

The Impact of Cyberstalking: The lived experience - A Thematic Analysis

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Abstract. Cyberstalking (CS) can have major psychosocial impacts on individuals. Victims report a number of serious consequences of victimization such as increased suicidal ideation, fear, anger, depression, and post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptomology. Research is largely limited to quantitative outcome research. This study examines the diversity of experiences reported by people who define themselves as having been cyberstalked. Thematic analysis was used to explore 100 CS victim narratives, gathered by means of an online survey questionnaire designed to capture structured text responses. Five emergent themes were evident in the data: control and intimidation; determined offender; development of harassment; negative consequences; and lack of support. Findings identify similarities and differences to traditional stalking, along with the necessity of support for victims and illustration of the negative impacts this form of harassment produces.

Keywords. CS, harassment, deviant online behaviors

Introduction

Stalking is defined as a pattern of intrusions and harassment upon a person in a manner which would cause a reasonable person anxiety or fear [1]. The Internet has facilitated new means of harassment. CS is defined as the repeated use of the Internet or digital electronic communication devices to harass or threaten a specific individual or group of individuals [2]. The characteristics of CS and 'offline-stalking' both consist of repeated harassing behaviors that are intrusive and negatively impact upon the victim [3]. However it has been argued that the electronic methods used by offenders may provide different processes and outcomes yet to be identified [2]. Increasing technological reliance exposes individuals to new means of intrusion and surveillance [4]. Furthermore, the speed of Internet familiarity has created misperceptions of privacy, permanency of information and personal safety [5].

Estimates of the prevalence of offline-stalking in the U.K. range between 12% and 32% among women and 4% and 17% among men [6]. Prevalence rates for CS have not yet been reliably identified however, estimates suggest that 26% of victims experiencing traditional stalking also report receiving electronic harassment [7].

The majority of contact stalking offenders are male [4][8]. Over half are current or ex-partners of the victim [9] while 10-13% are strangers [10]. It is not clear whether these proportions are equivalent in CS or if they differ due to characteristics that

technology may provide. For example, anonymity and physical distance may encourage a different population to harass. Little research has been conducted on CS perpetrators and it is not known what motivates them to harass victims online rather than in person. Additionally, contact stalking research has focused on the impact of stalking on victims. The most commonly reported outcome is fear. Significant distress is identified in terms of paranoia, distrust of others, feelings of helplessness, cases of suicide are also documented [11]. Serious physical harm and murder have also been identified in cases of both stalking and CS [12].

The general aim of this study was to qualitatively expand understanding. The study also aimed to identify similarities and differences between stalking and CS where possible. In addition, the work aimed to identify actions made by victims that were effective in managing the cyber interaction effectively.

1. Method

A self-selected sample of 100 anonymous participants defining themselves as victims of CS. Participants were aged 15-68 yrs ($M=38.93$, $SD=11.42$). Relationships between the offender and victim were: acquaintance (25.53%), stranger (24.47%), someone dated casually (13.83%), lived with/was married to/have children with (11.70%), unknown (9.57%), work colleague (6.38%), close friend (4.26%), partners ex (2.13%), pupil (1.06%) and relative (1.06%).

The data was gathered by means of an online survey. The qualitative questions were developed iteratively by stalking professionals and researchers. Participants typed a maximum of 500 words in a box provided for each of the following questions: 1. How did it all begin? When did you realize that this was becoming a problem? 2. Provide examples of each of the harassment behaviours experienced. 3. Did any actions improve the situation? 4. Did any actions make the situation worse? 5. Are there any actions that you feel would have protected you better if they had been available to you? 6. What else could have helped improve the situation?

Thematic analysis was applied to identify recurrent themes in the data. The analysis was used across questions, rather than for each open-ended question individually, in order to identify themes across the data as a whole. Furthermore, the context identified as crucial in stalking [8] was not lost. An essentialist and semantic approach served as the basis for the thematic analysis [13]. Codes were inductively formed due to limited theory on CS, therefore the codes had to be drawn solely from the raw data without the use of any theoretical framework [14]. Analysis was guided by a six-step approach to thematic analysis [13]. Direct quotes were extracted from the data providing a clear illustration of each theme in the participant's own words. Inter-rater reliability provided a coefficient of 0.71.

