

# Victims' Voices: Understanding the Emotional Impact of Cyberstalking and Individuals' Coping Responses

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## Abstract

Recent quantitative research has identified similar detrimental effects on victims of cyberstalking as those that arise from traditional stalking. The current study thematically analyzed one hundred victim narratives gathered by means of an online survey with a view to assessing the mental health and well-being implications of the experience of cyberstalking. Coping strategies employed by victims and the perceived effectiveness of each strategy were also explored. The findings suggest that the emotional impact of cyberstalking predominantly includes comorbid anxiety and depression. Common coping strategies adopted by victims in our sample include avoidant coping, ignoring the perpetrator, confrontational coping, support seeking, and cognitive reframing. Taken together, the findings demonstrate that the ramifications of cyberstalking are widespread, affecting psychological, social, interpersonal, and economic aspects of life. To adapt, some victims made major changes to both their work and social life, with some ceasing employment and others modifying their usual daily activities. The widespread negative effects of cyberstalking identified in this study highlight that this phenomenon should be a concern to both legal and mental health professionals, particularly as the comments made by our sample illustrate the current inadequacy of response and provision. Recommendations are discussed and provided for law enforcement and mental health professionals.

## Keywords

cyberstalking, victims, emotional impact, well-being, coping strategies

Traditional stalking is a considerable public health issue and describes a constellation of behaviors in which one individual intrudes upon or harasses another resulting in fear experienced by the victim as a result of the unwanted pursuit (McEwan, MacKenzie, Mullen, & James, 2012). Ubiquitous access to the Internet has dramatically altered communication in contemporary society, and these electronic means provide perpetrators with novel ways of pursuing individuals. In light of this, a phenomenon known as cyberstalking has emerged that can be defined as the repeated pursuit of an individual utilizing electronic means to induce fear or distress (Maple, Short, & Brown, 2011). As the Internet is a rapidly evolving medium, many new forms of cyberstalking are emerging and provide additional tools for stalkers' arsenal. Cyberstalking can take many forms including sending direct threats via email, encouraging others to threaten or harass the victim, distributing intimate photographs online, impersonating the victim online, and seeking and compiling information on the victim (Short, Linford, Wheatcroft, & Maple, 2014). Social networking sites provide a novel way to gather information about an individual and, as such sites facilitate intrusion-like behaviors, they are being used as conduits for stalking and online harassment (Fox, 2016). Indeed, according to Kraft

and Wang (2010), social media has made stalking much easier and visiting social networking sites can lead to an increased likelihood of becoming a victim of cyberstalking. However, in many cases, the perpetrator makes use of both online and offline stalking techniques (Maple et al., 2011; Sheridan & Grant, 2007) and other researchers have also reported that it is common for cyberstalking to begin with the issuing of threats, and escalate to physical assault (Bocij, Griffiths, & McFarlane, 2002).

Stalking is one of the most common forms of interpersonal violence. Figures from the British Crime Survey 2011 demonstrate that one in five women and one in 10 men will be stalked at some point during their life (Smith, Coleman, Eder, & Hall, 2011) and more recent figures from the 2013/2014 Crime Survey for England and Wales demonstrate that 4.4% of women and 2.5% of men aged 16

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to 59 reported experiencing stalking over a period of 1 year (Office for National Statistics, 2015). Using data from a supplement to the 2006 National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS), Baum, Catalano, Rand, and Rose (2009) reported that during a 12-month period, 1.4% of adults in the United States were victims of stalking, and cyberstalking behavior was reported in one in four stalking cases (26.1%). Taken together, the characteristics of both online and offline variants of stalking consist of repeated nuisance behaviors that are intrusive and that result in negative impacts in the victim (Shimizu, 2013).

