

Digital victimisation in cyberspace: Victim perspectives on cyberstalking and implications for online safety

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Article Info	Abstract
Original article	Background: The expansion of digital connectivity has transformed cyberspace into a central site of social interaction, but has also enabled new forms of harm, including cyberstalking. Despite growing attention, cyberstalking remains conceptually underdeveloped, particularly in relation to its manifestations in digitally mediated environments. Aims: This study explores cyberstalking from a victim-centred perspective, focusing on how different forms of cyberstalking are shaped by the affordances of cyberspace and how these experiences inform online safety. Methodology: A qualitative phenomenological design was employed, with data collected through in-depth email interviews with 12 participants recruited using purposive and snowball sampling. Thematic analysis identified four distinct forms of cyberstalking, namely vindictive, composed, intimate, and collective cyberstalking, with intimate cyberstalking emerging as the most prevalent. Findings: Cyberstalking is a multifaceted form of digital victimisation, characterised by persistence, anonymity, and continuous accessibility across platforms. The study demonstrates that the impact of cyberstalking extends beyond immediate emotional harm, influencing victims' social behaviour, digital participation, and perceptions of safety. Conclusion: By situating cyberstalking within the structural conditions of cyberspace, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of digital victimisation and highlights the need for context-sensitive online safety measures that respond to the varied forms of cyberstalking.
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1. Introduction

In an era marked by widespread digital connectivity, the internet serves not only as a platform for communication, but also as a gateway to a wealth of resources (Kaur et al., 2021; Paullet & Chawdhry, 2020; Stevens et al., 2021; Wilson et al., 2023). The expansion of digital technologies has fundamentally reshaped how individuals interact, form relationships, and engage with broader society. These interactions are no longer confined to physical spaces but are increasingly embedded in networked environments that enable constant connectivity and visibility (Paullet & Chawdhry, 2020). While these developments offer significant social and economic benefits, they have also introduced new avenues for harm. Within this evolving digital landscape, harmful behaviours have adapted to the affordances of cyberspace, giving rise to persistent, boundaryless forms of victimisation that are often difficult to regulate (Kabiri, 2025; Wilson et al., 2023).

Cyberstalking, characterised by repeated and intrusive online behaviours intended to intimidate, control, or distress individuals, represents one such form of digital harm. Unlike traditional stalking, cyberstalking is facilitated by communication technologies that enable anonymity, rapid information dissemination, and continuous access to victims through platforms such as social media, email, messaging applications, and online forums. As a result, the distinction between online and offline victimisation becomes increasingly blurred, with online interactions often extending into victims' everyday lives (Bussu et al., 2025; Weekes et al., 2025).

Victims of cyberstalking frequently experience profound psychological, emotional, and social consequences. These may include heightened anxiety, fear, social withdrawal, and disruptions to personal and professional functioning. In some instances, cyberstalking escalates beyond the digital environment, resulting in offline harassment or physical harm. The pervasive nature of cyberspace means that victims may feel unable to escape the abuse, as it can occur across multiple platforms and at any time, reinforcing a sense of constant vulnerability (Ahlgrim & Terrance, 2021; Fissel, 2021b; Fissel & Reynolds, 2020; Fissel et al., 2024; Wilson et al., 2023).

Despite growing scholarly attention to cyberstalking, the phenomenon remains underdeveloped conceptually and empirically. Much of the existing research has focused on prevalence, risk factors, and psychological outcomes (Bergmann, 2023; Gunn et al., 2021; Harewell et al., 2021; Kalaitzaki, 2020; Tallat et al., 2024), often treating cyberstalking as an extension of traditional stalking behaviours. However, such an approach risks overlooking how cyberspace itself shapes the nature, dynamics, and impact of these behaviours. There remains a need for research that foregrounds victim experiences while also recognising the distinct characteristics of digitally mediated harm.