2. Analysis

Five overarching themes emerged: control and intimidation (online [direct and indirect] and offline); the determined offender; development of the harassment; negative consequences; and lack of support. Control and intimidation occurred either solely online or as combined methods that intruded into the victim's life and privacy both online and offline. CS was divided into two sub-themes, direct and indirect harassment.

Direct harassment included making threats: “eventually the chat threads started becoming [sic] threatening, to me personally and to my family, in one instance someone anonymously wrote they wanted to kill me.” (participant 8, page 22, line 7-9); making false accusations: “The person would make up channels saying I was a pedophile, woman abuser, dog molester [sic], drug addict.” (34,12,3-4); hacking the victim’s email; sending viruses; and posting intimate photographs: “setting up a facebook account of me with intimate photos he’d refused to delete [sic].” (78,3,20-22). Complex behaviors included tricking the victim into talking to the offender by creating new identities online: “He created a fake journal and tried to become my friend” (75,35,7); changing the victim’s passwords; or threatening suicide: “sent text messages indicating that he would commit suicide if I did not respond to him” (79,5,21-22); and accusing the victim of being the perpetrator: “she set me up to look like I’d stalked her by posting her email to the bulletin board.” (77,2,4-5).

Indirect methods were: talking to the victim’s contacts: “through her Facebook site...She contacted my daughter three times, some of the things said to my daughter were both vile and completely untrue.” (44,25,7-9); impersonating the victim and harassing their contacts: “impersonated me online sending out emails” (5,8,3); posting the victim’s personal information online: “my address being posted in chat rooms” (12,15,10); encouraging others to harass the victim; following the victim’s activities online and gathering information on the victim to use at a later date: “My stalker and her friends compiled information on where I worked, who my friends were, any new relationships” (42,21,8-9).

Many participants also experienced offline harassment; being followed in person, confrontation, letters, damage to property and assault. Offline behaviors were used either: as a precursor to CS; or in combination with CS: “he started calling at all hours on the landline...[and] the mobile...[and] after he started using pay phones...He [then] overpowered and raped me, and continued calling and IM’ing me after that” (67,23,24); or post CS: “He posted aggressive and insulting messages on my myspace profile it escalated pretty quickly until one night he followed me home and tried to get into my house” (15,18,4-6).

The theme of determined offender brought together a number of features. Most participants described harassment as constant, occurring all day and for long periods of time: “the texts and calls were relentless. At every work breaktime she’d phone over and over again and send text after text of nonsense. These could amount to over 30 a day.” (40,18,18-20); “went on for 3 to 5 years from the same person” (37,15,4-5). The offender was often unyielding, creating new ways to maliciously attack the victim if a method was blocked: “Each time I shut down a means of communication from her she would find another way to harass me” (59,12,34-35).

The motivation of the offenders was diverse, ranging from intimacy seeking: “He kept calling and calling (and calling, and...), trying to get me to go out with him” (67,23,8-10); “he declared his love for me” (63,3,26-27); anger: “She was very angry and the harassment has continued ever since” (7, 9,1-4); revenge: “A friend’s ex-wife blamed me for their divorce so started stalking my husband and myself” (41,20,1-2); “I ... stood up to them, they then embarked on a long campaign of harassment” (13,16,5-7). However motivation was often unclear: “I started by getting a friend request on Facebook from someone I didn’t know, then they started sending me facebook messages and it spiralled [sic] from there” (11,14,1-3).

