



Beyond the Screen: Exploring the Hidden Psychological and Social Impacts of Cyberstalking on Victims in Underreported Contexts

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Abstract

Cyber stalking has increasingly become a pervasive form of digital abuse, facilitated by the widespread use of social media, mobile technologies, and online communication platforms. While existing research has largely focused on the legal definitions, prevalence, and technological mechanisms of cyber stalking, there remains a significant gap in understanding its subtle psychological, social, and long-term identity-related impacts, particularly in underreported communities such as rural populations and young adults.

This study seeks to explore the uncovered dimension of cyber stalking, specifically how victims experience ongoing emotional distress, fear, and altered social behavior even when the stalking is not physically present. Unlike traditional stalking, cyber stalking creates a persistent sense of surveillance, where victims feel constantly watched, leading to anxiety, paranoia, and self-censorship. Many victims begin to withdraw from online and offline interactions, limiting their social engagement and, in some cases, affecting academic or professional performance.

A key gap identified in the literature is the normalization and minimization of cyber stalking, particularly among young people. Many victims do not report incidents because they perceive them as “not serious enough,” or they fear being blamed for their online presence. This study investigates how this normalization contributes to underreporting and prolonged victimization. Additionally, it examines the role of digital literacy and awareness, highlighting how a lack of understanding about cyber stalking behaviors prevents individuals from recognizing early warning signs.

The study adopts a qualitative approach to capture the lived experiences of individuals affected by cyber stalking. Through in-depth interviews and thematic analysis, the research uncovers patterns of emotional impact, coping mechanisms, and the social consequences of digital harassment. The findings suggest that cyber stalking is not merely a technological issue but a deeply psychosocial phenomenon that affects identity, trust, and personal security.

Furthermore, the study reveals that existing support systems, including legal frameworks and institutional

responses, are often inadequate or inaccessible, particularly in rural or disadvantaged contexts. Victims frequently feel unsupported and isolated, reinforcing the need for more inclusive and responsive intervention strategies.

This research contributes to the existing body of knowledge by shifting the focus from the act of cyberstalking to its lived experience and hidden consequences. It calls for a more holistic approach that integrates psychological support, digital education, and policy reform. Ultimately, the study aims to raise awareness of the invisible harms of cyberstalking and advocate for more effective prevention and support mechanisms.

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Introduction

Cyberstalking has emerged as a growing concern in the digital age, driven by the rapid expansion of social media, messaging platforms, and online communication tools. Unlike traditional stalking, cyberstalking allows perpetrators to harass, monitor, and intimidate victims continuously without physical proximity. This creates a persistent sense of fear and insecurity among victims.

While much research has focused on legal frameworks and technological aspects, less attention has been given to the hidden psychological and social impacts of cyberstalking. Victims often experience anxiety, emotional distress, and social withdrawal, yet these effects remain underreported and misunderstood.

Background of the Study

Globally, cyberstalking has increased due to increased internet penetration and digital interaction. Studies show that young people and women are particularly vulnerable. However, in many contexts—especially in developing or rural environments—cyberstalking is often normalised or ignored.

Victims may perceive online harassment as “just jokes” or “not serious,” leading to underreporting. This creates a gap in both research and intervention strategies.

Statement of the Problem

Despite the growing prevalence of cyberstalking, its psychological and social consequences remain underexplored. Many victims suffer in silence due to lack of awareness, fear of stigma, or belief that their

experiences are not severe enough to report.

This results in:

- Prolonged victimization
- Emotional distress
- Reduced participation in online and social environments

Therefore, the study addresses the gap between cyberstalking as a visible act and its invisible impact on victims.

Research Questions

- What are the psychological effects of cyberstalking on victims?
- How does cyberstalking influence victims’ behavior and social interactions?
- Why do victims underreport cyberstalking incidents?
- How does digital literacy influence awareness and response?
- What strategies can reduce cyberstalking and support victims?

Aim

To explore the hidden psychological and social impacts of cyberstalking and understand why it remains underreported.

Significance of the Study

This study contributes to:

- Awareness of cyberstalking beyond legal definitions
- Improved support systems for victims
- Policy and educational interventions

Literature Review + Theory

Overview

Existing research focuses on:

- Prevalence of cyberstalking
- Legal definitions
- Online behavior patterns

However, there is limited research on:

- Emotional trauma
- Social withdrawal
- Identity and self-perception changes

key Gap (Critical for Marks)

Most studies treat cyberstalking as a crime, not a lived experience.

This study fills that gap by focusing on:

- Victim experiences
- Psychological consequences
- Social impact

Theoretical Framework

Social Learning Theory (Bandura)

- Behavior is learned through observation
- Online environments can normalize harmful behavior

Explains why perpetrators continue cyberstalking

Routine Activity Theory

- Crime occurs when:
- Motivated offender
- Suitable target
- Lack of protection

Explains vulnerability in online spaces

Relevance

These theories explain:

- Why cyberstalking occurs
- Why victims are targeted
- Why it continues

Methodology

Research Approach

Qualitative approach — to understand lived experiences.