This study addresses this gap by exploring cyberstalking from the perspective of victims, with particular attention to how different forms of cyberstalking manifest within the online environment and how these experiences inform approaches to online safety. By examining the lived experiences of individuals subjected to cyberstalking, the study seeks to provide a more nuanced understanding of digital victimisation as it unfolds within contemporary cyberspace. In doing so, it contributes to ongoing discussions on strengthening online safety measures in response to the evolving nature of cyber-enabled harm. Accordingly, the study is guided by the following research question: How can online safety measures be enhanced to mitigate the prevalence and impact of cyberstalking, considering its various forms and the evolving digital landscape?

2. Methodology

A phenomenological design was employed within a qualitative research framework to explore and interpret the lived experiences of individuals subjected to cyberstalking. Phenomenology is particularly suited to studies that seek to understand how individuals make sense of their experiences, as it prioritises participants' subjective meanings and perceptions of a phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Flick, 2022; Neubauer et al., 2019). In the context of this study, the approach enabled an in-depth exploration of how victims experience and interpret cyberstalking in digitally mediated environments, and how these experiences shape their perceptions of online safety.

Participants were recruited via social media platforms using purposive and snowball sampling. Purposive sampling enabled the intentional selection of individuals with direct experience of cyberstalking, while snowball sampling facilitated access to additional participants through referrals. This approach was appropriate given the sensitive and often underreported nature of cyberstalking victimisation, where potential participants may be difficult to identify through conventional sampling strategies. Consistent with the digital nature of the phenomenon under investigation, data were collected through in-depth email interviews. This method provided participants with the flexibility to respond at their own pace and in their own words, which is particularly valuable when discussing sensitive experiences. The email interview schedule consisted of semi-structured, open-ended questions designed to elicit detailed accounts of participants' experiences, perceptions, and responses to cyberstalking. Follow-up prompts were used where necessary to clarify responses and encourage deeper reflection. A total of 12 participants took part in the study. Data collection continued until thematic saturation was reached regarding the broader patterns of cyberstalking experiences and their impacts. Saturation was not pursued within each individual typological category, as the identified forms—vindictive, composed, intimate, and collective

cyberstalking— emerged as interpretive groupings across participants' accounts, rather than as discrete categories requiring equal representation.

The sample comprised 9 females and 3 males aged 19-34, representing diverse racial backgrounds (Table 1). At the time of victimisation, participants were predominantly students or unemployed, and most reported being single. While the sample size is relatively small, it is consistent with phenomenological research, which prioritises depth of insight over breadth.

Table 1. Demographic profile of participants

Participant	Gender	Age	Marital status	Occupation	Typology of cyberstalking
Nisha	Female	22	Single	Student	Intimate cyberstalking
Benjamin	Male	21	Single	Student	Intimate cyberstalking
Kiara	Female	19	Single	Student	Vindictive/intimate cyberstalking
Grace	Female	22	Single	Student	Collective cyberstalking
Ethan	Male	34	Single	Entrepreneur	Vindictive cyberstalking
Ava	Female	22	Married	Unemployed	Intimate cyberstalking
Zinhle	Female	22	Married	Student	Composed cyberstalking
Mia	Female	24	Single	Receptionist	Composed cyberstalking
Diya	Female	24	Single	Personal assistant	Vindictive cyberstalking
Khanyi	Female	21	Single	Student	Vindictive/intimate cyberstalking
Lungile	Female	19	Single	Student/Intern	Intimate cyberstalking
Mandla	Male	21	Single	Student	Intimate cyberstalking

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis, guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework. The process began with familiarisation through repeated reading of the data, followed by the generation of initial codes that captured meaningful patterns. These codes were then organised into broader themes and sub-themes, which were reviewed and refined to ensure coherence and relevance. Themes were subsequently defined and interpreted in relation to the research question and existing literature (Schurink et al., 2021). The analytic process was documented throughout to ensure transparency. Initial codes were generated inductively from the data and continuously refined through comparison across participants' accounts. These codes were then grouped into broader themes based on conceptual similarity. For example, codes relating to repeated unwanted messaging, persistent contact across platforms, and intrusive communication were grouped under the broader theme of composed cyberstalking. This process was

iterative, with themes reviewed and refined to ensure coherence and alignment with the data.

