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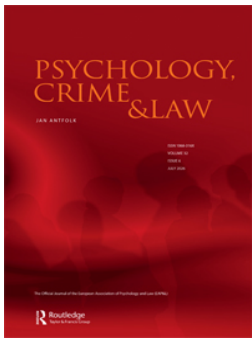
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Comparing experiences of cyberstalking from victim and perpetrator perspectives

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ABSTRACT

This exploratory study examines cyberstalking from both victim and perpetrator perspectives using two questionnaires. A total of 505 respondents to the victimisation questionnaire and 527 respondents to the perpetration questionnaire indicated a cyberstalking victimisation prevalence rate of 14.7% and a cyberstalking perpetration prevalence rate of 2.1%. Victims most commonly reported experiencing repeated, unwanted online contact (98.6%), while perpetrators most frequently reported engaging in online monitoring (81.8%). Relationships between victims and perpetrators varied, including current or ex-intimate partners, friends/ex-friends, and strangers. Common motivations included revenge (44.6% of victims; 36.4% of perpetrators) and reconciliation (41.9% of victims; 36.4% of perpetrators). Findings highlight a juxtaposition in the reported prevalence of cyberstalking by victims and perpetrators, indicating that victims most often report unwanted contact, but perpetrators most often report covert monitoring. Evidently, cyberstalking can be perpetrated without the victim's knowledge, and this has important implications for operationalising cyberstalking and identifying victimisation and perpetration rates.

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Cyberstalking, generally defined as repeated, unwanted online behaviour that causes a victim alarm, distress, or fear (Nobles et al., 2014; Owens, 2016; Wilson et al., 2022), has been the subject of an emerging body of research. Cyberstalking is not defined or operationalised distinctly to stalking in legislation in England and Wales. Namely, section 2A of the Protection from Harassment Act (1997) and Protection of Freedoms Act (2012) prohibit a course of conduct that amounts to stalking, including both in-person and online methods of repeated unwanted behaviour. Section 4A of the Protection from Harassment Act (1997) and Protection of Freedoms Act (2012) further prohibits a course of conduct that amounts to stalking, which causes another person to fear violence or causes serious alarm and distress, which adversely affects their day-to-day life, including both in-person and online methods of repeated unwanted behaviour. It should be noted

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that inconsistencies persist in how cyberstalking is defined and operationalised; differences in definitions include the minimum number of incidents required, the requirement of victim fear, and the specific behaviours that constitute cyberstalking perpetration (Wilson et al., 2022). Rates of cyberstalking victimisation have been estimated in the literature to vary between 3.4% and 40.8% (Berry & Bainbridge, 2017; DeKeseredy et al., 2019; Dressing et al., 2014; Fissel, 2021; Kraft & Wang, 2010; Lee & O'Sullivan, 2014; Reyns et al., 2012, 2018). Although most research indicates a higher propensity of female victims than male (Bossler et al., 2012; Kalaitzaki, 2020; Reyns et al., 2012; Van Baak & Hayes, 2018), a study by Lee and O'Sullivan (2014) noted no significant difference in the rate of male and female victimisation. Cyberstalking perpetration rates have also varied from 4.9% to 50.9% (Lee & O'Sullivan, 2014; Lyndon et al., 2011; Navarro et al., 2016; Reyns et al., 2012). Some research suggests that perpetrators are most likely to be male (Cavezza & McEwan, 2014; Fernández-Cruz et al., 2021; Reyns, 2019); however, other studies have identified a higher prevalence of female perpetrators (March et al., 2020; Miller, 2012; Resett et al., 2023; Rodríguez-Castro et al., 2021; Silva Santos et al., 2021).

Common methods of cyberstalking have been identified as unwanted online contact; posting online about the victim; contacting friends/family of the victim; monitoring the victim's location or online activity; and accessing their online accounts (Kaur et al., 2021; Marcum & Higgins, 2021; Wilson et al., 2023). Research suggests that perpetrators of cyberstalking are often known to the victim (Cavezza & McEwan, 2014); however, relationships between victims and perpetrators vary and include ex-intimate partners, friends, colleagues, acquaintances, and strangers (Reyns et al., 2012). Generally associated with the relationship present between perpetrator and victim, cyberstalking perpetration is often motivated by revenge, reconciliation, resentment, jealousy, affection, and deviant sexual interests (Cavezza & McEwan, 2014; Fissel, 2021). The current study will explore methods of cyberstalking, relationships between victims and perpetrators, and motivations of cyberstalking, as reported by victims and perpetrators.

Methods of cyberstalking

Cyberstalking is operationalised in the existing literature through a variety of online acts. No single method must be present to classify cyberstalking; instead, the behaviour must be repeated and unwanted by the victim. Unwanted, repeated contact through technology is the most commonly reported method of cyberstalking, enacted through repeated messages, emails, phone calls, voicemails, and friend requests (Begotti & Maran, 2019; Centelles et al., 2021; DeMatteo et al., 2017; Dressing et al., 2014; Every-Palmer et al., 2015; Tokunaga & Aune, 2017). The nature of this repeated, unwanted online contact can be sexual or threatening (Begotti & Maran, 2019); however, it is important to note that the content of messages does not dictate whether cyberstalking has occurred, only that the contact is unwanted and repeated (Wilson et al., 2022).