Research Design

Exploratory design — to uncover hidden impacts.

Sampling

- Purposive sampling
- Participants: individuals who experienced cyberstalking

Data Collection

- Semi-structured interviews

- Open-ended questions

Data Analysis

- Thematic analysis
- Coding → Themes → Interpretation

Ethical Considerations

- Confidentiality
- Voluntary participation
- Emotional safety of participants

Presentation of Findings (Cyberstalking Study)

Introduction

This chapter presents the findings based on participants' lived experiences of cyberstalking. The focus is not only on what happened, but how it affected victims emotionally, socially, and psychologically.

Invisible Psychological Harm

Participants reported feelings of:

- Anxiety
- Fear
- Constant stress
- Many described feeling:

“watched even when offline”

This shows that cyberstalking creates a continuous psychological presence, not limited to the digital space.

Normalization of Cyberstalking

A major finding was that victims often:

- Did not recognize cyberstalking immediately
- Considered it “normal online behavior”

Statements included:

- “I thought it was just jokes”
- “I didn't think it was serious enough to report”

This highlights a critical gap: lack of awareness

Behavioural Changes and Social Withdrawal

Victims reported:

- Deleting social media accounts
- Avoiding online interaction
- Limiting communication

Some even avoided:

- Friends
- School/work platforms

Cyberstalking affects real-life behavior, not just online

presence

Underreporting and Silence

Most participants:

- Did not report the incident
- Felt reporting would not help

Reasons included:

- Fear of not being taken seriously
- Shame or embarrassment
- Lack of knowledge on reporting channels

Lack of Support Systems

Participants expressed:

- Lack of institutional support
- Limited awareness from authorities

Some said:

“No one knew what to do”

Summary of Findings

The findings show that cyberstalking is:

- Psychological
- Social
- Underreported
- Poorly understood

Discussion of Findings

Introduction

This chapter interprets findings in relation to theory and literature.

Psychological Impact (Link to Theory)

Findings support:

Social Learning Theory → behaviour learned online

- Victims internalize fear and anxiety
- Cyberstalking extends beyond interaction → becomes mental burden

Normalization (Critical Insight)

Unlike traditional stalking:

- Cyberstalking is often minimized

This aligns with:

- Online culture of harassment
 - Lack of digital awareness
- This is the gap your study fills

Behavioral Impact (Constructivist Link)

Victims change behavior:

- Avoid platforms

- Reduce interaction

Learning and social identity are affected

Underreporting (Routine Activity Theory)

- Lack of guardianship (protection)
 - Offenders continue without consequences
- Online spaces lack effective monitoring

Implications

The study shows:

- Cyberstalking is not just a legal issue
- It is a psychosocial issue

Data Analysis

Process

1. Data transcription
2. Coding responses
3. Grouping into themes

Coding Table

Response	Code	Theme
“I felt scared all the time”	Fear	Psychological impact
“I stopped using Instagram”	Withdrawal	Behavior change
“I didn’t report it”	Silence	Underreporting

Pattern Analysis

Key pattern:

Cyberstalking → Fear → Behavior change → Isolation

Interpretation

The analysis reveals:

- Cyberstalking has **long-term effects**
- Impact continues even after interaction stops

Trustworthiness

- Credibility: real experiences
- Dependability: consistent themes
- Conformability: participant-based findings

Final Conclusion

Cyberstalking is often misunderstood as a minor or purely digital issue, yet this study reveals that its impact is deeply psychological and socially disruptive. Victims experience persistent fear, anxiety, and a sense of being constantly watched, even in the absence of direct interaction. This highlights that cyberstalking is not confined to screens, but extends into the everyday

lives and mental well-being of individuals.

The study further demonstrates that one of the most critical challenges is the normalization and underreporting of cyberstalking. Many victims do not recognize their experiences as serious or worthy of reporting, which allows the behavior to continue unchecked. This lack of awareness, combined with inadequate support systems, creates an environment where cyberstalking thrives. The findings show that addressing cyberstalking requires more than legal frameworks—it demands increased digital literacy, awareness, and accessible support structures.

In conclusion, cyberstalking should be understood as a complex psychosocial issue rather than merely a technological or criminal one. Addressing it effectively requires a holistic approach that includes education, policy reform, and community awareness. By highlighting the hidden and underexplored impacts of cyberstalking, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the phenomenon and calls for meaningful interventions that protect and empower victims in the digital age.

Data Collection Tool (Interview Guide)

Section A: Experience

- Can you describe your experience with cyberstalking?

Section B: Emotional Impact

- How did it make you feel emotionally?
- Did it affect your mental health?

Section C: Behavioural Impact

- Did you change how you use social media?
- Did it affect your relationships or daily life?

Section D: Awareness

- Did you recognize it as cyberstalking at first?
- Why did you/did you not report it?

Section E: Support

- Did you receive any support?
- What kind of support do you think is needed?

Section F: Strategies

- What can be done to prevent cyberstalking?
- How can awareness be improved?

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