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Self-Reports of Adverse Health Effects Associated with Cyberstalking and Cyberharassment:

A Thematic Analysis of Victims' Lived Experiences

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Abstract

Despite growing evidence that incidents of cyber-harassment and cyberstalking are growing in scope and severity as the variety of technological platforms increase, researchers have yet to fully examine the differences between cyber-harassment and cyberstalking. Therefore, this study examines if differences exist in victims reports of their physical, emotional, and psychological health following incidents of cyberharassment or cyberstalking. The current study conducted focus group sessions with 49 participants who reported a broad range of unwanted electronic communication experiences. The results reveal minimal differences in the victims' reports of the types of harms experienced despite the designation of cyberstalking as a criminal activity, as opposed to cyber-harassment, that is not covered by legal statutes. These findings demonstrate that victims of both types of unwanted communication suffer many adverse health effects, but may face difficulty should they choose to seek justice.

Reports of Adverse Health Effects Associated with Cyberstalking

Carlie was finishing her junior year of high school when she met Trevor. He was a classmate and they became fast friends on a social network site. After chatting all night, for many nights, they quickly became a romantic couple. As she would later recall, he was always "kinda jealous" but after she left to go to college, his possessive behavior became "out of control." His hourly texts ballooned to hundreds, his daily rants on her social media page vacillated between hostility and apology, until she told him that she wanted to end the relationship. According to Carlie, that was when her annoyance became terror. "Before I broke up with him ... I couldn't eat, sleep, get my schoolwork done ... but, I felt bad 'cuz I knew he missed me." However, after she terminated their romance, she recalled "he was so mean and scary ... he knew where I was all the time, even though my school was in another state, he threatened my mom and my dog, he wished my brother would get hit by a bus." In addition to her psychological torment, Carlie explained "my hair was falling out, I lost 20 pounds, I developed endometriosis ... I was falling apart and had become as crazy as he was."

In addition to Trevor's social media posts, her "friends" also would comment on his messages. According to Carlie, the posts almost always were negative remarks about her looks and her personality. "They said I was losing too much weight ... I looked like I had cancer ... it was payback for all the bitchy things I said about others." Carlie's experience with Trevor and others represent two newer forms of interpersonal terrorism known as cyberharassment and cyberstalking.

Cyberharassment and cyberstalking are similar, yet distinct constructs. Although there is a federal statute that addresses cyberstalking, not all states have laws to cover incidents of

cyberharassment (for a review of state laws, see Fox, Nobles, & Fisher, 2011). Cyberstalking is

a criminal action characterized by the repetitive use electronic devices to stalk that requires a

pattern of threatening or malicious behaviors and involves a credible threat (NCLS, 2013; US

Attorney General Report, 1999). Thus, to be in violation of Federal cyberstalking laws, the

aggressor must make repeated, specific, intentional, and fear-producing threats that leads one to

believe an illegal act or an injury will be inflicted on the recipient, his/her family or household.

On the other hand, "cyberharassment differs from cyberstalking in that it may generally be

defined as not involving a credible threat. Cyberharassment usually pertains to threatening or

harassing email messages, instant messages, or to blog entries or websites dedicated solely to

tormenting an individual. Some states approach cyberharrassment by including language

addressing electronic communications in general harassment statutes, while others have created

stand-alone cyberharassment statutes. (NCLS, 2013). Cyberharassment is not illegal, yet many

victims may experience irritation, annoyance, and frustration due to the frequency and/or subject

matter of the aggressor's messages.

　　　　Statistics show the crime of stalking (both non-cyber, also known as traditional stalking,

and cyberstalking) is on the rise. According to the 2006 Supplemental Victimization Survey

(SVS), estimated 5.3 million Americans reported they had been stalked within the 12-month

period prior to administration of the survey (Baum, Catalano, & Rand, 2009). Within this

population, 66.7% of respondents had received unwanted phone calls/messages and 30.7% had

been sent unwanted email/letters. Only 4 years later, in 2010, researchers for the U.S. Center for

Disease Control found an estimated 7.1 million had been stalked within the previous 12-months.

78.8% reported unwanted phone calls/messages and 30.7% received unwanted email/letters

(Black et al, 2010). Taken as a whole, these national surveys demonstrate a frightening trend.

These statistics represent the total numbers of individuals who indicated they had experienced fear as a result of enacted, repetitive threats, whether face-to-face or through electronic means. Despite the stark difference in statistics, the data reveal even greater gains if the numbers of victims of traditional harassment and cyberharassment are included.