In addition to repeated, unwanted messages, perpetrators of cyberstalking also adopt other methods of cyberstalking that range from covert, such as monitoring the victim's online activity or location and infiltrating their online accounts, to overt, such as posting publicly about the victim and contacting the victim's family or friends (Woodlock, 2017). These methods are often enacted through social media (Dhir et al., 2021; Ferdous & Huda, 2023; Kaur et al., 2021) and further research over the years has highlighted how the

evolving nature of social media has diversified the perpetration of cyberstalking. For instance, early research by Lyndon et al. (2011) highlighted how Facebook can be used by cyberstalking perpetrators to post about the victim; write on the victim's Facebook wall; ask the victim to unblock them; post nasty or spiteful comments on the victim's photos; create a fake Facebook profile; post embarrassing photos of the victim; or spread vexatious rumours. Newer social media platforms not only enable the perpetration of cyberstalking through similar methods but also have additional features that diversify perpetration and present new challenges to victims. For example, Brady et al. (2023) noted how Snapchat is used by cyberstalking perpetrators to send repeated, unwanted messages or photos, but also allows perpetrators to cover their tracks as messages and photos disappear after being opened by the victim. In addition, the sender of a message or photo is notified if the recipient takes a screenshot, potentially preventing victims from feeling able to collect evidence of cyberstalking on this platform. Snapchat also has geolocation tracking features that enable covert monitoring of a victim's live location without the need to download additional tracking technology or plant a device on the victim.

In addition to social media use, new methods of cyberstalking continue to emerge with the advent of new technologies, including anonymous messaging services, which not only allow a perpetrator to send repeated, anonymous text messages to a victim but also prevent efforts by authorities to identify the perpetrator, allowing for continued unwanted contact (Horsman & Conniss, 2015). Location tracking of a cyberstalking victim can be enabled through specific GPS tracking devices, including Apple AirTags, coin-sized battery-operated devices that enable location tracking via Bluetooth (Shafqat et al., 2023). Moreover, location-based tracking apps can be downloaded onto a victim's phone and disguised by a perpetrator, thus enabling covert tracking of a victim without the need for an additional device (Eterovic-Soric et al., 2017). Spyware can be installed on a victim's computer or mobile device, providing a perpetrator with information regarding the victim's Internet usage, online accounts, and passwords; and webcams or microphones can be compromised by a perpetrator to surreptitiously gather images or record conversations (Eterovic-Soric et al., 2017). Smart home technology, including smart surveillance; doorbell cameras; virtual assistants; and energy monitoring systems, can facilitate monitoring of a victim. Specifically, a perpetrator who has access to smart home devices can monitor the victim's movements to and from the home; identify visitors to the home; monitor the victim's use of a voice-activated assistant (e.g. Amazon Alexa device); and identify the victim's routines (Sovacool et al., 2021).

The perpetration of cyberstalking is therefore varied in methodology and notably, many cases of cyberstalking involve covert methods that can be perpetrated without the victim's knowledge through social media, location tracking, spyware, and smart home technology. When examining victim reports of cyberstalking methods, victims less often recognise and report covert methods of cyberstalking when compared to receiving direct unwanted, repeated messages or experiencing defamation (Dressing et al., 2014).

Victim – perpetrator relationship

Research has attempted to identify the most common relationship between cyberstalking perpetrators and their victims. Reyns et al. (2012) grouped victim-perpetrator relationship types into three broad categories: 17.4% of cyberstalking cases involved a current/ex-

partner; 38.6% of cases involved a friend/acquaintance; and 44% of cases involved a stranger, meaning cases were almost evenly split between known (56%) and unknown (44%) perpetrators. Additional research indicates that most cases of cyberstalking involve a perpetrator known to the victim. For instance, Fernández-Cruz et al. (2021) identified that 59.8% of cyberstalking victims knew their perpetrator, often reporting their perpetrator was an ex-partner (13%), a friend (7%), or a current partner (6.6%). In a study by Dressing et al. (2014), most victims knew their perpetrator (69.9%), and 29.3% of victims reported cyberstalking from an ex-partner, 20.5% reported cyberstalking from an acquaintance, and 8% reported cyberstalking from a friend.

Research has also attempted to identify differences in relationship types in cases of 'offline' stalking versus cyberstalking. Cavezza and McEwan (2014) compared forensic samples of 'offline' stalking cases to cyberstalking cases; cyberstalking perpetrators were significantly more likely to be an ex-partner of the victim, represented by 75% of cyberstalking cases, compared to 47% of 'offline' stalking cases. Relatedly, Heinrich (2015) used a non-forensic sample of 'offline' stalking and cyberstalking cases, with almost half of the cases of cyberstalking involving an ex-partner perpetrator (45.4%) compared to just 22.3% of 'offline' stalking cases.

Perpetrator motivation

Motivations of cyberstalking perpetrators vary and are generally associated with the perpetrators' relationship to the victim. Based upon Mullen et al.'s (1999) stalking typology, which categorises perpetrators of stalking based on their relationship to the victim, motivation, and other variables, research by Cavezza and McEwan (2014) attempted to categorise cyberstalking perpetrators and identify the most common motivations of cyberstalking. *Rejected* perpetrators, who engage in stalking for reconciliation or revenge following the breakdown of a relationship with the victim, represented 75% of cyberstalking cases. This was followed by 14% of cases who fit the *Resentful* category, perpetrators who feel they have been humiliated by the victim and desire revenge. Only 5% of cases involved *Intimacy Seeking* perpetrators, who have a fantasy of love and aim to establish an intimate relationship with the victim, generally a stranger or acquaintance, and 3% *Incompetent Suitor* perpetrators who aim to initiate contact with the victim and feel entitled to a relationship with them. *Predatory* perpetrators who have deviant sexual beliefs and conduct stalking in preparation for an attack, also represented 3% of cases (Cavezza & McEwan, 2014).

Research has also explored how victims of cyberstalking perceive the motivation of their perpetrator. Dressing et al. (2014) identified four motivational types reported by their sample of cyberstalking victims, many of whom reported more than one motivation: 62% reported resentment; 54.9% reported jealousy; 49.4% reported the perpetrator was seeking a romantic relationship; and 40% reported revenge. A small proportion (13%) were not able to identify the perpetrator's motivation. A further study of victim perception by Fissel (2021) established the most commonly reported cyberstalking motivations as affection (47.22%); rejection (43.6%); or obsession (41.5%). Victims also reported that the perpetrator was seeking power or control through cyberstalking in almost 30% of cases; and 23% reported retaliation or revenge as the perpetrator's motivation. Similarly, 14% could not identify a motivation behind the cyberstalking and 1% indicated other

reasons. Fissel (2021) also analysed the motivational types within the context of the victim-perpetrator relationships and the associated impact on victims. For instance, victims targeted by an ex-intimate partner most often reported rejection (56.7%) as the motivation, whereas victims targeted by a classmate most often reported affection (55.9%) as the motivation. Wanting power or control was more often reported by victims targeted by an ex-intimate partner (40.5%) or family member (34.5%), compared to victims targeted by a friend (15.3%). Victims who perceived their perpetrator to be motivated by retaliation, revenge, or rejection were significantly more likely to experience fear as a result of the cyberstalking compared to victims who perceived affection as the perpetrator's motivation (Fissel, 2021).

