

What Do Social Scientists Know About Cyberstalking?

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9 December 2023

Introduction

Technology is one of the most important aspects of today's society and technology-facilitated violence, such as cyberstalking, has become the most common type of intimate partner violence. This type of behavior is naturally misogynistic and psychologically damaging. Over 70% of women are victims of cyberstalking behaviors as they fall victim to being harassed, watched, and exposed online (Marganski & Melander, 2020). While women are disproportionately affected, race and other factors can also be risks for falling victim to this kind of behavior.

Cyberstalking is a relatively new issue in society and consequently government agencies around the world are still having issues dealing with it. Between ignorance, ineffective legislation, and failure to report cyberstalking and other instances of victimization are out of control. In addition a lot of the research on this subject is new and some of the explanations for the demographics are still not solidified.

What Is Cyberstalking?

Cyberstalking refers to using the internet to carry out stalking behaviors. Continuous unwanted phone calls, monitoring behavior on social media, and spying are just a few examples (Gordon, 2023). Cyberstalking is often used as a means to control the victim without having to physically interact with them. Social media is a common tool that stalkers use to harass and watch their victims. Popular sites such as facebook, instagram, and twitter are often used to spy and initiate unwanted communications.

Cyberstalking is a relatively new term but is growing in popularity as more people experience harassment over the internet. In 2015 the United Nations estimated that about 73% of

females experience online abuse (Alosi, 2017). Intimate relationships often play a big role in cyberstalking incidents and are just a part of the issue. A study conducted in Victoria, Australia reported that 98% of domestic violence case workers said their clients had experienced technology facilitated abuse by a former intimate partner (Alosi, 2017).

What Do We Know About Cyberstalking?

The first article, *Technology-facilitated abuse: the new breed of domestic violence*, analyzed technology-facilitated abuse primarily using data from Australia. One of the two biggest points addressed in this article was that women are disproportionately affected by cyberstalking when compared to men. Social workers reported that smartphones, email, and gps tracking were amongst the most popular platforms used to harass victims in their cases. The second major point of this article is that cyberstalking is not given the same attention as traditional domestic abuse issues. The Australian government dedicated \$30 million to combat domestic abuse but did not include cyberstalking and other like behaviors in the campaign. The laws that cover cyberstalking are also vague and problematic. This is unfortunate because technology-facilitated abuse has the same implications as physical abuse. It often leads to the escalation of behaviors sometimes resulting in physical harm (Alosi, 2017).

While it has already been established that females are more likely to be victims of cyberstalking and other forms of violence, race also plays a part in the issue. In the article *Race, cyberbullying and intimate partner violence*, the focus is making the connection between African Americans and the risk for online intimate partner violence. Despite not being listed as an official risk factor for cyberbullying, there is data that shows that African American youth admitted to being both victims and perpetrators of cyberbullying at a higher rate when compared to other races. Some of the questions asked were “Modified or deleted their profile” and “Accessed their mobile phone or accounts” (Graham, 2017). The author believes that this

outcome is a result of young African Americans being more accepting of technology than other demographics.

Failing to effectively handle cyberstalking is not only a problem in Australia but more so a worldwide issue. In the next article, *The ‘new’ offenses added to the online safety bill are not really new – and could continue to fail victims of online abuse*, England is also facing issues. In 2022 the UK government was reviewing a bill with the intention of making their country the “safest place in the world to go online” (Higson, 2022). This bill included three new criminal offenses regarding online harassment and abuse to make the internet safer. While this seems like a good step, the issue is that all of the things mentioned in the new bill are already covered in other legislation. In addition, the laws are very vague which makes defining and prosecuting the crimes difficult. The biggest question with these laws is if the current laws in place are not being enforced then what is making new laws going to do? It seems that the problem is how complaints are handled and following through with prosecuting the crimes. Moving forward, the government should focus on why the current laws are not being enforced instead of throwing more laws at the issue.

Unlike the previous articles the last two, *Domestic abusers use tech that connects as a weapon during coronavirus lockdowns* and *Technology-enables abuse:how ‘safety by design’ can reduce stalking and domestic violence*, focus on more recent implications and what affects the future of technology will have on cyberstalking. During the Covid-19 pandemic there was a significant increase in perpetrators using technology to stalk and harass their victims. While people were forced to stay inside and away from others it is not surprising that cyberstalking became more common (Marganski & Melander, 2020). Even with the influx of new cases, law enforcement agencies still dropped the ball on handling them effectively. New technology also

enabled this behavior making it easier for perpetrators to commit these acts. Recently there have been multiple advancements in technology that would make cyberstalking easier. Apple recently released the Airtag which is a small tracking device meant to help consumers keep track of easily lost items. While this product can be useful when used correctly it is important to understand that it could also be used maliciously (Harris, 2021). Remember that these devices are just small, easily accessible GPS trackers and understand the implications of having these kinds of devices available on the market. Bridget Harris, the author of this article, expressed the importance of having safety features in place to prevent misuse of these devices. The ‘Safety by Design’ initiative will focus on creating a safe space for these devices to be used while taking into consideration at risk groups (Harris 2021).

Conclusion

The majority of women will experience some form of cyberstalking. The advancement of technology has made it easier to stalk and harass victims by removing the physical aspect. Anyone can hide behind a computer screen and cause the same psychological damage as if they were committing physical abuse. That being said, a lot of cyberstalking cases stem from intimate partner violence and domestic abuse incidents. Most governments have a well known procedure to deal with domestic violence and in some cases allocate extra funds to combat it. Oftentimes technology-facilitated abuse is not handled the same way despite it being present in a lot of cases. Hopefully in the future these discrepancies will be fixed as more research is done on how cyberstalking and like crimes work. More research on race, gender, and other discriminatory factors could help explain who is more at risk. In addition, technology companies should be held accountable to do their part and protect potential victims from malicious use of their products. These efforts should be able to make the internet a safer space for everyone and decrease the instances of cyberstalking.

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