Despite the large number of victims, cyberharassment behaviors have been viewed by the general public, law enforcement, as well as legal and medical professionals as less harmful (Alexy, Burgess, Baker, & Smoyak, 2005). One reason for this assumption may be due to the lack of literature that examines cyberharassment. Although research has demonstrated the grave health risks associated with the cyberstalking experience (Bocij & McFarlane, 2003, Kennedy, 2000; Lamberg, 2002; Mechanic, Uhlmansiek, Weaver, & Resick, 2000; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004), very little is known about the health effects of cyberharassment. In an effort to explore if the annoyance, irritation, and frustration that may accompany persistent, unwanted cyberharassment may also be associated with negative health outcomes, this study will examine the narratives of cyberstalking and cyberharassment victims. Specifically, this investigation will focus on how these victims describe their: (a) emotional health (b) psychological health (c) physical health.

Literature Review

Cyberharassment and cyberstalking share many similarities and are often used interchangeably, however they have notable differences. In this section, we begin with a discussion of research of obsessional relational intrusion and cyber-obsessional pursuit in order to explain cyberharassment. Next, we explore the unique properties of cyberstalking. Last, we provide a review of the cyberstalking health effects literature.

Cyberharassment

Cyberharassment involves the use of electronic devices in order to harass or threaten a target without a specific threat of imminent danger to self, family, or personal property (NCLS, 2013). For example, empirical evidence suggests individuals use websites, blogs, and social network sites vent their frustrations about another that may cause embarrassment, but do not instill fright (Goodno, 2007; Lyndon, Bonds-Raacke, & Cratty, 2011; Ogilvie, 2000; Paullet, Rota, & Swan, 2009). Other studies have shown cyberharassers use electronic devices to pester or pursue a potential target (e.g., Alexy, Burgess, Baker, & Smoyak, 2005; Baum et al., 2009; Jerin & Dolinsky, 2001; Sheridan & Grant, 2007). Victims have been identified in these studies as past, current, and potential romantic partners, as well as friends, co-workers, classmates, and family members.

Cyber-obsessional pursuit (COP) was one of the earliest conceptual frameworks used to explore cyberharassment. Spitzberg and Hoobler (2002) define COP as the use of data transmission or electronic devices to harass, intimidate, or demand intimacy from another person. It is important to note that intimacy does not necessarily mean a desire for a romantic or physical relationship. Instead, intimacy has been described as a process in which one person expresses important self-relevant feelings and information to another and, as a result of the other's response, comes to feel understood, validated, and cared for (Reis & Patrick, 1996; Reis & Shaver, 1988. Therefore, in a cyber-obsessional context, a perpetrator uses electronic technology to divulge personal information in order to elicit the return of similar disclosures that may heighten a real or imagined relationship.

Like COP, obsessional relational intrusion (ORI) is an active attempt by one to deepen a real or imagined relationship. Spitzberg and Hoobler (2002) define ORI as "the unwanted pursuit of intimacy through the repeated invasion of a person's sense of physical or symbolic

privacy" (p. 73). Like COP, this definition highlights an on-going interpersonal phenomenon. Specifically, an individual seeks to establish, heighten, or re-establish a personal connection with their target (Cupach & Spitzberg, 1998, 2001; Cupach, Spitzberg, & Carson, 2000; Spitzberg, Marshall, & Cupach, 2001; Spitzberg, Nicastro, & Cousins, 1998; 2001; Spitzberg & Rhea, 1999). Because the actions associated with ORI are repetitive and invasive, they may also fall under the rubrics of cyberharassment and cyberstalking However, in an effort to delineate ORI from cyber-behaviors, Spitzberg and Hoobler (2002) identified three core characteristics of COP: hyperintimacy, intrusion, and aggression.

First, *hyperintimacy* is characterized by amplified and unwanted expressions of affection through electronic means, such as telephone messages, emails, texts and social media posts (Spitzberg & Hoobler, 2002). These messages are characterized by their excessively neediness, disclosure, and demands.

Second, *intrusion behaviors* involved threats of public dissemination of personal and private details about the target, as well as warnings of sabotage to the victim's reputation (Spitzberg & Hoobler, 2002). Although threats are made, they do not center on one's personal safety, therefore may not constitute cyberstalking behavior.

Last *aggression activities* included the use of threats, attempts at computer hacking, and the willful alteration to the target's online identity (Spitzberg & Hoobler, 2002). Because the focus is on one's personal property and not the victim's physical being, these threats may cause emotional discomfort, irritation, or annoyance, but not necessarily invoke fear.

In this section, we have defined cyberharassment and discussed the behaviors associated with cyber-obsessional pursuit. To re-iterate, from a legal perspective, cyberharassment does not instill fear in a victim. In order to provide a point of comparison, we next define and describe

cyberstalking.