Current study

Existing research indicates that cyberstalking cases involve a variety of methods, perpetrator-victim relationship types, and motivations. The current study builds on this prior research by examining these elements from both victim and perpetrator perspectives. The current study adopts a definition of cyberstalking in line with legal criteria, and suggestions made by Wilson et al. (2022), to identify prevalence rates of cyberstalking victimisation and perpetration. Experiences of cyberstalking will then be examined in more detail, specifically, the current study will identify the methods of cyberstalking reported by both victims and perpetrators and assess differences in prevalence, particularly between overt and covert methods. Examining potential disparities in methods of cyberstalking reported by victims and perpetrators is especially warranted considering how the advent of new technologies presents new opportunities for perpetrators to target victims without their knowledge (e.g. Eterovic-Soric et al., 2017). Additionally, the study will identify the types of perpetrator-victim relationships reported by victims and perpetrators, on which existing research has failed to reach a consensus (e.g. Reyns et al., 2012). Finally, the current study will explore the motivations of cyberstalking as reported by victims and perpetrators, building on previous work which identified a variety of motivations including resentment, jealousy, reconciliation, revenge, and obsession (Cavezza & McEwan, 2014; Fissel, 2021). The current study will aim to identify if cyberstalking motivations differed according to victim-perpetrator relationship.

Method

Participants

Victimisation and perpetration of cyberstalking was measured via two separate online self-report questionnaires. Participants were only permitted to complete one of the two questionnaires, creating two distinct samples. A sample of 508 participants completed the cyberstalking victimisation questionnaire. Participants were recruited via the Research Participation Scheme at the University of Kent ($n = 145$) and crowdsourcing platform Prolific ($n = 363$). Participants who failed to complete the questionnaire or failed the attention checks ($n = 3$) were removed from the sample. Therefore, a total of 505 participants' responses were analysed (283 females, 215 males, 6 non-binary, 1 did not disclose).

Separately, a sample of 549 participants were recruited to complete the cyberstalking perpetration questionnaire. Participants were recruited via the Research Participation Scheme ($n = 278$), Prolific ($n = 256$), and a research participation webpage ($n = 15$). 22 participants did not complete the questionnaire or failed the attention checks, and their responses were removed from the analyses. Therefore, a total of 527 participants' data was analysed (343 females, 165 males, 15 non-binary, 4 did not disclose).

Procedure and design

The study received full ethical approval from the psychology ethics committee at the University of Kent. Both the cyberstalking victimisation and perpetration questionnaires were distributed via Qualtrics online survey platform. Participants from the Research Participation Scheme were awarded academic credits for their participation and participants from Prolific were compensated based on an hourly rate of £9. Participants who accessed the study through the public research participation webpage were not rewarded for their participation.

Questionnaires

The questionnaires examined cyberstalking victimisation and perpetration through a series of questions with multiple response options. Gender and age category were collected first (18–21; 22–25; 26–30; 31–35; 36–40; 41–50; 51–60; 61+). The subsequent section of each questionnaire established whether the respondent had experienced or perpetrated cyberstalking. Based on the existing literature, cyberstalking was defined in the current study as repeated, persistent online behaviour that is unwanted by the victim and causes alarm, distress, or fear (Owens, 2016; Reyns et al., 2024). Cyberstalking was thus operationalised in the victimisation questionnaire by asking participants if on more than one occasion someone had ever targeted them through unwanted online contact; online monitoring; online posts about them; or accessing their online accounts. To differentiate victims of online fraud from victims of cyberstalking and subsequently remove instances of scam artists, respondents were asked whether they thought the individual who had targeted them was someone who participates in a fraudulent operation online to obtain money, bank details, or personal details. In the perpetration questionnaire, participants were asked if on more than one occasion they had ever targeted an individual with unwanted online contact; online monitoring; online posts; or accessed the individual's online accounts. Respondents of both questionnaires were asked if the cyberstalking had ever caused alarm, distress, or fear.

In the third section of the questionnaires, respondents who self-identified as victims or perpetrators of cyberstalking based on the study definition were then asked for further details about the methods of cyberstalking they had experienced or perpetrated. Cyberstalking methods were divided into four categories: online monitoring; online contact; online posting; and accessing online accounts. Each category contained five to seven cyberstalking methods (see Table 1), and participants were asked to indicate if they had ever experienced or perpetrated each method. If respondents to the victimisation questionnaire reported that they had experienced a method of cyberstalking, they were asked to indicate whether they *knew* that the perpetrator had engaged in that

Table 1. Methods of cyberstalking reported by victims and perpetrators.