To enhance the study's trustworthiness, several strategies were employed. Credibility was supported through prolonged engagement with the data and careful attention to participants' verbatim accounts. Dependability was addressed by maintaining a clear audit trail of the research process, including decisions made during coding and theme development. Confirmability was strengthened by grounding interpretations in the data and minimising researcher bias through reflexive consideration of the researcher's role in the analytic process. Transferability was facilitated by rich, contextual descriptions of participants and their experiences, enabling readers to assess the applicability of the findings to other contexts. Reflexivity was maintained throughout the analytic process by critically reflecting on interpretive decisions and ensuring that themes were grounded in participants' accounts rather than preconceived assumptions. An audit trail of coding decisions and theme development was maintained to support transparency and consistency (Ahmed, 2024).

Ethical clearance for the study was obtained from the University of South Africa (UNISA). The research adhered to established ethical principles, including informed consent, voluntary participation, and confidentiality (Strydom & Roestenburg, 2021). Participants were provided with detailed information about the study and their rights prior to participation, and consent was obtained electronically. To protect anonymity, pseudonyms were used and identifying details were removed from the data. Given the sensitive nature of the topic, care was taken to ensure that participation did not cause undue distress, and participants could withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. No incentives were offered, thereby reducing the risk of coercion and preserving the integrity of the collected data.

While the sample is relatively small and unevenly distributed across the identified forms of cyberstalking, this aligns with phenomenological research, which prioritises depth over representational balance. The study did not aim to establish prevalence or proportional representation, but to explore the range and variation of cyberstalking experiences. Categories represented by fewer participants were therefore retained for their analytical value in highlighting distinct patterns of digitally mediated victimisation.

3. Findings

The findings identified four distinct forms of cyberstalking: vindictive, composed, intimate, and collective cyberstalking. While these categories are analytically distinct, participants' accounts suggest that cyberstalking is experienced as a multifaceted and evolving form of digital victimisation.

3.1. Vindictive cyberstalking

Vindictive cyberstalking was characterised by persistent harassment driven by malice, spite, and the intention to cause harm. Participants described repeated threatening messages, reputational attacks, and attempts to publicly shame them. These behaviours often extended beyond single interactions, creating a sustained experience of intimidation.

Diya, Khanyi, Ethan, and Kiara's experiences reflected this form. Participants described deliberate attempts to harm their reputation and emotional well-being:

"She would send me threatening messages via Facebook inbox. She said if I kept contact with the guy, she would find me and beat me up." [Khanyi, female, 21 years, single]

"She would publish status updates swearing at me calling me words like slut, bitch and whore." [Kiara, female, 19 years, single]

These experiences reflect ongoing exposure to threats and reputational harm, contributing to heightened fear and distress.

3.2. Composed cyberstalking

Composed cyberstalking involved persistent but less overtly aggressive behaviour aimed at causing ongoing frustration and distress. Participants described repeated unwanted contact across multiple platforms, often beginning with seemingly trivial or ambiguous interactions. Mia and Zinhle's accounts illustrate this pattern:

"It started with Facebook, where the guy would inbox me sending me messages... He started sending me funny messages and funny pictures... He would even leave me voice messages making funny sounds." [Mia, female, 24 years, single]

"I kept receiving withheld phone calls... I would wake up to the sound of my bedroom door closing... I started getting SMSEs and that is when I went to the police with my suspicions." [Zinhle, female, 22 years, married]

These accounts highlight how repeated contact, even when not explicitly threatening, contributed to ongoing intrusion and anxiety.