Cyberstalking

Recent technological advancements in data transmission devices have provided new opportunities for individuals to stalk, observe, and intimidate their targets in order to frighten their victim through repetitive communications. Similar to cyberharassment, past, current, and potential intimates comprise the majority of cyberstalkers, as opposed to anonymous perpetrators (Alexy, Burgess, Baker, & Smoyak, 2005; Baum et al., 2009; CDC, 2010; Finn, 2004; Jerin & Dolinsky, 2001; Mohandie, Meloy, McGowan, & Williams, 2006; Sheridan & Grant, 2007). Moreover, like cyberharassment, research also has consistently demonstrated an enhanced desire for a relationship or resumption of a former relationship, feelings of jealousy, envy, and hurt as well as a need for revenge following rejection all may serve as trigger mechanisms for cyberstalkers (Mohandie, Meloy, McGowan, & Williams, 2006; Roberts & Dziegielewski, 2006). Despite the commonalities between cyberharassment and cyberstalking, the experience of fear separates the two constructs.

Early research of fear-producing messages sent through electronic devices can be found in studies of traditional stalking that contain measures including cyber-behaviors (e.g., Bjerregaard, 2000; Mullen, Pathé, Purcell, & Stuart, 1999; Sheridan, Davies, & Boon, 2001; Spitzberg, 2002; Spitzberg et al., 1998; Tjaden & Thoennes, 1998, 2000). However, the main focus of these studies main was the types of technologies used, not the fear component. Yet, more recent studies have specifically focused on the experience of fear in unwanted sexual solicitation and unwelcome relational pursuit from an overly-aggressive suitor or spurned love interest (Jerin & Dolinsky, 2001; Lee, 1998; Spitzberg & Hoobler, 2002). In a study of 324 self-identified cyberstalking victims in the United Kingdom, 80.9% reported fear and 94.1% reported

distress (Maple, Short, & Brown, 2011). Specifically, the participants listed fear of damage to

their reputation, fear of physical harm caused by the perpetrator or one's self, fear of physical

violence enacted against significant others, and fear of injury to one's own feelings. Thus, fear

has multiple facets.

The collection of these studies underscores cyberstalkers use a variety of tools to terrorize

and inflict negative affect within victims. Yet fear is only one aspect of the cyberstalking

experience. In the next section, we examine the literature that has empirically demonstrated other

psychological and physical health impacts reported by cyberstalking victims.

Health Effects

Scholars have long documented the adverse health effects of traditional stalking that also

are applicable to cyberstalking and cyberharassment experiences. For example, in his

exploration of the side effects of traditional stalking, Spitzberg (2002) created a seven-cluster

typology of stalking symptoms that included: general distress (e. g., PTSD), affective symptoms

(e. g., depression, anxiety), cognitive health (e. g., loss of self-esteem, helplessness), physical

health (e. g., problems with alcohol, appetite, or sleeping), social health (e. g., deterioration in

social relationships), and resource health (disruption of work or school). The seventh cluster was

named as resilience to refer to victims who may found productive rather that counterproductive

ways of surviving victimization. The presence of these negative health effects may not be

present in all cases of cyberharassment or cyberstalking and may be represented on a continuum

of possible outcomes.

Cyberharassment Health Effects. Studies of cyberharassment have shown repetitive and

unsolicited messages can cause undue stress and other ill-effects on the target (e.g., D'Ovidio &

Doyle, 2003; Fisher Cullen & Turner, 2000; Meloy, Rivers, Siegel, Gothard, Naimark, &

Nicolini, 2000; Ogilive, 2000; Sinclair & Frieze, 2000). The issues reported within these studies

are often consistent with Spitzberg's (2002) typology.

For example, Sinclair, Bauman, Poteat, Koenig, and Russell (2011) surveyed 17,366

middle and high school in order to explore the if differences existed between students who were

"bullied, threatened, or harassed in the past 12 months about their racial/ethnic background or

being perceived as lesbian, gay, and bisexual" through traditional and cyber-means (p. 521).

Salient to this study, the authors found higher rates of substance abuse, mental health issues, and

academic problems than those who did not report any messages of bias through traditional or

electronic means.

Affect symptoms and resource health issues also appear in college samples. In their study

of 1,368 Canadian and American college students, Beran, Rinaldi, Bickham, and Rich (2012)

found one-third had experienced cyberharassment. Of these participants, 31.62% reported anger,

21.37% felt sad or hurt, 20.23% experienced embarrassed and 18.23% felt anxious more than

once during their ordeals. School-related issues reported by the participants include poor

concentration, lowered achievement, and absenteeism.

The studies presented in this section demonstrate how cyberharassment impact victims'

health in a variety of negative ways. Next, we turn to the detrimental effects of cyberstalking,

specifically the PTSD, general psychological and physical symptomology reported by victims.

Cyberstalking Health Effects.

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. One of the most severe forms of mental health

disorders to affect cyberstalking victims is Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). In order to

be diagnosed with PTSD a victim must meet six specific criteria: (1) exposure to a traumatic

event, (e. g., sexual, physical, or psychological assault) (2) repeated real or imagined re-

experience of the trauma, (e. g., nightmares and flashbacks) (3) avoidance of activities and

stimuli associated with the trauma, (e. g., evasion of off-line/on-line activities or evasion to

certain locations) (4) numbed response to emotional experiences, (e. g., difficulty experiencing

positive or negative emotions) (5) heightened arousal, (e. g., intensified irritability, exaggerated

startle reflex) (6) persistent symptoms for at least one month of distress or impairment (APA,

1994).