Category of cyberstalking methods	Cyberstalking method	Victims		Perpetrators <i>n</i> (%)
		Suspected <i>n</i> (%)	Known <i>n</i> (%)	
Online monitoring	Monitored victim's online activity	23 (31.1%)	32 (43.2%)	7 (63.6%)
	Joined online groups/communities the victim was in	17 (23%)	13 (17.6%)	2 (18.2%)
	Checked who the victim was with in tagged posts or photos	29 (39.2%)	24 (32.4%)	5 (45.5%)
	Checked the victim's tagged locations and/or online status	27 (36.5%)	20 (27%)	5 (45.5%)
	Physically checked the victim's phone	10 (13.5%)	18 (24.3%)	4 (36.4%)
	Checked the victim's live location	22 (29.7%)	15 (20.3%)	3 (27.3%)
Online contact	Installed software on the victim's device to monitor their location or activity	5 (6.8%)	5 (6.8%)	0
	Sent repeated, unwanted messages to the victim via email, text, or social media	10 (13.5%)	58 (78.4%)	3 (27.3%)
	Sent the victim online invitations	6 (8.1%)	18 (24.3%)	0
	Created a fake account to monitor or contact the victim	29 (39.2%)	24 (32.4%)	5 (45.5%)
	Sent the victim photos of yourself	9 (12.2%)	24 (32.4%)	3 (27.3%)
	Sent the victim photos of themselves	5 (6.8%)	21 (28.4%)	3 (27.2%)
Online posting	Contacted their family or friends	12 (16.2%)	32 (43.2%)	3 (27.2%)
	Posted the victim's personal information online	10 (13.5%)	8 (10.8%)	0
	Posted private photos of the victim online	7 (9.5%)	7 (9.5%)	0
	Posted false information about the victim online	19 (25.7%)	17 (23%)	0
	Posted messages of love or adoration online about the victim	10 (13.5%)	19 (25.7%)	4 (36.4%)
	Repeatedly commented on the victim's social media posts	11 (14.9%)	27 (36.5%)	3 (27.3%)
Accessing online accounts	Posted on social media pages of the victim's family or friends about the victim	6 (8.1%)	8 (10.8%)	2 (18.2%)
	Posted in social media groups about the individual	18 (24.3%)	12 (16.2%)	0
	Tried to gain access to the victim's social media or email accounts	22 (29.7%)	19 (25.7%)	5 (45.5%)
	Tried to gain access to the victim's online shopping accounts	9 (12.2%)	4 (5.4%)	0
	Tried to gain access to the victim's personal devices	13 (17.6%)	12 (16.2%)	3 (27.3%)
	Tried to lock the victim out of their online accounts	13 (17.6%)	12 (16.2%)	1 (9.1%)
	Tried to access their Wi-fi network to check their online activities	5 (6.8%)	4 (5.4%)	1 (9.1%)

Note: Victims (*n* = 74); Perpetrators (*n* = 11).

method of cyberstalking, or that they *suspected* that the perpetrator had engaged in that method of cyberstalking.

In the final section of both questionnaires, respondents were asked if they had met the victim/perpetrator in-person before the cyberstalking began; what their relationship was to the victim/perpetrator; and if the perpetrator had tried to locate the victim in-person. To identify motivations behind cyberstalking perpetration, perpetrators were asked what their motivation was, and victims were asked what they perceived the perpetrators motivation was. Victims were asked whether they had complained or asked the perpetrator to stop their behaviour, and whether the perpetrator stopped as a result. Perpetrators were asked if the victim was aware of their behaviour, if the victim had complained or asked them to stop, and whether they stopped their behaviour after being contacted by the victim.

Results

Prevalence of cyberstalking victimisation and perpetration

The questionnaires identified a cyberstalking victimisation rate of 14.7% ($n = 74$) and a perpetration rate of 2.1% ($n = 11$). Table 2 provides demographic details of the victim and perpetrator samples. The majority of cyberstalking victims were female (71.6%, $n = 53$). This is notably and significantly higher than the proportion of females in the total sample which was 56% ($n = 283$), indicating that victims were significantly more likely to be female than non-victims, $\chi^2(1, 498) = 10.85, p < .001$. Almost half of the victims (48.7%, $n = 37$) were aged 18–21, which is significantly higher than the corresponding proportion in the total sample (29.9%, $n = 151$), $\chi^2(1, 505) = 18.26, p = .011$. The cyberstalking perpetration rate was 2.1% ($n = 11$), with most perpetrators being female and aged under 22 (72.7%, $n = 8$). This was not significantly different from the total sample, which was 65.1% female ($n = 343$) and 52.6% aged under 22 ($n = 277$).

Many respondents to the perpetration questionnaire indicated that they had engaged in one or more of the cyberstalking methods on more than one occasion towards the same individual, but reported that the victim was not aware of, or had not complained about, their behaviour. While admissions of this nature do not meet the definition of cyberstalking used in the current study or legal definitions outlined in the Protection from Harassment Act (1997) or Protection of Freedoms Act (2012), which require that the victim experience alarm, distress, or fear, these actions reflect concerning online behaviours. Specifically, 8.3% ($n = 44$) of the respondents to the perpetration questionnaire had engaged in concerning online behaviour.

Methods of cyberstalking

Table 1 summarises the methods of cyberstalking reported by victims and perpetrators divided into four categories: *online monitoring*; *online contact*; *online posting*; and *accessing online accounts*. Overall, all but one victim ($n = 73$, 98.6%) reported at least one

Table 2. Demographic details of victim and perpetrator samples.

Demographic variable	Victimisation questionnaire		Perpetration questionnaire	
	Non-Victims n (%)	Victims n (%)	Non-perpetrators n (%)	Perpetrators n (%)
Age				
18–21	114 (26.6%)	35 (47.3%)	270 (52.3%)	7 (63.6%)
22–25	40 (9.3%)	7 (9.5%)	46 (8.9%)	1 (9.1%)
26–30	42 (9.8%)	7 (9.5%)	52 (10.1%)	1 (9.1%)
31–35	58 (13.5%)	5 (6.8%)	38 (7.4%)	0
36–40	46 (10.7%)	7 (9.5%)	31 (6%)	1 (9.1%)
41–50	57 (13.3%)	8 (10.8%)	31 (6%)	1 (9.1%)
51–60	41 (9.6%)	2 (2.7%)	27 (5.2%)	0
61+	31 (7.2%)	3 (4.1%)	19 (3.7%)	0
Undisclosed	0	0	2 (0.4%)	0
Gender				
Male	196 (45.7%)	19 (25.7%)	162 (31.4%)	3 (27.3%)
Female	228 (53.1%)	53 (71.6%)	335 (64.9%)	8 (72.7%)
Non-binary	4 (0.9%)	2 (2.7%)	15 (2.9%)	0
Undisclosed	1 (0.2%)	0	4 (0.8%)	0