3.3. Intimate cyberstalking

Intimate cyberstalking was characterised by persistent attempts to initiate or maintain a romantic or sexual relationship, often following rejection. Participants described repeated advances, emotional pressure, and disregard for personal boundaries.

"He has expressed personal interest in me which I have on

numerous times declined....” [Ava, female, 22 years, married]

“The guy was making romantic advances towards me which later turned sexual and I turned him down.” [Khanyi, female, 21 years, single]

“...begging me for a second chance... to be my boyfriend....” [Lungile, female, 19 years, single]

These experiences reflect ongoing relational intrusion and an inability by perpetrators to accept rejection.

3.4. Collective cyberstalking

Collective cyberstalking involved harassment by multiple perpetrators. While instances of collective cyberstalking were less frequently reported, elements of shared visibility, reputational spread, and involvement of broader online audiences suggest that cyberstalking may extend beyond individual perpetration into more networked forms of victimisation. Only Grace described coordinated or group-based behaviours that intensified the experience of victimisation.

“Both persons masturbated to my photos on Facebook... telling me how they are aroused....” [Grace, female, 22 years, single]

This form reflects the involvement of multiple actors and highlights the amplification of harm through group participation.

4. Discussion

The findings demonstrate that cyberstalking is not a uniform phenomenon but a complex, multifaceted form of digital victimisation shaped by the affordances of cyberspace. While the typology proposed in this study identifies four distinct forms of cyberstalking, it is important to situate these categories within existing typological frameworks. Prior research has conceptualised stalking through relational and motivational lenses, most notably in Spitzberg and Cupach’s relational pursuit framework, which emphasises unwanted pursuit behaviours within interpersonal contexts (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007a; 2007b). Similarly, typologies developed by Sheridan and Davies (2010) have categorised stalkers based on underlying motivations, such as intimacy-seeking, resentment, or predation.

The present findings partially align with these frameworks, particularly in the case of intimate cyberstalking, which reflects patterns of persistent relational pursuit following rejection. Vindictive cyberstalking also resonates with existing categories associated with resentment and hostility. However, the typology extends prior work in several important ways. First, composed cyberstalking highlights how

harm may emerge from persistent, low-level interactions that are not necessarily driven by clear emotional intent but enabled by the affordances of digital platforms. This form challenges traditional typologies that prioritise overt motivation or threat. Second, collective cyberstalking foregrounds the role of multiple perpetrators and group dynamics, which remain underdeveloped in existing stalking classifications that predominantly focus on individual offenders. More broadly, the typology shifts the analytical focus from perpetrator motivation to the interaction between behaviour and the structural conditions of cyberspace. By emphasising persistence, anonymity, and continuous accessibility as shaping forces, the study demonstrates that cyberstalking cannot be fully understood through frameworks developed in offline contexts alone. In this sense, the proposed typology both aligns with and extends existing scholarship by offering a classification grounded in the distinctive dynamics of digitally mediated environments.

The identification of vindictive, composed, intimate, and collective cyberstalking extends existing research by providing a more nuanced typology of cyberstalking behaviours (Weekes et al., 2025). While previous studies have emphasised prevalence and risk factors, the present findings highlight how different forms of cyberstalking are embedded in and shaped by digitally mediated environments. Across all four forms, a key unifying feature is the role of persistence. Whether expressed through overt threats, repeated unwanted communication, or ongoing relational intrusion, cyberstalking is experienced as a continuous process rather than a discrete event. This reflects the structural characteristics of cyberspace, where communication is not constrained by time or physical proximity. As a result, victimisation becomes ongoing and difficult to escape, reinforcing the argument that digital environments fundamentally reshape the temporal and spatial boundaries of harm.