Past research has concluded PTSD is strongly correlated to traditional and cyberstalking

victimization (Basile, Arias, Desai, & Thompson, 2004; Kamphuis, & Emmelkamp, 2001;

Kamphuis, Emmelkamp & Bartak, 2003; Kraaij, Arensman, Garnefski, & Kremers, 2007; Pathé,

& Mullen, 1997; Westrup, Fremouw, Thompson, & Lewis, 1994). These results have been found

consistently in studies conducted in a variety of countries. For example, in the United Kingdom,

Maple, Short, and Brown (2012) found high levels of the key symptoms displayed by PTSD

sufferers in Cluster B (re-experiencing the trauma), Cluster C (avoidance and emotional

numbness), and Cluster D (Hyper-arousal). Dutch researchers have also findings that

demonstrate prolonged exposure to traditional and cyberstalking behaviors increases one's

propensity for developing post-traumatic stress (Kamphuis, Emmelkamp, & Bartak, 2003).

Moreover, the results indicate non-violent intrusive communications and harassment also had a

strong effect on psychological distress.   Last, research conducted in the United States with

National Violence Against Women Survey (NVAWS) found stalking (both traditional and cyber)

was a strong predictor for PTSD.

Psychological Abuse. Interpersonal violence has many devastating effects on individuals. In

their study of this phenomenon, Coker, Davis, and Sanderson (2002) also used the NVAWS

survey data to explore a variety of health outcomes. Salient to this study, psychological abuse

that included verbal abuse, as well as expressions of power and control were associated with

higher amounts of negative health than physical assaults. The authors created the verbal abuse

scale to include items such as swearing, name calling, and acting jealous or possessive. The

power and control scale included items such as "frightens you" and "makes you feel inadequate."

Moreover, items that show a perpetrator's ability to restrict her or his victim's movements were

included. Because incidents of technological stalking are communicative expressions designed

to induce fear, verbal abuse captures this emotion succinctly. The results show the receipt of

psychological abuse puts victims at great risk for the development of chronic mental illness,

injury, and chronic health diseases.

In light of the research included in this discussion, there is an obvious need to understand

the potential psychological destruction cyberstalking can have on individuals. Moreover,

because one's psychological well-being has a direct influence on one's physical health; this area

must also be examined.

Physical Health. Similar to the research of PTSD, there has been limited research of the

negative health outcomes associated with cyberstalking. Nonetheless, the effects of traumatic

stress on physical health have gained increasing attention. Women with traumatic experiences,

such as abuse, report poorer health status and more physical symptoms than those without such

experiences (Green & Kemmerling, 2004). Thus, due to the dearth of cyberstalking research,

this section will explore past research of the impacts stalking on one's health.

Stalking has been shown to have a deleterious effect on one's physical well-being

(Blackburn, 1999; Brewster, 2000; Nicastro et al., 2000; Pathé & Mullen, 1997; Purcell, Pathé, &

Mullen, 2000; Spitzberg, 2002). These health effects include somatization, problems sleeping,

excessive tiredness or weakness, issues with appetite, headaches, and nausea (Amar, 2006; Davis

et al., 2002; Dressing, Kuehner, & Gass, 2005; Pathé & Mullen, 1997). Specifically, Pathé and Mullen's (1997) study found that many stalking victims reported heightened anxiety (83%), chronic sleep disturbance (74%), excessive tiredness or weakness (55%), appetite disturbance (48%), frequent headaches (47%), and persistent nausea (30%). Similarly, Dressing, Kuehner, and Gass (2005) subjects reported sleep disturbances (41%), stomach trouble (35 %), and headaches (14%). In addition, 24% of the total sample had consulted a psychologist or a physician with 18% took sick leave as a direct result of the stalking.

Somatization is an often reported problem associated with abusive experiences. Somatization is operationalized as a pattern of physical symptoms for which medical assistance is sought but for which no medical cause can be identified. In the psychological research, somatization is often seen as the tendency to express psychological problems by means of somatic symptoms. Thus, the expression of bodily disturbances is often a by-product of stalking. In Amar's (2006) study of college women who had been stalked, individuals who had experienced stalking reported poorer perceived physical health status and had significantly higher somatization scores than individuals who did not report experiencing stalking. Moreover, victims reported statistically significant level of poorer physical health status than those who did report experiencing stalking.

Research Question

As we can see, the activities associated with cyberharassment involve threats, but not of a physical nature, federal legal statutes would not consider these acts as criminal. Moreover, the level of fear, as measured by the "reasonable person standard" that is required for criminal conviction under many state laws would most likely not be met, yet do lead to negative health effects. Therefore, the following research question is posited:

RQ1: What are the main differences between cyberharassment and cyberstalking presented in victims' health narratives?