A burgeoning literature reports the negative impacts of traditional stalking in terms of victims' mental health and well-being (Blaauw, Winkel, Arensman, Sheridan, & Freeve, 2002; Brewster, 1997; Kuehner, Gass, & Dressing, 2007; Pathé & Mullen, 1997). Lifestyle changes also appear to be a universal response to being stalked offline with a diverse array of responses reported by victims. For instance, some victims changed workplace or school. Others relocated residence and many victims eschewed social outlets in favor of staying at home through fear of encountering their stalker (Pathé & Mullen, 1997). With regard to the emotional impact of traditional stalking, Pathé and Mullen (1997) found that victims' mental health deteriorated after the onset of harassment. More specifically, victims reported heightened anxiety levels, vivid flashbacks of their stalking ordeal, and persistent nausea. Purcell, Pathé, and Mullen (2005) reported that stalking victims had elevated levels of general psychological symptoms compared with short-lived harassment victims and controls, and almost one in five victims reported post-traumatic stress symptomology. Similarly, Kamphuis and Emmelkamp (2001) also documented that many victims experienced clinical or subclinical manifestations of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as a consequence of their stalking ordeal. In addition, Kuehner et al. (2007) found associations between stalking victimization and specific mental health problems, classified according to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (4th ed., *DSM-IV*; American Psychiatric Association, 1994) with the most prevalent mental health problems being major depression and panic disorder. Collectively, such studies highlight that traditional stalking poses a serious threat to the mental health of victims. One factor shown to play an important role in the relationship between interpersonal stressors and psychological difficulties is coping (Lazarus, 1998).

Coping refers to the cognitive and behavioral efforts a person utilizes to manage stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Various conceptualizations of coping are reported in the psychological literature, and many are underpinned by Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) theory which dichotomizes coping into problem-focused strategies (e.g., engaging in behavior to change the situation such as seeking professional support) and emotion-focused strategies (e.g., trying to avoid the source of stress). Victims of traditional stalking employ a wide array of coping strategies to deter

perpetrators and manage the negative emotional impact of the unwanted pursuit. Cupach and Spitzberg (2004) and Spitzberg (2002) developed a typology of common coping strategies employed by stalking victims. Coping strategies are conceptualized into the following five categories: moving inward, moving outward, moving away, moving toward, and moving against (Cupach & Spitzberg, 2004). The moving inward category reflects the victim using idiosyncratic problem-solving skills, discounting help from others, ignoring the problem, and blaming the self. In direct contrast, the moving outward category reflects the victim seeking guidance and support from others and this includes both formal support from law enforcement as well as social support from family and friends. Moving away coping strategies aim to avoid and limit access from the perpetrator, and specific behaviors include restricting accessibility and relocating. Last, both moving toward and moving against coping strategies involve attempts to reason with the perpetrator. However, moving against coping strategies include issuing verbal threats and using physical violence to deter perpetrators. More recent studies (e.g., Geistman, Smith, Lambert, & Cluse-Tolar, 2013; Johansen & Tjørnhøj-Thomsen, 2016) have categorized victims' coping responses as either formal responses (i.e., contacting law enforcement) versus informal responses (i.e., dealing with the perpetrator on their own or with the help of significant others) or external strategies (i.e., seeking assistance from external resources such as law enforcement and/or family and friends) versus internal strategies (i.e., changing everyday routines and employing "safety" behaviors).

Moving to the cyberstalking literature, it is interesting to note that the majority of this literature is quantitative. Using data from the 2006 NCVS to compare traditional stalking and cyberstalking victims, Nobles, Reyns, Fox, and Fisher (2014) reported that individuals stalked via electronic means employed more self-protective behaviors, such as changing usual activities and changing email addresses, in comparison with traditional stalking victims. The authors offered an explanation for their findings couched in the dynamics of online interaction as they suggested that communication via electronic means is just as personal as, or more personal than, face-to-face communication and therefore cyberstalking may elicit a personal violation, which consequently elicits more diverse self-protective behaviors. Alternatively, given the pervasive and public nature of social media, stalking occurring via these means may influence victims' behaviors as humiliating content is visible to a larger audience and, as it is challenging to completely remove content from the Internet, it cannot be easily overlooked. In light of this, cyberstalking may be more detrimental to victims' emotional health and reputation, and consequently, victims may employ additional self-protective behaviors.

