its use for society are incalculable [9]. However, internet has also a dark side creating opportunities for unknown criminal behaviors, which have no physical boundaries, boundaries and limitations of identifying, punishing and reducing and that social problem is constantly increasing with global dimensions [10].

Many definitions formulated for cyber stalking often associated the term of "harassment". Although the terms harassment and stalking are used in the literature, Harvey (2003) makes a clear distinction and notes that the nature of stalker's behavior is based on anonymity while the harasser is not based on that. He also notes that the purpose of the stalker is to provoke fear, while the harasser is less serious and more annoying [11]. Another definition of D'Ovidio and Doyle (2003) describes cyber stalking as the recurrent use of the internet, e-mail and any media associated with digital electronic communication devices in order to annoy or threaten a person [12]. A relevant research conducted on cyber stalking among youth found that stranger stalking was considered as more dangerous than acquaintance stalking. [13] Another study showed that online threats were associated with physical violence to girls who had been victims of cyber stalking by their boyfriends [14].

There are several typologies that have been proposed and classify cyber stalkers according to their behavior. A typology proposed by McFarlane and Bocij (2005) refers four distinct types: a) *the vindictive cyber stalker* is the most malicious and harasses its victims through emails and messages, b) *the composed cyber stalker*, aims to harass the victim, causing him/her discomfort through a variety of threatening behaviors, c) *the intimate cyber stalker*, is creating a relationship with a person who relies more on love and persistence and d) *the collective cyber stalker* consists of two or more people who are persecuting the same victim [15]. Usually cyber stalker is motivated by interesting and erotic feelings for the victim, but often emotions are unresponsive. But it can

also be motivated by feelings of hatred or need for revenge, for power or even racism. These actions include a range of behaviors that usually start from an individual / perpetrator and relate to a pattern of harassing or threatening behavior. [16] It is obvious that the term cyber stalking is presented as a form of online behavior in the virtual world of the internet. However, very often, behavior spreads to real life, causing the victim to feel real fear, with harmful consequences to his/her mental health, his/her family and his/her life in general. [17]

## Nature of cyberstalking

Cyberstalking is a specialized form of stalking and involves the use of information and communication technologies as the means and the medium of harassment or intimidation [18]. Cyberstalking represents a violation of several fundamental human rights, such as the right to life, liberty and security, and can represent a very serious interference with the victim's privacy, family or correspondence [19]. According to the findings of survey, cyberstalkers present virtually no restriction with respect to age, gender, marital status, sexual orientation, and ethnic, cultural, economic or intellectual background and it seems that cyberstalking will become increasingly prevalent [20]. It is important that educational programs address these online risks and the various methods employed by perpetrators, so that potential victims would limit the opportunities available to cyberstalkers. But it is also important that users protect their online privacy and secure their computer data, use technology to block out unwanted messages, use improved identity management technology, and learn how to preserve the evidence of the illegal conduct.

Another survey findings have shown that people under the age of 18 are more likely to be cyber stalking victims in different ways, but also have more opportunities to perpetrate these crimes [21]. Another study found that 10-15% of students had experienced threatening and harassing behaviors through emails or messages on their mobile phone and only 7% of them reported the incident to the authorities [22]. This is in contradiction with the findings of another survey, which shows that most of victims reported the incident to the authorities [23].

Empirical research reported that cyber stalker causes fear to the victim and due to this behavior has the control of a victim. According to the findings of other surveys, misperceptions and depreciation of cyber stalking incidents can be attributed to the lack of awareness and understanding of this kind of crime. Victims, perpetrators and authorities (law enforcement officers, police officers, school teachers etc) do not perceive the malicious and dangerous nature of the crime until the victim has a physical abuse or damage to his/her personal property [24].