Methods

Participants

Participants (N = 85) consisted of undergraduate students (47 female and 38 male). All were currently enrolled in communication courses at a mid-sized, Midwestern university and a small, private West Coast University. Twenty-seven participated in one-on-one in-depth interviews conducted by the primary researcher and 48 engaged in small focus groups conducted by the primary researcher and the two other co-authors. The ages of all participants ranged from 18-45 years and the average age of the participants was 20.23. In order to be eligible to participate in the interview or focus groups, the participant had to have had some form of interpersonal relationship with their perpetrator, as opposed to being cyberharassed or cyberstalked by unknown person.

Data Collection Procedures

Prior to engagement in the interview or focus groups, participants were asked to select a pseudonym prior to their participation. Participants were informed that all information collected completely anonymously and no real names were provided.

Next, they were provided with a verbal and paper copy of the study's aims, as well as the benefits and risks involved in their participation. This was done to ensure all participants were comfortable with the subject matter prior to the administration of the demographic survey and the interview/focus group processes. Next, participants were given and read a description of how cyberharassment and cyberstalking have been defined for this study. The reason for this was to ensure the study participants were able to meet the study criteria. Participants were instructed

that if they did not meet these definitions, they were excused from further participation. Those who remained also were told they may end their participation at any time, for any reason.

Measures

Research participants were first given a packet of materials including series of questionnaires to assess their demographic profile and their computer usage. Second, a portion of Spitzberg and Cupach's (2011) Obsessional Relational Intrusion Victimization Report (ORIVR) was included to prime the participants for the interview and focus groups. Specifically, the measures that explore mediated context and proxy pursuit were used in order to explore specific technological stalking behaviors. Following the interview or focus group, participants were given revised versions of the posttraumatic diagnostic scale (Foa, 1995) and the Somatic Complaints List (Jellesma, Rieffe, & Terwogt (2007). Participants were asked to rate on a 5-point Likert-type scale how often they experienced the symptoms during the time of their experience. The range of responses was 5 (almost daily) to 1 (never).

Semi-structured Interviews and Focus Groups

The use of interviews and focus groups are valuable methods for interpretive scholars to collect information from individuals with lived experiences because they are able to articulate their first-hand knowledge about a particular phenomenon (Baxter & Babbie, 2004; Creswell, 1998). Moreover, this method allows researchers to uncover the nuanced detail of a specific context in order to develop a more complete understanding of the phenomenon. As a result, we employed semi-structured interviews to guide the participants to areas specific to this present study, but also allowed participants to elaborate on their specific experiences.

In this current study, w collected data in order to conduct a thematic analysis of the victims' experiences. For all interviews and focus groups, we started with the same question:

"Can you describe why you felt you had been cyberharassment or cyberstalking?" After

descriptions were given, each participant was asked to identify if they thought their experience

was cyberharassment or cyberstalking. Following the interviews and focus groups, participants

were debriefed, given the opportunity to ask questions, and were provided with resources about

cyberharassment and cyberstalking upon request.

Data Analysis

The interviews were audio-taped, transcribed verbatim, and verified by all members of

the researcher team, yielding a total of 878 single-spaced pages of data. In order to analyze the

data, Owen's (1984, 1985) conceptualization of thematic interpretation to unitize the data.

Themes were identified and created based on: recurrence, repetition, and forcefulness of

statements provided by participants. Recurrence was found by locating significant passages that

appeared more than once and "have the same thread of meaning" even though different wording

may have been used. Repetition was found in the explicit use of exact words and phrases to

stress the importance of an incident or idea. Last, forcefulness was located in the use of verbal

and nonverbal means to emphasize key ideas within one's retelling of their experiences.

Nonverbal, nonlinguistic instances were found in the audit trail maintained by each of the focus

group leaders or primary interviewer.

Each member of the research team read all transcripts multiple times. First, team

members, identified significant passages in each transcript. Next, more general categories were

developed from these passages. This process allowed us to create themes of higher level

abstractions but also remain grounded in each of the participants' narratives.

The final stage was to create a table of the themes identified within the participants'

narratives complete with descriptive information about each theme in order to easily locate the

words and phrases in the manuscripts that corresponded to each theme. This organizational

method allowed us to demonstrate the superordinate themes and all sub-themes contained within

each category. This was an important step because if categories did not have sufficient support

or we could not reach agreement, the theme was dropped and themes with excessive support

were further divided. In order to maintain agreement, the team met to discuss the key themes

located in each transcript, as well as the entire project as a whole.

RESULTS

The results indicate that cyberharassment and cyberstalking victims suffer adverse health

effects in three main areas: emotional, psychological, and physical. Although the areas of impact

are the same, the experiences vary in duration of symptomology and severity of symptomology.