Note: Non-Victims ($n = 429$); Victims ($n = 74$); Non-perpetrators ($n = 516$); Perpetrators ($n = 11$).

online contact method of cyberstalking. The most frequently experienced individual method of cyberstalking was repeated, unwanted contact via email, text, or social media ($n = 58$, 78.4%). The majority of victims also reported experiencing at least one *online monitoring* method of cyberstalking ($n = 52$, 70.3%), and most prevalent within this category, 43.2% ($n = 32$) of victims reported that the perpetrator had monitored their online activity. Over half of victims ($n = 44$, 59.5%) also reported at least one *online posting* method of cyberstalking, most frequently that the perpetrator had repeatedly posted comments on the victim's social media posts ($n = 27$, 36.5%). Methods of cyberstalking from the final category, *accessing online accounts*, were reported by 29.7% ($n = 22$) of victims, most frequently that the perpetrator had attempted to gain access to the victim's social media or email accounts ($n = 19$, 25.7%). Almost half of victims ($n = 34$, 45.9%) reported that the perpetrator had gathered information about them online to attempt to locate the victim in-person, and a minority ($n = 12$, 16.2%) reported that this had happened more than once. In addition to the methods of cyberstalking reported above that victims *knew* the perpetrator had engaged in, victims also *suspected* that the perpetrator had engaged in various methods of cyberstalking. All five methods of *accessing online accounts* were more often suspected by victims than known to have occurred. For example, 12.2% ($n = 9$) of victims suspected that the perpetrator had attempted to gain access to their online shopping accounts, yet only 5.4% ($n = 4$) of victims knew that this had occurred.

The majority of victims had asked the perpetrator to stop the cyberstalking ($n = 48$, 64.9%) and/or complained to the perpetrator about their behaviour ($n = 22$, 29.7%). Of the total victims who did complain or ask the perpetrator to stop ($n = 61$, 82.4%), 44.3% reported that the perpetrator did not stop their behaviour ($n = 27$). Out of the remaining cases where the perpetrator did stop their behaviour, only 5.9% ($n = 2$) of perpetrators stopped immediately after being asked, with most victims indicating that most perpetrators stopped after a while ($n = 32$, 94.1%). A minority of victims ($n = 17$, 23%) did not complain or ask the perpetrator to stop.

Overall, perpetrators most often reported engaging in *online monitoring* methods of cyberstalking, and the majority of perpetrators ($n = 9$, 81.8%) had engaged in at least one method from this category. The most frequently perpetrated method of cyberstalking overall was monitoring the victim's online activity ($n = 7$, 63.8%). *Online contact* methods were reported by 72.7% ($n = 8$) of perpetrators overall, and methods involving accessing online accounts and online posting were perpetrated by around half of the perpetrators, with 54.5% ($n = 6$) of perpetrators attempting to access the victim's online accounts or devices and 45.5% ($n = 5$) of perpetrators making online posts or comments about the victim. Most perpetrators reported that the victim had contacted them to complain about their behaviour ($n = 7$, 63.6%) and/or asked them to stop ($n = 8$, 72.7%). The majority of perpetrators ($n = 8$, 72.7%) reported that they stopped their behaviour after being contacted by the victim, although only 25% ($n = 2$) of these perpetrators reported that they had stopped their behaviour immediately.

Victim – perpetrator relationship

The majority of victims ($n = 53$, 71.6%) and perpetrators ($n = 9$, 81.8%) reported that they had met in-person before the cyberstalking began. Victims most often reported that the

perpetrator was an ex-partner ($n = 23$, 31.3%), this was followed by ex-friend ($n = 16$, 21.6%), stranger ($n = 13$, 17.6%), and friend ($n = 9$, 12.2%). Fewer victims reported that the perpetrator was an acquaintance ($n = 6$, 8.1%); a current partner ($n = 2$, 2.7%); a family member ($n = 2$, 2.7%); a colleague ($n = 1$, 1.4%); an ex-colleague ($n = 1$, 1.4%); or they had another relationship not listed ($n = 1$, 1.4%). Perpetrators most often reported targeting a current partner ($n = 4$, 36.4%) or an ex-partner ($n = 3$, 27.3%). Perpetrators also reported targeting a friend ($n = 2$, 18.2%), an acquaintance ($n = 1$, 9.1%), or that they had another relationship not listed ($n = 1$, 9.1%). Individuals who had engaged in concerning online behaviour had almost all met their victim in-person before perpetration ($n = 43$, 97.7%), and most often targeted a friend ($n = 16$, 36.4%) or current partner ($n = 14$, 31.8%).

Perpetrator motivation

Victims and perpetrators could report more than one motivation for the cyberstalking. Victims reported that the perpetrator was motivated by revenge or wanting to punish them in 44.6% of cases ($n = 33$), followed by reconciliation ($n = 31$, 41.9%); and seeking a romantic relationship ($n = 30$, 40.5%). Motivations less frequently reported by victims were seeking a friendship ($n = 13$, 17.6%); monitoring during the relationship ($n = 11$, 14.9%); or other motivations not listed ($n = 9$, 12.2%). Motivations reported by victims varied by perpetrator-victim relationship type, as demonstrated in Figure 1. For example, victims targeted by an ex-partner reported the widest variety of motivations including all six motivational types, whereas victims targeted by a colleague reported only two motivations, namely seeking a romantic relationship or seeking a friendship.