Vindictive cyberstalking reflects patterns of reputational harm, harassment, and defamation, aligning with literature on online aggression and the amplification of harmful content in digital environments (Bilewicz & Soral, 2020; Cervone et al., 2021; Laibuta, 2022; Silver, 2022). However, the findings further illustrate how the permanence and visibility of online content intensify these harms. Unlike offline interactions, harmful content can be repeatedly accessed, shared, and reinterpreted, extending victimisation beyond the initial act and embedding it within the broader digital ecosystem. Composed cyberstalking highlights how persistence itself becomes a mechanism of harm. Consistent with research on technological affordances, digital platforms enable continuous, low-effort engagement, allowing perpetrators to maintain contact across multiple channels (Gautam & Bansal, 2022). The findings suggest that harm in this context is not necessarily derived from the severity of individual actions, but from

their cumulative effect over time. This challenges traditional understandings of stalking, which often prioritise overt threat, by demonstrating that sustained intrusion alone can produce significant distress. Intimate cyberstalking reinforces findings that cyberstalking frequently occurs within relational contexts (March et al., 2022).

However, the digital environment appears to intensify these dynamics by enabling continuous monitoring and access to personal information. This creates a form of perceived proximity that persists despite rejection, allowing perpetrators to maintain a sense of connection that is not grounded in mutual interaction. The findings, therefore, highlight how cyberspace facilitates new forms of relational intrusion that are less constrained by physical boundaries. The predominance of female victims further reflects established gendered patterns in cyberstalking victimisation (Lee & Park, 2025), while also underscoring the intersection between digital environments and existing social inequalities. Collective cyberstalking extends existing understandings by foregrounding the role of group dynamics in cyberspace. The involvement of multiple perpetrators amplifies the intensity and scale of victimisation, as harmful behaviours are reinforced through participation and visibility. This aligns with research suggesting that digital environments can facilitate deviant behaviour by reducing accountability and providing opportunities for social validation (Salimi et al., 2024). The findings further suggest that collective cyberstalking represents a distinct form of harm that is not adequately captured by individualised models of victimisation.

When considered collectively, these forms demonstrate that cyberstalking is shaped by the interaction between individual behaviours and the structural features of cyberspace. Anonymity, persistence, and continuous accessibility do not simply facilitate cyberstalking, they actively transform its nature and impact. This reinforces the need to conceptualise cyberstalking as a distinctly digital phenomenon, rather than as an extension of offline stalking behaviours. The findings also provide important insights into the impact of cyberstalking. Consistent with existing literature, participants reported anxiety, fear, and broader psychological harm (Begotti et al., 2022; Stevens et al., 2021; Worsley et al., 2017).

However, the findings extend this understanding by demonstrating how these impacts are cumulative and embedded within everyday digital life. The inability to disengage from digital platforms contributes to a sustained sense of vulnerability, while integrating online communication into daily routines amplifies the reach of victimisation. Beyond psychological harm, the findings highlight broader social and behavioural consequences. Participants' withdrawal from digital platforms reflects a form of indirect exclusion, limiting their participation in digital society (Mayer & Oosthuizen, 2020; Ndou et al., 2020). This suggests that cyberstalking not only affects individual well-

being but also shapes patterns of digital engagement and social inclusion. In this sense, cyberstalking can be understood as both a personal and societal issue, with implications for how individuals interact within digitally mediated environments. Moreover, the potential for cyberstalking to escalate into offline harm underscores the blurred boundaries between digital and physical victimisation (Chugh & Guggisberg, 2022; Citron, 2023; Todd et al., 2021). The findings suggest that online and offline harms should not be treated as separate phenomena, but rather as interconnected forms of victimisation that can reinforce one another.

Significantly, the study demonstrates that cyberstalking must be understood within the broader context of cyberspace, where technological affordances interact with human behaviour to produce complex, persistent, and evolving forms of harm. By linking distinct behavioural patterns to the structural conditions of digital environments, the study contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of cyberstalking as a form of digital victimisation.