Despite this difference, previous research has revealed a general picture of similarity between traditional stalking

victims and those stalked via electronic means with regard to the victims' general responses to the ordeal. Specifically, Sheridan and Grant (2007) reported that the extent of physical and emotional consequences did not differ significantly according to the degree of cyberinvolvement. With regard to social consequences, the only difference was that traditional stalking was associated more with changes to the victim's employment status and social routines whereas cyberstalking was more strongly associated with loss of significant relationships. More recently, using standardized measures of anxiety and PTSD, Short, Guppy, Hart, and Barnes (2015) reported that both traditional stalking and cyberstalking victims experience comparable elevated levels of psychological distress as a consequence of the ordeal. In line with this, when Dreßing, Bailer, Anders, Wagner, and Gallas (2014) presented users of a German social networking site with a list of psychosomatic and psychosocial symptoms, over half of the individuals who had experienced cyberstalking reported anger, helplessness, and anxiety. They also found that victims of cyberstalking scored significantly lower on a standardized measure of well-being than a comparison group who had not experienced cyberstalking. Thus, there were still significant negative outcomes for victims despite these interactions taking place online.

Given the limited existing cyberstalking research is largely quantitative, the perspectives of victims themselves are currently underrepresented in this literature. Experiential data can provide valuable insights about the impact of cyberstalking, the coping strategies employed by victims, and the experience of responses and provisions from relevant professional bodies during and following the ordeal. In light of this, the current research aims to qualitatively examine the narratives of victims, specifically with regard to the mental health and well-being consequences of cyberstalking as well as the coping strategies used to manage the ordeal effectively. As far as the authors are aware, no research has examined these issues in this context to date. Furthermore, victims' experiences of professional involvement, particularly law enforcement, during and following the cyberstalking ordeal are explored.

## Method

### Participants

Data from a self-identified sample of 100 anonymous participants who defined themselves as victims of cyberstalking were gathered by an online survey. The sample comprised 65 females and 34 males (one participant's gender was unspecified) who were aged between 15 and 68 years ( $M = 38.93$ ,  $SD = \pm 11.42$ ) and the majority of participants were from the United Kingdom. This sample of 100 victims was obtained as a random sample from the Electronic Communication Harassment Observation (ECHO) project and represented 28.33% of the total sample from the wider project ( $n = 353$ ).

In half of all cases, there had been little or no prior relationship between the stalker and the victim with 25.53% of cases reporting that the stalker was an acquaintance and 24.47% of cases reporting that the stalker was a stranger. Other relationships between the stalker and victim included someone dated casually (13.83%), lived with/was married to/have children with (11.70%), unknown (9.57%), work colleague (6.38%), close friend (4.26%), partners "ex" (2.13%), pupil (1.06%), and relative (1.06%). Ethical approval was obtained from the University's Ethics Committee. All participants were provided with information prior to taking part and provided informed consent on that basis. All participants were assured of their anonymity. No incentives were provided for participation.

### The Online Survey

The online survey was launched by the National Centre for Cyberstalking Research (NCCR) and hosted on the website of the British Charity Network for Surviving Stalking (NSS). Participants were invited through a NSS newsletter, national broadcasts, and print media in news stories related to cyberstalking. The questions were developed iteratively by professionals and researchers. There was an inbuilt check for the kind of experiences that people were reporting in the form of a definition: "cyberstalking is a course of action that involves more than one incident perpetrated through or utilizing electronic means (such as the Internet or mobile technology) that causes distress, fear, or alarm. Have you experienced cyberstalking which meets this definition?"

The online survey was designed to capture information about the experiences of cyberstalking and, importantly, it did not explicitly address the effects of the experience on the victims. The survey participants, all victims of cyberstalking, were asked to respond to the following broad open-ended questions: (a) How did it all begin? When did you realize it was becoming a problem? (b) Give examples of each of the harassment behaviors experienced. (c) Did any actions improve the situation? (d) Did any actions make the situation worse? (e) Are there any actions that you feel would have protected you better if they had been available to you? (f) What else could have helped improve the situation?