In each section below, we will discuss each, cyberharassment and cyberstalking, experiences

separately, describe each area of health impacts separately, as well as any areas of stark

difference.

Cyberharassment Health Effects

Emotional health – expressed anger. The first theme located was the expression of

anger. In this theme, participants discussed various levels of annoyance, frustration, and

resentment towards their harasser, but often these feelings of anger were punctuated by strong

declarations aimed at the perpetrator. According to Eric, who was cyberharassed by an ex-

girlfriend:

> At first I just felt kind of betrayed and kind of victimized and just really angry with the
>
> whole situation. I'm still angry with it, its something that I deal with day to day. She still
>
> bugs me from time to time, nothing major, but I wish she would just go away already" (3:
>
> 136-139).

Brittany, also was tormented by a former partner, recalled "It turned into anger because…I was asking [him] not to talk to me. Why couldn't [he] respect me enough to not talk to me?" (9: 128 - 129). In each of the scenarios, the victims could not understand why a person they had once loved was unable to stop communicating with him or her. Both participants, among others, stated the persistence of the communication was the trigger for their feelings of anger.

       Emotional health – fear of aggressor. To recall, cyberharassment does not include a specific threat to one's personal self, therefore in the following vignettes, the victims describe instances when excessive communication led some participants to develop feelings of fear of their aggressor, as well as a fear for their own reputations.

       Betty had worked with her, but was never romantically involved with him. Although she considered him a "work friend" at first, when she decided that she no longer felt comfortable talking or texting him outside of work, she stopped responding to his phone calls or messages. She stated "he sent like 100 messages in one day … they weren't like threats but just like "why won't you talk me you stuck up bitch" (Betty, 8: 346- 381).

       Carlos also experienced cyberharassment from a former friend. The pair along with several friends had taken a Spring Break trip together, but a dispute followed after the some of the friend's belongings were missing after a party in their hotel room. "It started with a few phone calls and texts, then he went on Facebook ... talkin' shit ... bein' a little bitch whining to everyone that he should kick my ass."

       In both, Katelyn's and Carlos' situations, the harassment did not last more than a month. However both discussed their initial fear that their cyberharasser might try to seek out physical retribution for their supposed wrongdoings, even though no direct threat had been made.

Emotional health – fear of loss of reputation. Like Betty and Carlos, Katelyn, had had a friendship with Nancy, her aggressor. However, as they moved on with their lives after high school, Katelyn felt no desire to keep in contact with her past pal. When Nancy decided to transfer to Katelyn's school, Katelyn was very hesitant to reconnect. Because they had been friends on Facebook, Katelyn's worry became a full-fledged cause for concern after Nancy revealed she was gay. According to Katelyn, "I was afraid of what she was gonna say to other people about me or that other people were seeing her posts on my Facebook" (10, 207-230). She would later discuss how she believed her sorority sisters may look at her differently if she had a close lesbian friend.

The experiences in this theme represent the emotional harms expressed by the participants. Although the actual experiences lack the threat required by cyberstalking statutes, the victims reported their incidents had a negative impact on their emotional health.

Psychological health – anxiety. Participants also reported several psychological health effects as a result of cyberharassment. Feelings such as anxiety and stress, and behaviors such as the inability to develop close relationships and substance abuse were reported by the victims as manifestations of poor psychological health during and after their cyberharassment experiences.

Brittany, who had been tormented by her former partner explained that due the frequency of his communications her "anxiety went up which then...affect[ed] my school work and that made me stressed" (9: 197-198). Brittany's expedience shows the ripple effect that may occur following a traumatic ordeal. In addition to the psychological affects, she also developed issues with her resource health. Amanda also reported how the anxiety she felt during her experience spilled over into other areas of her health. She explained "I feel like now I don't like to get as

close to people because I do not know if they are going to go crazy or do something weird ... I

hate it cuz I used to be so outgoing" (Amanda, 7: 158-160).

Ryan, also developed negative cognitive health and social health issues after the younger

sister of a former teammate had developed an unrequited crush on him. He recalled his

teammates were not happy about how he handled the situation and used social media and text

messages to annoy and pester him to the point that he developed adverse psychological effects.

"I was definitely annoyed ... it really built up some anxiety for me. I felt uncomfortable all time,

and after games or wherever I was at I thought that they could possibly be around the corner"

(Ryan, 8: 76-79).

These two exemplars demonstrate how negative psychological effects often do not work

in isolation. In addition to the cognitive and social impacts, several participants also reported the

development of substance abuse problems as a way of coping with their suffering.

Psychological health – substance abuse. The use of legal and illegal substances was

employed as a positive coping mechanism for some, however often led to addiction in others. In

these cases, the experience of cyberharassment did not have the long-term psychological

impacts, yet did leave some victims with lasting effects.