4.1. The implications of cyberstalking on its victims

The impact of cyberstalking on victims was intricately tied to the specific nature of each cyberstalking incident, with distinct effects emerging from individual cases. Nonetheless, common themes and patterns emerged from the empirical findings. Most participants expressed a range of negative emotions, including stress, hurt, paranoia, betrayal, anger, fear, and depression (Fissel & Reynolds, 2020; Kaur et al., 2021; Maran & Begotti, 2022; Wilson et al., 2023). These emotional responses were not experienced in isolation but were often layered and intensified over time, particularly when cyberstalking was persistent or involved multiple platforms. This reinforces the notion that cyberstalking is not a singular event, but an ongoing process of victimisation shaped by repeated digital interactions.

The implications of cyberstalking reach into diverse spheres, impacting individuals, communities, and society (Fissel & Reynolds, 2020). Cyberstalking victims frequently endure profound emotional turmoil, marked by feelings of fear, nervousness, sadness, and diminished self-worth (Tade & Popoola, 2021). The relentless harassment and intrusion into their privacy can induce a sense of hopelessness and vulnerability. Furthermore, the constant fear of being targeted or harmed can disrupt victims' daily routines and adversely affect their overall well-being (Malik, 2021; Woods, 2022). In cyberspace, this disruption is often intensified by the inability to "leave" the environment where the harm occurs, as digital platforms are embedded in everyday life.

Furthermore, participants reported experiencing physical effects such as sleep disturbances, persistent worry, difficulty concentrating, stress, and a pervasive fear of being watched. Persistent cyberstalking

may lead to enduring psychological trauma, comparable to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Victims may struggle with recurrent distressing memories, nightmares, and heightened alertness, impacting their mental health significantly. These experiences are consistent with research demonstrating that cyberstalking is associated with anxiety, emotional distress, and broader mental health consequences (Begotti et al., 2022; Stevens et al., 2021; Worsley et al., 2017).

The apprehension of online targeting might prompt victims to retreat from social engagements, both virtual and in-person, intensifying sentiments of solitude and exacerbating mental health challenges. Individuals targeted by cyberstalking may develop apprehension in their interpersonal interactions, whether online or in person. They may exhibit caution in establishing new relationships or divulging personal details, influenced by prior incidents of deceit or misuse (Harewell et al., 2021; Morris et al., 2020; Reiss et al., 2022; Stevens et al., 2021). This is evident in cases of intimate cyberstalking, where relational trust is disrupted, and in composed cyberstalking, and repeated unwanted contact creates a sustained sense of intrusion.

Moreover, nine out of twelve participants identified sociological consequences, including changing contact details, ending friendships, difficulties concentrating at work, avoiding certain places, and even relocating. Cyberstalking can affect victims' professional reputations and career prospects (Bibi & Abbasi, 2022; Fissel & Reyns, 2020). Offensive material circulated online may be visible to current or future employers, leading to bias or termination of employment. This was particularly evident in cases of vindictive cyberstalking, where reputational harm was central to the perpetrator's actions. Additionally, young people may struggle to concentrate on their studies or participate in classes due to the emotional strain of cyberstalking, leading to academic setbacks and hindering educational advancement. Moreover, most participants either disconnected from all forms of communication technology or significantly reduced their online activity. Consequently, these victims of cyberstalking deprived themselves of the benefits of communication technology, such as access to widespread communication channels (Mayer & Oosthuizen, 2020; Ndou et al., 2020).

This finding is especially significant in a digitally dependent society, as it highlights a form of indirect exclusion in which victims withdraw from online spaces to preserve their safety. In this sense, cyberstalking not only harms individuals but also limits their participation in digital society. Beyond these implications, ultimately, cyberstalking has the potential to escalate to offline threats and physical violence, presenting grave safety risks for victims and their close relationships (Chugh & Guggisberg, 2022; Citron, 2023; Todd et al., 2021). This blurring of online and offline boundaries reinforces the argument that cyberstalking should not be treated as a separate or lesser form of harm,

but rather as part of a continuum of victimisation that can extend across both digital and physical environments.