### Method of Analysis

Survey responses were analyzed using the thematic analysis procedure described by Braun and Clarke (2006). Thematic analysis is a flexible qualitative methodology that aims to identify, analyze, and report recurrent themes in data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This analysis takes a realist epistemological standpoint, treating participants' narratives as representative of their lived "reality". Thematic analysis was selected for several reasons: First, the narratives may be varied, specifically with regard to individual experience, and therefore may not yield a single overarching theory. Second, as no prior

qualitative research had been conducted specifically assessing the mental health and well-being implications of cyberstalking, this methodology was considered most useful for providing an initial description of the consequences of cyberstalking and last, thematic analysis is sensitive to individual nuance. However, as this analysis does not attempt to describe the content of the entire dataset, the analysis could be described as more theoretical than inductive as the coding process was driven by our analytical interest in the mental health and well-being consequences of cyberstalking rather than to provide an overall description of the dataset.

The steps for conducting thematic analysis as outlined in detail by Braun and Clarke (2006) were followed: First, the data were read carefully to identify meaningful units of text relevant to the research topic and initial codes were generated. The codes dealing with the same issue were then grouped together to generate the thematic structures. The analysis was conducted across all the aforementioned questions, rather than for each question independently to identify themes across the data as a whole. The themes, drawn purely from within the data, are illustrated by anonymous direct quotations. As the data were supplied from the NCCR and provided online, there are no line numbers present to report. However, to illustrate the breadth of participant contribution to the study, we have included the participant number beside each quotation.

## Analysis

The World Health Organization (WHO) has described health as “. . . a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity” (WHO, 1946, p. 1315). In light of this, cyberstalking could influence health in a number of ways, and the ramifications of this ordeal are therefore potentially multilayered with serious potential outcomes. Using the method of analysis described above, the participants’ descriptions of the emotional, cognitive, and lifestyle impact of cyberstalking were explored. The emergent themes and associated subordinate themes, summarized in Table 1, illustrate the number of ways that cyberstalking can influence health and are each discussed in turn.

### Fear

In line with the definition of cyberstalking, a preponderance of victims experience a heightened sense of fear as a consequence of the cyberstalking ordeal, and fear as an intense emotion may overshadow every other aspect of life, for instance:

My whole life stopped because I was in so much fear. (Participant 19)

In the end I became phobic. (Participant 92)

There are about 6 people who write things about me and to me that make me fearful. (Participant 9)

**Table 1.** The Impact of Cyberstalking on Mental Health and Well-Being.

Themes	Subordinate themes
Fear	
Anxiety	Specific anxiety symptoms Physiological responses Persistent/chronic anxiety
Depressive symptoms	Low mood Lack of control Helplessness
Secondary emotional responses	
Global well-being consequences	
Lack of effective victim support	Police Other

Also, it seemed that victims found it difficult to determine which self-protective strategy to adopt in response to their fear:

When under fear, in panick [*sic*] it is difficult to work out what is the best solution. (Participant 54)

Thus fear was a consequence of the repeated pursuit felt by the victims and it is possible that victims develop anxiety as a consequence of the fear response and the helpless position they find themselves in to relieve this fear.

### Anxiety

It appeared that anxiety could manifest as a posttraumatic stress response or as acute physiologically based responses such as panic attacks. Some participants reported experiencing intense, disabling anxiety which can be linked specifically to the cyberstalking ordeal. When anxiety is tied to such a traumatic event, it is sometimes accompanied by flashbacks:

I still have flashbacks and experience anxiety when going into my inbox. (Participant 81)

To this day I still have flashbacks when sat in my front room. (Participant 99)

Taken together, such quotations serve to highlight that vivid memories of the cyberstalking ordeal are relived involuntarily and ultimately this can have a severe emotional impact. In addition to vivid flashbacks, intrusive recollections were also reported:

I imagine I see his face in every car that passes. (Participant 2)