Jamal reported after he and his former girlfriend broke up, she used a variety of electronic

devices to contact him "relentlessly" for over three months. In order to cope, he turned to

marijuana. He explained "I honestly used to smoke a lot of weed when I'd get anxiety about it

but it really wasn't that big of a deal" (Jamal, 8: 223). On the other hand, Maizey turned to

alcohol which developed into a habit of binge drinking. She recalled "when it first happened, my

friends and I would take a drink every time he sent a text, like it was a game ... but after he

stopped calling I was still in ... party all the time mode." Later in the interview, she confided "I

was such a hot mess, I stopped going to class, I lost a ton of weight ... my mom saw the changes

helped me find help. Although less common than other forms of health effects, the physical

maladies described by Maizey were also present in others' reports.

Physical health – sleep disturbances. The most common impact experienced by

victims was changes to sleep patterns. The disruptions led to difficulty with concentration and

resource health, as well as general irritability and exhaustion. According to Shay, **"**it was hard

for me to sleep because I worried would she would send another text or message ... I thought I

was gonna lose my job because I was so tired" (3: 255-256). Jack also trouble keeping up with

his schoolwork due to a lack of sleep. He stated "sometimes I'd be in bed and thinking, what if I

wake up at 1 in the morning and this kid is...in the house? ... I'm gonna flunk out of school and

then what?" (Jack, 5: 401 - 434).

The issues with disrupted sleeping patterns and general anxiety also caused some

participants to experience adverse bodily conditions.

Physical health – gastrointestinal issues. Stomach issues were a problem with several

victims. For example, Devin recalled "my stomach would hurt when the phone would ring and it

was always a relief when it wasn't her" (6: 364 - 365). Cassie's experience is similar because she

also had stomach issues, but her physical ailments have had a lingering effect. She stated "after

about a month of this going on, my mom took me to the doctor and he tested me for an ulcer … I

didn't have one, but now when anything stresses me out, I get like , um, I'm constantly in the

bathroom" (8, 654-698).

Taken as a whole, the narratives in this section demonstrate that the annoyance and

irritation often associated with cyberharassment also can have an array of adverse emotional,

psychological, and physical effects. Although in a few cases these effects lasted after the

cyberharassment ended, generally speaking, the victims reported the issues ceased after their

tormentor ceased communication. In addition, the lack of specified and direct threats may have

contributed to less severity of symptomology.

Cyberstalking Health Effects

The results indicate cyberstalking victims also suffer adverse health effects in same three

main areas: emotional, psychological, and physical. However, the key area of difference is that

victims report symptomology lasts longer and the effects were much more severe.

Emotional health – fear of aggressor.   The participants in this section demonstrated the

lingering effects of the fear. Specifically, each participant recalled how they continue to be

afraid of their aggressor, even in cases where there is no contact. Jane explained "I literally was

afraid and paranoid for my life ... I was like she's outside my ... bedroom window right now...

even though this she hasn't called in forever, I still freak if there's a noise outside" (5: 46 - 89).

For Taylor, his constant worry led to vivid thoughts of his own death. "I...thought she was going

to just walk up to me on the street and kill me" (5: 460 - 461). Krystal also reported she had

grave fear of her ex-boyfriend despite being in a different state. "He kept calling me, he went to

my parents' doorstep, he went to our local park and took pictures … it was really weird because

that was right near my house, is he like gonna come to (the university) next? (Krystal, 672-740).

The fear of not being able to anticipate their cyberstalkers actions seemed to heighten the

fear for these victims. The feelings of unpredictability also was seen in the fear of damage to

one's reputation.

Emotional health – fear of loss of reputation. The victims' reports in this section focus

on the fear of the release of private information that was once shared between past intimates. For

example, Jennifer explained that during their courtship, she allowed her ex-intimate to take

sexually explicit photos of her. I her interview, she recalled "even though we have been broken up for a year he won't delete those pictures… I feel like if upset him any way, he will show them those pictures to other people and that scares me (Jennifer, 10, 207-230).

For Missy, her ex-girlfriend actually did carry out on her threats. Although Missy has moved out of state, she lives in constant fear that her past will remain hidden.

> After we broke up and I unfriended her, she posted to all my friends' walls that I was slept with Mrs. (name deleted – the principal of her school) … that like blew everything up and I had a meltdown. I had to go into counseling, I was medicated, I to, uh, I changed schools twice and I still have a hard time making friends because I feel like it's only a matter of time before they find out (Missy, 1:182-272).

The experiences in this section demonstrate the impact that emotional torment can have on a victim; even long after there has been contact with the cyberstalker. The manifestation of fear may also have lasting psychological impacts on the victim.

Psychological health – anxiety. One of the hallmarks of post traumatic stress disorder is the re-experiencing of the distressing incident. This phenomenon is often preceded by a triggering event. In this section, we provide a few examples of victims who have experienced adverse psychological trauma.