Perpetrators reported being motivated to engage in cyberstalking to punish or seek revenge against the victim ($n = 4$, 36.4%), to reconcile with the victim ($n = 4$, 36.4%), or to monitor the victim during their relationship ($n = 4$, 36.4%). Fewer perpetrators reported

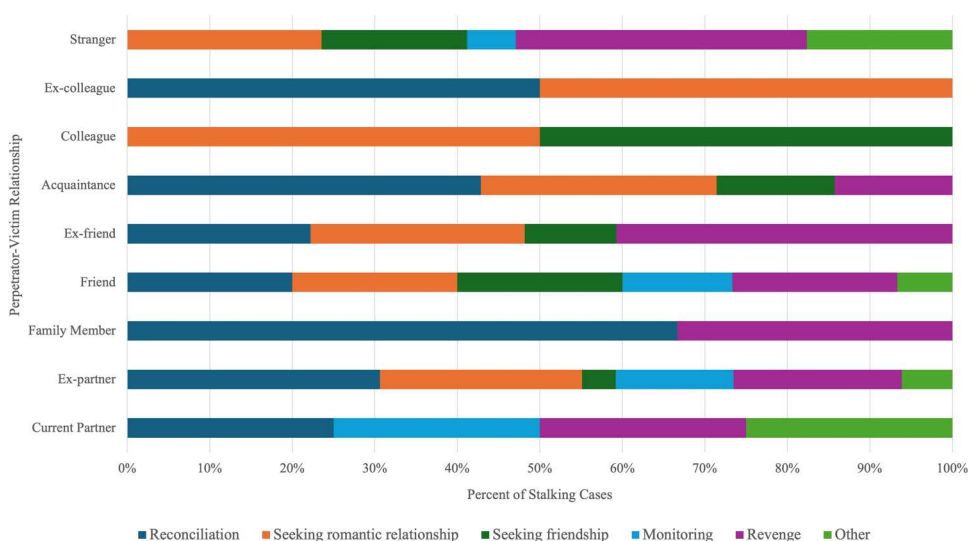


Figure 1. Perpetrator motivations reported by victims by perpetrator-victim relationship type.

that they were seeking a romantic relationship with the victim ($n = 3$, 27.3%), or a friendship with the victim ($n = 1$, 9.1%); or that they were motivated for another reason ($n = 2$, 18.2%).

Individuals who engaged in concerning online behaviour reported that they were motivated by a desire to monitor the victim during their relationship ($n = 31$, 31.8%) but also desired to seek a friendship with the victim ($n = 8$, 18.2%); rekindle with the victim ($n = 7$, 15.9%); or seek a romantic relationship with the victim ($n = 6$, 13.6%). Only one perpetrator of concerning online behaviour (2.3%) reported that they wanted to punish the victim or seek revenge, and many reported alternative motivations not listed ($n = 17$, 38.6%).

Discussion

The purpose of this exploratory study was to investigate experiences of cyberstalking from victim and perpetrator perspectives, specifically identifying methods of cyberstalking; relationships between victims and perpetrators; and motivations of cyberstalking. Most victims of cyberstalking were female and aged under 30; most perpetrators of cyberstalking were also female and aged under 22. Victims most often reported experiencing repeated, unwanted online contact from the perpetrator; however, perpetrators most often reported engaging in covert methods of online monitoring. Most victims were targeted by an ex-intimate partner, yet most perpetrators reported targeting a current intimate partner. The most common motivation of cyberstalking reported by both victims and perpetrators was revenge.

In order to align with previous research and identify accurate rates of cyberstalking perpetration and victimisation, the current study adopted suggestions put forward in Wilson et al.'s (2022) review. Namely, cyberstalking was clearly defined and operationalised in the current study, in line with legislation that dictates stalking behaviour must be repeated and unwanted and cause the victim to feel distress, alarm, or fear (e.g. Protection from Harassment Act, 1997; Protection of Freedoms Act, 2012); cases involving scam artists were removed; and clear descriptions of cyberstalking methods were provided to respondents. The current study consequently identified a cyberstalking perpetration prevalence rate of 2.1%. To identify the impact of cyberstalking operationalisation on the perpetration prevalence rate, the requirement of inducing alarm, distress, or fear was removed; as a result, 8.3% of the sample had engaged in concerning online behaviour. The current study also identified a cyberstalking victimisation prevalence rate of 14.7%, including the requirement of victim alarm, distress, or fear. This is higher than the 6.3% victimisation rate identified in previous research using the same definition (Dressing et al., 2014). It is evident that the definition and operationalisation of cyberstalking can greatly influence the rates of prevalence identified in research.

Other suggestions provided by Wilson et al.'s (2022) review were not adopted and require careful consideration in ongoing cyberstalking research. For instance, the authors suggest that a minimum duration of two weeks and minimum repetition of 10 incidents of cyberstalking should be included in cyberstalking victimisation or perpetration operationalisation; however, much stalking legislation, including various statutes in the United States (Hazelwood & Koon-Magnin, 2013) and the Protection from Harassment Act (1997) and Protection of Freedoms Act (2012) in England and Wales,

do not require this minimum duration or repetition of behaviours, instead specifying that the unwanted behaviour must have happened more than once, in line with the operationalisation adopted in the current study. Wilson et al.'s (2022) also suggest that unwanted, repeated messages sent during a course of conduct of cyberstalking should be grouped and measured separately as unwanted contact, unwanted harassment, unwanted sexual messages, and unwanted threatening messages. It is important to note, however, that the nature of repeated, unwanted contact does not dictate whether cyberstalking has occurred, and in fact, many perpetrators only send messages of love or affection (e.g. Centelles et al., 2021). Additionally, Wilson et al. (2022) do not specify how 'unwanted online contact' and 'unwanted online harassment' would differ in measurement or operationalisation. Therefore, in keeping with the methodology of the current study, cyberstalking literature must be sure to include all instances of repeated, unwanted contact regardless of its nature or content. Ultimately, the adoption of a consistent and strict definition of cyberstalking is essential to ensure consistency in, and accuracy of, cyberstalking research. Elements of cyberstalking operationalisation can impact research findings, evidenced by the reduction in perpetration prevalence rate with the implementation of a strict definition in this study. However, some suggestions to date do not align with stalking legislation, the consideration of which is vital to ensure the practical application of ongoing research.