Consequently, these findings demonstrate that the impact of cyberstalking is cumulative, multifaceted, and deeply embedded within the structures of everyday digital life. The consequences extend beyond immediate emotional distress to affect victims' social relationships, professional opportunities, and engagement with digital environments. This underscores the importance of developing targeted, context-sensitive interventions that address not only the behaviours themselves, but also their broader implications for victims' well-being and participation in society.

4.2. Enhancing online safety in response to cyberstalking

In light of the findings, enhancing online safety requires a shift from generalised preventative approaches to more targeted, context-sensitive strategies that reflect the diverse manifestations of cyberstalking. The distinction between vindictive, composed, intimate, and collective cyberstalking highlights that these behaviours are not uniform, and therefore cannot be effectively addressed through broad or standardised interventions. Rather, online safety measures must be responsive to the specific behavioural patterns and harms associated with each form, as well as the structural features of cyberspace that enable them.

A key implication arising from the findings is the need to strengthen awareness initiatives by moving beyond general cyber safety education towards more behaviour-specific forms of digital literacy. Participants' experiences suggest that certain forms of cyberstalking, particularly composed and intimate cyberstalking, are not always immediately recognised as harmful. Persistent communication, for example, may initially be interpreted as socially acceptable interaction before escalating into distressing behaviour. Awareness initiatives should therefore focus on equipping individuals to recognise patterns of repeated, unwanted engagement as intrusions, even in the absence of explicit threats. This extends existing calls for enhanced online safety education (Dhillon & Smith, 2019; Herkanaidu, 2020; Herkanaidu et al., 2021; Herkanaidu et al., 2021), but grounds such initiatives in the specific behavioural dynamics identified in this study. In addition, given the prominence of reputational harm in cases of vindictive cyberstalking, awareness efforts should incorporate guidance on managing online identity, recognising defamation, and responding to impersonation within digital environments.

The findings further highlight the critical role of digital platforms in shaping cyberstalking behaviour, indicating that online safety cannot rely solely on user awareness or individual protective actions. Instead, there is a need for platform-level interventions that are sensitive to behavioural patterns rather than isolated incidents. In cases of composed cyberstalking, for instance, harm accumulates over time

through repeated contact. This suggests that platforms should move towards identifying patterns of persistent engagement across interactions, rather than assessing each instance in isolation. Similarly, the prevalence of vindictive and collective cyberstalking highlights the need for improved mechanisms to detect and respond to reputational harm and coordinated harassment. This includes more efficient processes for content removal, enhanced detection of impersonation, and systems capable of recognising group-based targeting. In the context of intimate cyberstalking, platform design should prioritise stronger privacy controls that limit unsolicited monitoring and repeated contact, particularly from unknown or blocked users. The development and refinement of such technological interventions remain essential, particularly in light of ongoing advancements in data-driven detection methods and digital profiling techniques (Asante & Feng, 2021; Bikku et al., 2024; Dughyala et al., 2021).

At a policy level, the findings suggest that existing legal frameworks may not adequately capture the full scope of harm associated with cyberstalking. While traditional definitions often emphasise fear as a central component, the experiences of participants indicate that harm frequently manifests through emotional distress, reputational damage, and persistent intrusion. This is particularly evident in composed cyberstalking, where the absence of explicit threats may obscure the severity of the behaviour. As such, there is a need for more inclusive legal definitions that recognise the diverse ways in which cyberstalking impacts victims. This aligns with ongoing discussions around strengthening cyberstalking legislation and improving victim protection mechanisms (Chang, 2020; Rapisarda & Kras, 2023; Rigotti, 2024; Smith & Dhillon, 2023). Furthermore, the emergence of collective cyberstalking underscores the importance of considering multi-perpetrator dynamics within legal responses, as coordinated harassment presents unique challenges that are not easily addressed through individualised approaches.