Collectively, intrusive recollections and vivid flashbacks are commonly reported symptoms of PTSD. Although some participants reported posttraumatic stress symptomology, others overtly stated that they have suffered PTSD as a consequence of the traumatic ordeal:

I became very ill in August 2009 and now suffer complex PTSD/depression as a result of the harassment and abuse. (Participant 99)

Taken together, many victims reported suffering from clinical or subclinical manifestations of PTSD. In addition to distressing recollections and flashbacks, other participants described distress in the form of paranoia and mistrust:

I get paranoied [*sic*] very easily and reluctant to trust indirect communications. (Participant 54)

I found myself being suspicious of friends and customers who I had known well for years. (Participant 63)

Moreover, some participants described that the various states of anxiety exemplified above may also take the form of panic attacks:

I had panic attacks and nervous breakdowns. (Participant 68)

I still have anxiety attacks when the phone rings. (Participant 67)

Thus, as a consequence of the cyberstalking ordeal, some participants experienced intense periods of overwhelming anxiety alongside pronounced physiological effects. Persistent nausea was reported by one participant who experienced the urge to vomit every time she addressed her incoming mail:

I began to fall apart and would be sick when I had to address incoming email. (Participant 93)

In line with this, heightened anxiety levels manifested as “shakes” in another participant:

Her last email left me shaking. (Participant 72)

In addition, some participants also experienced persistent/chronic anxiety which manifested in the form of constant hypervigilance:

I am constantly looking around my shoulder when leaving school. (Participant 1)

The stress and fear of having to look over your shoulder all the time. (Participant 64)

The emotional impact of cyberstalking could be long-lasting as some participants still experienced anxiety when accessing emails or hearing the phone ringing:

I still experience anxiety when going to my inbox. My health has not been the same since. (Participant 81)

I still have anxiety attacks when the phone rings. (Participant 67)

## Depressive Symptoms

Reflecting the fact that anxiety and depression very commonly occur together, profound anxiety was often reported alongside depressive symptoms. For instance, one participant stated she now suffers:

Complex PTSD/depression as a result of the harassment and abuse. (Participant 92)

Depression encompasses a wide array of symptoms including loss of control, low mood, rumination, and feelings of helplessness and hopelessness. Some participants expressed a lack of control over the situation:

You are made to feel with less control of your life. (Participant 54)

I realised then I had lost all control of the situation. A low point. (Participant 14)

Taken together, such cognitions may contribute to the low mood experienced by victims. For others, low mood was triggered by the stalker’s specific tactic:

Her two replies accusing me of all sorts of things I hadn’t ever done made me feel pretty low. (Participant 3)

Low mood is accompanied by negative automatic cognitions, which consequently lead to the emotional elements of depression. In line with this, rumination also arises among victims as one participant stated:

The whole situation occupied my thoughts constantly. (Participant 63)

In addition, feelings of helplessness were prominent amongst victims, for instance,

Impotence at how little I can do is the main emotion I feel. (Participant 55)

I was helpless to defend myself. (Participant 19)

I was also made to feel helpless about the situation. (Participant 64)

Similarly, participants also expressed pessimistic views of the future, such as,

I feel it is something I will never entirely escape. (Participant 53)

He will follow me for the rest of my life and I can do nothing. (Participant 2)

I realised it was a problem fairly early on, but there was nothing I could do about it. (Participant 95)

Thus participants felt unable to change the situation; however, by remaining passive, victims may exacerbate their

depressive symptoms. Taken together, the cyberstalking ordeal leaves victims with a low opinion of the control they have over their own lives and thus, with a pessimistic future outlook.