Although Kelly has chosen to stay at the same school with her cyberstalker because she is so close to graduation, she has had many occasions to relive her trauma. Here, she explains "If I have one of his roommates...in one of my classes..or see him in the quad, .it's like it never ends" (Kelly, 5: 336 - 337). Like Kelly, Manny also experiences heightened anxiety on a regular basis. "No matter where I am, if I hear the ringtone that I used for her, it send me into an out and out panic" (Manny, 17: 302 - 304). Manny further explained he has been prescribed an anti-anxiety

medication, but when he has these moments, he often over-medicates. This reaction is also seen in other narratives.

      Psychological health – substance abuse. As we reported in the section of cyberharassment, legal and illegal substances often serve as a coping mechanism for some victims. Yet, for some victims, like Manny, the use of drugs and alcohol to over-indulge through self-medication has produced greater issues.

      Lucy was cyberstalked by a former classmate who she had beat out for a spot on the cheerleading squad at her high school. She recalled that the student started rumors that she was "a lesbian slut, so I transferred and they found out about the rumors ... so and they started to bully me too … I took a bunch of my meds ...my mom found out … and put me in the psych ward for 3 days" (Melinda, 36: 652-724).

      In addition to substance abuse, victims also report turning to food as a source of comfort during and after their ordeals. In the next section, we provide narratives of over-eating and other physical health issues.

      Physical health – Appetite issues. Several students discussed changes in their eating behaviors as a result of their cyberstalking experience. While some had little to no appetite, others developed eating disorders. For example, Collette stated "I would look at all the things people were saying because of his stupid posts and I would just start eating, then I'd go throw up ... my parents made me get treatment, but I still have a hard time when I'm stressed" (51: 324-369).

      Kendall also had weight changes due to her experience. She recounted "when my phone would flash with...some kind of message from him, I would...get this sick stomach feeling and I wouldn't be able to eat ... and then [I] got acid reflux" (Kendall, 5: 389 - 392). Finally, Max's

loss of appetitive occurred when he fell into a depression and had no desire to eat. "All I wanted to do was stay in bed, food was the farthest thing on my mind. When I finally went to the doctor, I had lost almost 30 pounds" (43: 419-420).

Weight changes often are accompanied by other physical health issues. In this study, sleep disturbances were also present.

Physical health – sleep disturbances. One of the most common issues for cyberstalking victims, like cyberharassment victims, was changes in sleeping patterns. Although cyberharassment episodes are typically short-lived, for cyberstalking victims the terror spans a longer period of time, therefore, the changes in rest periods may take its toll on one's overall physical health. As Lance points out

In the beginning, I had sleeping problems...because of all the buzzing that was going on but then even [if the phone was turned off]...I still wasn't sleeping through the night because I knew the text was coming ... it was so hard for me to [sleep], but you need that to function. I got sick a lot more because I still had to do all my work and ... other stuff with no sleep. I nearly ran off the road a couple of times because I was so tired (Lance, 33. 193 - 256).

Lance's situation demonstrates how the lack of proper rest can take its toll on several aspects of his physical health. Due to inadequate sleep, his immune system was weakened. The lack of sleep also may have resulted in serious injury or death to himself or others at work or while driving his car. Therefore, this exemplar shows how changes in the amount of rest one gets due to cyberstalking may have dire consequences.

Discussion

The results of this study demonstrate that the experiences of cyberharassment and cyberstalking victims are remarkably similar in terms of the impacts each may have one a

victim's health.. The crucial differences are intensity and duration. These results are consistent

past research that has shown victims of cyberharassment receive repetitive, unwanted

communications that was nonthreatening, but may have been classified as annoying irritating, or

harassing (e.g., Asada, Lee, Levine, & Ferrara, 2004; Cupach & Spitzberg, 1998, 2000;

Spitzberg, Nicastro, & Cousins, 1998). Moreover, the results in this study are also consistent

with studies that have shown cyberstalking has been shown to have a deleterious effect on one's

physical well-being (Blackburn, 1999; Brewster, 2000; Nicastro et al., 2000; Pathé & Mullen,

1997; Purcell, Pathé, & Mullen, 2000; Spitzberg, 2002). These health effects include

somatization, problems sleeping, excessive tiredness or weakness, issues with appetite,

headaches, and nausea (Amar, 2006; Davis et al., 2002; Dressing, Kuehner, & Gass, 2005; Pathé

& Mullen, 1997).

        This study extends what we currently know about the health effects experiences by

victims of cyberharassment. The narratives presented here offer insight into the variety of harms

that may be associated with problematic messages that do not contain a direct threat, yet still

instill emotional, psychological, and physical harm. Although deeper analysis and more

empirical testing is needed, this study represents a move forward in our understanding of how

electronic communication may pose risks. The results presented provide a starting point in the

discussion for how current legislation needs to eliminate the reasonable fear standard as the

measure by which criminality is assessed, but instead looks at the types of actual harms suffered

by the victims.

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