Another survey reported that 80.9% of respondents felt fear of some type of harassment via electronic communication. In this research 82.7% who felt fear were women and 76.8% who were men. Overall 94.1% felt discomfort and anxiety in which the number for men were 90.5% and women was 95.6% [25]. In a victimization survey, nearly one-third reported some form of cyber harassment, which did not cause them any harm, but it was annoying. [26]. Another research has highlighted the importance of low self-control, because as self-control decreases, the opportunity of criminal behavior increases [27]. Findings of another survey indicate that cyberstalking is experienced by a nontrivial proportion of the sample, and that there are small but generally consistent relationships between facets of cyberstalking and spatially based stalking. In addition, the results suggested that only interactional forms of coping were related consistently with forms of cyberstalking [28].

It seems significant that more than 38% of cyberstalking victims did not know the identity of their harassers, but still reported high levels of psychological disturbance. This has significance for two reasons: not only do victims have troubling psychological symptoms in the absence of physical contact with their stalker, but also there is a high proportion of cyberstalking cases where the stalker does not know the victim [29]. This is divergent to what is known about offline stalking, where studies have revealed that the majority of stalkers know their victims [30] and contradicts the view held by some who argue for the assumption of parallelism between online and offline harassment [31].

## The impact of cyberstalking

Currently, there are a few empirical studies on the effects of cyberstalking on its victims and on a wider scale the perception of these effects is mixed. There are those scholars that minimize the effects of cyberstalking, believing since most of the behaviors occur online, the victim is not in physical danger and consequently, suffers less physical and emotional reactions [32]. Another survey's findings suggest that the emotional impact of cyberstalking predominantly includes comorbid anxiety and depression. Common coping strategies adopted by victims include avoidant coping, ignoring the perpetrator, confrontational coping, support seeking, and cognitive reframing. Taken together, the findings demonstrate that the ramifications of cyberstalking are widespread, affecting psychological, social, interpersonal, and economic aspects of life. To adapt, some victims made major changes to both their work and social life, with some ceasing employment and others modifying their usual daily activities [33]. Some suggest that victims of cyberstalking suffer from more intense reactions than their offline counterparts [34]. For instance, it has been said that since the victim is accessible both from afar and at all hours of the day in the online world, these victims experience more paranoia and stress than offline victims. A series of physical, emotional and psychological traumas are presented to the victim, who may develop or experience such as sleep disorders, eating disorders, high levels of stress, feeling out of control and a sense of loss personal safety [35]. Victims can also experience multiple other reactions, such as weakness, shame, feelings of isolation and anxiety or depression, and may also lead to substance use [36]. The psychological effects of cyberstalking have linked PTSD with harassment in the workplace and offline stalking [37] and more general psychological distress with the experience of being stalked [38]. Moreover, in common with other research that has investigated the effect of adverse experiences such as childhood trauma, [39] natural disasters [40] and war [41] on mental health outcomes, the respondents of the survey reported much higher levels of psychological distress than levels that have been reported in general population stud-

ies. [42] Therefore, just as offline stalking has psychological and physical effects on the victim, so does cyberstalking. Altered behaviours that victims of cyberstalking could experience include changes in sleeping and eating patterns, anxiety, stress and fear. These are many of the same symptoms involved in posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), leaving the victim experiencing feelings of isolation, irritability and guilt [43].

## Conclusion

Over the last decade, researchers have demonstrated that cyber stalking is a worrying reality for many people, especially the youngest. Cyberstalking, however, has received much less attention from the research community. Criminologists are currently in an exploratory research era in regard to cybercrime, the growth of which has thus far not been matched by criminological scholarship. Consequently, there currently exists little methodological precedent for the researcher intending to qualitatively examine the online victimization and harassment. The fact that cyberstalking does not involve physical contact creates the misconception that it is less threatening or dangerous than stalking. Cyber stalking is just as scary and potentially dangerous to the victim as it disturbs the victim's life and tranquility. Cyberstalking is becoming an increasingly significant problem for schools and society in general. The society should be more aware of the existence of such serious problems and take measures in order to not fall prey to cyber stalkers.

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