### *Secondary Emotional Responses*

In addition to the primary emotional consequences detailed above, it appears as though once the acute fear abates, anger or annoyance at the situation is expressed. For instance,

I stopped getting afraid quite some time ago, now I'm more annoyed. (Participant 14)

Despite resolving this amicably four weeks or so ago, there's still an element of trauma for want of a better term, and I still have a reasonably short fuse. (Participant 42)

One participant entertained aggressive thoughts and claimed that she wanted to physically assault her stalker:

Punching him in the face! I know that sounds stupid but it made me so angry and upset. (Participant 21)

In addition to anger and annoyance, other participants felt embarrassed by the situation and such negative self-directed affect may serve to deter victims from seeking help, for instance:

I probably should have entered counselling earlier although I felt too ashamed. (Participant 98)

Embarrassment has made me reluctant to involve the police. (Participant 44)

### *Global Well-Being Consequences*

In addition to specific forms of distress and emotion, some participants acknowledged the breadth of potential well-being consequences of cyberstalking as for some the impact was all-encompassing:

On the whole this stalker has had a huge affect on my life and mental stability. (Participant 63)

When I look back I think I was an emotional wreck who didn't know which way to turn. (Participant 63)

I nearly had a breakdown and I am a psychotherapist. (Participant 99)

It was the worst experience of my life. (Participant 80)

The breadth of potential consequences were also highlighted:

I had a friend who killed himself over the EXACT SAME incidents that I experienced, but he did not leave facebook, and therefore took his own life. (Participant 27)

I am no child, but if this was a child, I could see them driven to suicide because of this kind of bullying. (Participant 61)

Victims also reported that the cyberstalking ordeal affected social, interpersonal, and economic aspects of their lives. More specifically, the profound states of chronic anxiety and low mood evidenced above negatively influenced victims' working lives and impaired their relationships with significant others. Job losses can have damaging effects on individuals' well-being and many participants were required to withdraw from their job:

My only response was to withdraw from the public eye almost entirely—pulling out of several high profile jobs. (Participant 53)

Proving that they can hear my conversations and read my emails and files in a deliberate attempt to intimidate me and "still" me into inactivity which has affected my work and lost me jobs. (Participant 90)

I now have NO email what so ever so makes it hard for me to apply for jobs online. (Participant 17)

In addition to withdrawing from jobs, other victims terminated their use of particular websites, for instance,

I am deaf, and have to leave this site and the many freonds [sic] I have made as it provokes this man. (Participant 9)

Hence some victims lost contact with their online friends as a consequence of curtailing their Internet use, and this may induce feelings of isolation. Similarly, many victims reported that the cyberstalking ordeal placed an undue amount of strain on their relationships with significant others. For instance,

She turned a lot of my friends against me and destroyed one good friendship for several years. (Participant 77)

The resulting consequence is that my husband and I had to cut his family out of our lives for good as it is too painful a reminder of the trauma we went through. (Participant 6)

Taken together, the loss of such significant relationships as a consequence of the ordeal may negatively affect victims' well-being.

### *Lack of Effective Victim Support*

In light of such negative consequences, it is not surprising that victims seek professional help. However, the majority of participants expressed strong dissatisfaction with the lack of support they received in relation to the cyberstalking ordeal. Most victims reported that they were not taken seriously by law enforcement and, in light of this, many victims suggested that an increased awareness of the serious nature of this phenomenon among police officers is warranted:

The police didn't take this seriously enough and I felt really stupid and humiliated. (Participant 19)

It was such a struggle to get the police to take it seriously and convince them it was more than just a few words on websites/emails, texts etc. (Participant 20)

Some police officers even found the situation comical during the years. (Participant 56)

I think law enforcement people should be taking cyber harassment more seriously than they are at the moment. It is not just children and teenagers who are affected by it but also adults and so more attention needs to be given to this issue. (Participant 16)

A preponderance of victims reported that they did not receive any support at all and some victims expressed dissatisfaction with the continuity of support. For instance,

I was left on my own with no support. (Participant 19)

The police never referred me to any support organisations. (Participant 15)

I had little continuity from the police which meant that I was often re-telling all the information to different officers. (Participant 15)

More support from the police would have been really helpful. (Participant 99)

In light of this, participants highlighted that law enforcement personnel should signpost victims to antistalking organizations:

It would have been better if I had received more proactive advice such as putting me onto an anti-stalking organisation, and empowering me to enable me to deal with it. (Participant 64)