Negative consequences were experienced psychologically, physically and socially. Psychological harm included fear: “My whole life stopped because I was in so much

fear!" (19,24,29); paranoia: "I get paranoied [sic] very easily and reluctant to trust indirect communications" (54,4,24-27); and anger: "I am not so much scared by this, just really.. angry, fear plays little part in it for me" (13,16,11-12). Psychological symptoms included panic attacks, flash backs and PTSD. Participants stated: "I still have flashbacks and experience anxiety when going to my inbox. My health has not been the same since" (81,8,18-20); "I became very ill... and now suffer complex PTSD/depression as a result of the harassment and abuse" (93,29,37-39); "all the trauma and stress suffered from the stalking resulted in me miscarrying our child" (5,7,29-30). Social effects included: damaged reputation, damaged family relations or loss of work either directly or indirectly as a result of the harassment and a damaged reputation; the cyberstalker "impersonated me online sending out emails and status updates that ruined my reputation" (5,5,3); "I have been unable to work properly, as I have felt sullied, damaged, and abused." (86,18,11-12); "the stalking behavior caused irrevocable damage [sic] to family relations" (5,8, 4-5).

Some participants expressed helplessness and lowered perceptions of control "He will follow me for the rest of my life and I can do nothing." (2,2,12). Another said "impotence at how little I can do is the main emotion I fee[l]." (13,16,12-13). It seems as the offender increases control, the victim's perceived level of control decreases. This is supported by quotes such as "you are made to feel with less control of your life." (54,6,19-20). The development of harassment was considered by some to be affected by their response to it, altering in severity or frequency dependent on their actions. The action that most reduced harassment was to ignore the offender: "Ignoring him was probably the best response as any response from me appeared to either inflame him or make him happy!" (64,19,25-26). "It took a period of about two years for this to work, but it did work in the end." (24,34,36). This idea was supported by statements that the opposite effect occurred after responding to the offender: "it is worse because i responded" (96,34,6); "contacting these attackers directly .. made the attacks worse - they seemed to enjoy knowing that they were getting to me." (52,2,12-14); and "Responding did not help. He just learned that the price for talking to me was calling 30+ times in a row." (67,24,11-13).

The majority of participants had little support: "I completely despair at times of finding someone who will take this seriously." (7,9,22); "My mother did not take this seriously at first, suggested I go out with him, and gave him my e-mail address" (67,23,21-22). A lack of support was exacerbated if the victim was blamed for the harassment: "the Police ... said it was my fault for putting the information online in the first place." (80,7,30-31); "The police made us feel like we were almost to blame or that it was trivial" (20,27,41-42).

3. Discussion

Cyberstalkers emerge as determined offenders exerting control to intimidate by either online means or by combined methods. Consistent with previous research perpetrators are presented as unrelenting in their harassment, whereby the persistent offender exhibits an enduring pattern of harassment [8]. Other CS behaviors identified were similar to offline stalking such as: threats, following the victim, contacting victim's family and friends, false accusations, threatening suicide and manipulation [15]. This suggests similarities between offline and online stalking. No distinct motivations of CS were identified. This may be as the identity and motivations of the offender are more

easily hidden from the victim than in offline stalking. As well as similarities, there were distinct differences in behaviors, arising from the different channels used. Online methods allow technical invasions of privacy whereas offline methods facilitate physical invasions such as violence. Another contrast was the dispersion of the relationship type between the offender and victim. While current or ex-partners are the most common relationship in offline stalking, acquaintance was the most common relationship found, with similar numbers of current or ex-partners and strangers. There are many possible explanations, but one may be due to the enabling features online methods provide, such as anonymity, low cost, ease of use and speed [4]. There may also be a perceived lack of legislation enforcement compared to contact stalking making CS the more attractive option [3] [4].

CS has negative social and psychological effects consistent with previous research in contact stalking [4]. There are indications that stalkers' conduct is affected by the victims' actions, notably by not responding to the cyberstalker. However it seems a considerable period of harassment must be endured before it becomes effective. Victims experience a lack of support and understanding of their ordeal. CS is a crime where control is exerted over the victim. If the victim is further disempowered by a lack of support, the cyberstalker becomes more enabled and the effects upon the victim greater.

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