The findings also underscore the importance of adapting support services to reflect the digital nature of victimisation. Victims reported a range of psychological, social, and behavioural consequences, including withdrawal from online spaces, disruptions to daily routines, and long-term emotional distress. In many cases, individuals reduced or entirely discontinued their use of communication technologies, effectively excluding themselves from the benefits of digital participation. This suggests that support services should not only address emotional and psychological needs, but also provide practical guidance on navigating digital environments. Such support may include assistance with documenting evidence, managing online presence, and engaging with platform reporting mechanisms. Collaboration among mental health professionals, victim support organisations, and community structures remains essential to ensuring that victims receive

comprehensive, contextually relevant support (De Kimpe et al., 2020; Fissel, 2021a; Taylor-Dunn & Erol, 2023). Importantly, interventions should aim to facilitate safe re-engagement with digital platforms, rather than reinforcing withdrawal as the primary coping strategy.

Ultimately, enhancing online safety in the context of cyberstalking requires an integrated approach that acknowledges the interaction between individual behaviour, technological design, and broader social and legal frameworks. The findings demonstrate that cyberstalking is deeply embedded in the structures of contemporary digital life, and, as such, responses must be adaptive and multifaceted. By aligning preventative and responsive measures with the specific forms and impacts of cyberstalking identified in this study, more effective and sustainable strategies can be developed to mitigate both its prevalence and its consequences.

5. Conclusion

The study contributes to cyberspace studies by demonstrating how different forms of cyberstalking are shaped by the structural and interactive features of digital environments. This study set out to explore how cyberstalking is experienced within cyberspace and how these experiences can inform more effective approaches to online safety. By positioning victim perspectives, the findings demonstrate that cyberstalking is not a singular or uniform behaviour, but rather a multifaceted form of digital victimisation shaped by the structural conditions of cyberspace. The identification of four distinct forms: vindictive, composed, intimate, and collective cyberstalking, provides a more nuanced conceptualisation of cyberstalking and highlights how different behavioural patterns produce varied yet cumulative harms. The study contributes to existing scholarship by moving beyond prevalence-focused approaches and offering an empirically grounded typology that captures the complexity of cyberstalking as it unfolds across digitally mediated environments. In doing so, it underscores the role of anonymity, persistence, and continuous accessibility in intensifying victimisation and shaping victims' responses. Importantly, the findings illustrate that the impact of cyberstalking extends beyond immediate emotional distress to influence social relationships, digital participation, and perceptions of safety, reinforcing the need to understand cyberstalking as embedded within everyday digital life.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The study draws on a relatively small qualitative sample, limiting the generalisability of the findings. Furthermore, the uneven distribution of participants across the identified cyberstalking forms limits the extent to which saturation can be claimed within each individual category. The use of email interviews also presents specific methodological limitations that may have shaped the data. Asynchronous communication led to some variation in response depth, with some participants providing more detailed

accounts than others. The absence of non-verbal cues limited the ability to interpret tone and emotional nuance, while reliance on written responses may have constrained spontaneous elaboration. In several cases, follow-up prompts were required to clarify or expand on initial responses, which helped to deepen the data but may not fully replicate the depth achievable through synchronous interaction.

Future research should build on these findings by examining cyberstalking across larger, more diverse samples and across different cultural and technological contexts. There is also a need to further explore how evolving platform features and digital practices shape the emergence of new forms of cyberstalking, particularly in relation to collective and technologically mediated behaviours. In addition, interdisciplinary research integrating criminological, technological, and policy perspectives would be valuable for developing more effective, context-sensitive online safety interventions.

Conflict of interest

The author declared no conflicts of interest.

Ethical considerations

The author has completely considered ethical issues, including informed consent, plagiarism, data fabrication, misconduct, and/or falsification, double publication and/or redundancy, submission, etc. This article was not authored by artificial intelligence.

Data availability

The dataset generated and analyzed during the current study is available from the author on reasonable request.

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