Methods of cyberstalking

Cyberstalking victims and perpetrators in the current study reported a variety of cyberstalking methods including online contact, online posting, online monitoring, and infiltration of online accounts. The findings suggest a contradiction, however, in the prevalence of methods reported by victims and perpetrators; victims most often reported repeated, unwanted contact whereas perpetrators most frequently reported covert methods of online monitoring or infiltrating the victim's accounts. Almost all victims experienced repeated, unwanted online contact via text messages, email, or social media in line with existing research which highlights unwanted contact as the most frequently experienced method of cyberstalking (Begotti & Maran, 2019; Dressing et al., 2014). However, the majority of perpetrators in the current study did not report sending unwanted, repeated online messages. In contrast, only a quarter of victims reported that the perpetrator had attempted to gain access to their online accounts, and this method of cyberstalking is less frequently reported by victims generally (Dressing et al., 2014); however, just over half of the perpetrators in the current study reported engaging in this method of cyberstalking. Methods of cyberstalking involving online monitoring were also more frequently reported by perpetrators than victims, including checking the victim's posts, photos, locations, or online status. This suggests that many methods of cyberstalking may occur without the victim's knowledge and thus awareness of perpetrator behaviour may account for the discrepant findings herein.

Relatedly, many victims reported that they *suspected* that the perpetrator had engaged in methods of online monitoring but they were not certain if this had happened. When compared to repeated, unwanted contact, fewer victims report cyberstalking methods that do not involve direct contact (Begotti & Maran, 2019; Dressing et al., 2014); however, many perpetrators in the current study reported joining online groups the

victim was in, checking the victim's live location, accessing the victim's online accounts, and using a fake social media profile. Evidently, cyberstalking can be perpetrated without explicit knowledge of the victim in an effort to monitor their online activity and movements, often using a false identity. It is widely recognised that perpetrators engage in these covert methods of cyberstalking through the use of social media (e.g. Lyndon et al., 2011) but, alarmingly, researchers have also noted how novel technologies can enable entirely covert surveillance of a victim. For instance, a perpetrator could set up a fake or anonymous account on a location-enabled dating application such as Tinder or Grindr to identify their proximity to the victim, with some apps even providing this measurement down to metres or feet (Eterovic-Soric et al., 2017; Hoang et al., 2017). Additionally, Apple AirTags can be used by perpetrators to monitor a victim's precise live location (Heinrich et al., 2024; Shafqat et al., 2023). Research should endeavour to remain up to date with novel technologies and software to ensure these are accurately explored in the context of cyberstalking victimisation and perpetration.

Victim – perpetrator relationship

Victims most often reported being targeted by an ex-intimate partner, representing just under a third of cases. Victims also reported being targeted by a friend or ex-friend, stranger, acquaintance, current partner, family member, and colleague or ex-colleague, in line with existing literature that demonstrates a variety of relationships between cyberstalking perpetrators and victims (Cavezza & McEwan, 2014; Reynolds et al., 2012). Given that cyberstalking cases involve a variety of relationships, it would be prudent for further research to explore if relationship type within cyberstalking cases can predict impact on victims, as similar studies of offline stalking impacts have yielded mixed findings. Some research indicates that victims targeted by an ex-partner are more likely to endure more invasive and persistent methods of stalking and experience greater psychological, physical, and social impacts (Sheridan & Lyndon, 2012) but recent research suggests that a prior intimate relationship does not always predict impact, and in fact, victims of stalking targeted by a stranger report greater impacts on others around them (Storey et al., 2023).

Many perpetrators of cyberstalking, and notably almost a third of individuals who engaged in concerning online behaviour, reported targeting their current partner using methods of online monitoring, such as checking the victim's online activity, finding their live location, and monitoring their online status. Whilst these behaviours enacted towards a current partner during a relationship would fall into the legal remit of (technology-facilitated) domestic abuse (Afrouz, 2023) rather than cyberstalking, these findings warrant concern about the prevalence and impact of these behaviours. Additionally, it is well-known that domestic abuse during a relationship can predict stalking and cyberstalking after the relationship has broken down (Marcum & Higgins, 2021). Many victims of domestic abuse report that technology has changed the way that perpetrators pursue them long after they have left the relationship, creating a 'web of entanglement' (Dimond et al., 2011, p. 420). Methods of cyberstalking used by perpetrators to target an ex-partner may therefore reflect patterns of domestic abuse that they previously employed during the relationship.

Perpetrator motivation

Victims and perpetrators reported a variety of motivations for cyberstalking in the current study. Victims and perpetrators most often reported that the cyberstalking was motivated by revenge or reconciliation, in line with existing research which identified that most cyberstalking cases fit the *Rejected* category of Mullen et al.'s (1999) stalking typology, i.e. perpetrators who engage in cyberstalking for reconciliation or revenge following the breakdown of their relationship with the victim (Cavezza & McEwan, 2014). Many victims also reported that the perpetrator was motivated to seek a friendship or relationship with the victim, or to monitor the victim. In addition, many victims in the current study reported more than one motivation, and some victims and perpetrators reported 'other' motivations, i.e. not captured within the options provided in the current study, suggesting that motivations behind cyberstalking are complex and overlapping. Motivations behind cyberstalking perpetration may also change throughout a course of conduct, for instance if a perpetrator is initially motivated to seek a relationship with the victim and is rejected, they then may be motivated by revenge or resentment (Fissel, 2021).

Victim-reported motivations also varied by relationship-type. Namely, victims targeted by a friend/ex-friend, acquaintance, ex or current partner, or stranger reported a wider variety of motivations compared to victims targeted by a colleague/ex-colleague or family member. Considering the most prevalent relationships reported by victims, those targeted by an ex-partner most often reported reconciliation as the perpetrator's motivation, and those targeted by an ex-friend most often reported revenge. Limited existing research has explored how cyberstalking motivations vary by relationship type, but one study suggests ex-partner perpetrators are most often motivated by feelings of rejection or obsession, and perpetrators who target a friend are most often motivated by affection or rejection (Fissel, 2021).

Limitations

The current study provides valuable insight into methods of cyberstalking experienced and perpetrated, as well as relationships between perpetrators and victims and motivations behind cyberstalking perpetration. However, the study is subject to some limitations. The study relied on self-reported experiences of cyberstalking from samples with limited generalisability. The over-representation of young adults, mostly undergraduate students, within the samples does not necessarily hinder the results given the proclivity of technology use among that demographic, but future research should include a wider variety of demographic groups. The current study collected limited demographic details from participants, and did not measure sexual orientation, socio-economic status, or ethnicity. Within research that explores offending behaviours in the context of intimate relationships, it is particularly important to identify sexual orientation of victims and perpetrators to add to the literature regarding cyberstalking within heterosexual or same-sex relationships. In addition, measuring socio-economic status and ethnicity among participants would allow identification of cyberstalking prevalence rates among under-represented groups. The prevalence rate of cyberstalking perpetration identified in the current study was very low, and lower than many previous studies, but may reflect the strict definition of cyberstalking adopted. Conclusions drawn regarding the patterns of cyberstalking

perpetration based on this sample must therefore be considered preliminary, and future research should aim to include a larger sample of cyberstalking perpetrators.

Implications for future research and practice

The dichotomy in the reported prevalence of cyberstalking methods from victims and perpetrators in the current study suggests that victim reports may represent just the 'tip of the iceberg' of cyberstalking methods adopted by perpetrators, and in fact, many covert behaviours are perpetrated without the victim's knowledge. Whilst the current study could not find statistical significance in the number of suspected versus known methods of cyberstalking due to the small sample, future research could explore whether a victim's awareness of cyberstalking is influenced by the perpetrator's methods. A threshold of causing 'reasonable' alarm, distress, or fear is ultimately required for a case of cyberstalking to meet legal criteria. In ongoing research, it must be considered that victims may not be aware of certain methods of cyberstalking and behaviours may induce fear in some victims but not others (Pereira & Matos, 2016). In fact, by requiring fear, some cases of cyberstalking may be unduly excluded from research despite involving repeated, unwanted online behaviours (Wilson et al., 2022).

Whilst a standardised approach is unlikely, and researchers must consider the implications of their chosen definition on the practical applicability of research, studies including victim samples should define cyberstalking as any unwanted online behaviour that occurs more than once and causes alarm, distress, or fear. Varying the language used when asking victims about the impact of cyberstalking could help create a holistic picture of *how* and *why* cyberstalking causes alarm, distress, or fear. For instance, research could measure the impact of cyberstalking behaviours on victim's mental and physical health; day-to-day activities; safety; online confidence; and impact on others (Storey et al., 2023; Worsley et al., 2017) to create a holistic picture of the true prevalence and impacts of cyberstalking. For research including perpetrator samples, the act itself, regardless of the awareness or response of the victim, could form the basis of operationalisation, in line with other offences such as upskirting, voyeurism, or image-based sexual abuse, which are illegal regardless of the victim's awareness (Lewis & Anitha, 2023; Powell et al., 2020). However, limitations emerge when relying on perpetration samples. For instance, almost half of the victims in the current study who complained to the perpetrator about the cyberstalking reported that the perpetrator did not stop, yet the majority of perpetrators reported that they did stop their behaviour after being contacted by the victim. Perpetrators may therefore be attempting to downplay or dismiss the variety, duration, or severity of their cyberstalking perpetration, in line with the discrepancy in prevalence of reported perpetration and victimisation. This may mirror findings in domestic abuse research, whereby perpetrators are known to minimise or justify their actions (Giezek et al., 2023). Ongoing research into cyberstalking perpetration should consider the utility of solely perpetrator samples, and, in line with the current study, it is beneficial to include both victims and perpetrators in analysis of cyberstalking prevalence and methods.

In the context of managing cases of cyberstalking and supporting victims, the current study highlights that police must prioritise professional curiosity within their investigations. Firstly, the incidents that are reported to police may represent just a fraction of the overall cyberstalking offence, and police must endeavour to identify as many

cyberstalking methods as possible across different technologies, devices, and platforms; the responsibility should not fall entirely on victims to identify these methods. For example, particularly in cases where the perpetrator has had previous access to the victim's device, the perpetrator could have installed additional software to track or monitor the victim through this device without the victim's knowledge (Heinrich et al., 2024). Secondly, police must adopt professional curiosity to identify the true impacts of cyberstalking on the victim. The purpose of this approach is twofold: firstly, to meet the legal criteria of stalking, the victim must feel 'reasonable' alarm, distress, or fear, which must be established by police; and, secondly, evidence of the perpetrator's fixation must be established to classify a case as stalking. In the U.K., for instance, incidents of repeated, unwanted online contact could potentially be classified by the police as harassment; however, when this contact forms part of a fixated course of conduct, it constitutes stalking. This classification then dictates the management and possible outcomes of the case, and certain legal orders such as Stalking Protection Orders can only be applied for in cases classified as stalking, not harassment (Stalking Protection Act, 2019).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the current study highlighted that victims of cyberstalking experienced various methods of online monitoring, online posting, online contact, and infiltration of their online accounts. Victims most often reported experiencing repeated, unwanted online contact, but perpetrators of cyberstalking most often reported engaging in covert methods of online monitoring. Cyberstalking often occurred within the context of intimate relationships, motivated by revenge or reconciliation. The findings indicate that cases of cyberstalking contain a wide variety of methods, but that victims may not be aware of the true extent of the cyberstalking behaviours perpetrated against them. Perpetrators engaged in covert methods of monitoring and tracking their victims, and these methods continue to diversify with the advent of new technologies. Future researchers must consider the implications of defining and operationalising cyberstalking on prevalence rates, and ongoing research should focus on how new technologies are enabling the perpetration of cyberstalking at an increasing rate. In the wider context, the police should prioritise effective and thorough evidence collection and consider the impact of cyberstalking on victims, not only to provide support but also to ensure correct classification of cyberstalking cases.

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Consent to participate

Written informed consent was obtained from all voluntary participants.

Ethical considerations

Full ethical approval was provided by the University of Kent.

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