If the police don't have time, they could give the victim the contact details of an anti-stalking organisation. (Participant 63)

In addition, it appeared as though the police did not take action if the victim's physical health was not in jeopardy:

Without physical attack, they seem unwilling to do much. (Participant 74)

As long as you are not physically injured, the police do not act. (Participant 44)

In line with this, one participant suggested that law enforcers should be made aware of the extent of psychological damage sustained by victims of cyberstalking:

Police should be made aware of the distress that the victim is put under. Some sort of leaflet would be very useful of best actions to take i.e. do not reply, gather evidence etc. (Participant 59)

More worryingly, some participants believe that the way they were dealt with by professionals directly contributed to escalation of negative impact. For instance,

I do not believe that I would have become ill if the Police had taken effective action at a much earlier stage to protect myself and my children. (Participant 92)

Similarly, in other cases, law enforcers exacerbated the victim's feelings of helplessness:

Reporting him (police, website/service providers) made the situation worse too, because it did nothing and therefore I felt more helpless, and like the system was on his side. (Participant 24)

The police did take me seriously but I was also made to feel helpless about the situation. (Participant 64)

Such negative experiences with law enforcement may add to victims' feelings of vulnerability. Thus, victims may feel further disempowered by this apparent lack of effective support and as a consequence of reporting the ordeal to police without an effective response, they may feel, paradoxically, that the cyberstalker is empowered. Last, some victims were made to feel as though they were at fault:

The police made us feel like we were almost to blame. (Participant 20)

They said it was my fault for putting the information online in teh [*sic*] first place. (Participant 92)

In addition to the lack of support provided by law enforcement personnel, many participants also expressed strong dissatisfaction with the lack of support they received from other expected sources of help. With regard to social networking sites, a preponderance of victims reported that they did not receive any response from Facebook after they reported the ordeal. For instance,

There was no reponse [*sic*] from hotmail or facebook in regards to the breach of security—which totally appalled me that they continued to allow this woman to impersonate and abuse me online. (Participant 6)

More worryingly, some participants believed that as they were not offered any form of protection or help from expected sources, this contributed to the escalation of negative impact:

The university did not do anything to protect me, and I feel that a system that was less lenient would have spared me a lot of distress and psychological abuse. I was given no support throughout the whole thing. (Participant 68)

Even health professional friends washed their hands of me and so in that sense, colluded in the abuse of me. (Participant 77)

Having more friends on my side would have given me strength to take steps to stop things much earlier—and probably before it got so out of hand that I had panic attacks and nervous breakdowns. (Participant 68)

In line with this, many victims suggested that increasing general awareness is vital in combating cyberstalking and the negative emotional consequences. When victims were asked what could have improved the situation, many victims acknowledged the urgent need for increased public awareness, for instance:

People having a better understanding of cyberstalking. My friends, family and employers all reacted very strongly and judged me. (Participant 96)

If my friends had known a little more about what harassment and stalking is, they wouldn't have brushed him off as harmless as long as they did (some of them still do) and refuse to believe that he was a problem for me. (Participant 68)

Even the friends and family who really understand my whole long story still feel obliged to talk to the harasser in social situations leaving me feeling extremely angry that they belittle my experience. (Participant 62)

## Coping

Given the negative impact of cyberstalking outlined above, the specific ways that victims reported coping with cyberstalking were also explored. Coping responses can be seen as attempts to respond to an interpersonal stressor and the emergent themes were organized into restrictive behavioral approaches (e.g., avoiding and ignoring the perpetrator) and nonrestrictive approaches (e.g., confrontational coping, support seeking, and cognitive reframing). These approaches encompass the different coping strategies drawn on by victims to deal with the situation.

Restrictive behavioral approaches predominately include both avoiding and/or ignoring the perpetrator. For instance, most victims modified their usual daily activities through fear of encountering the perpetrator:

I stopped answering all phone calls. I also stopped looking out my window when being attracted to do so. (Participant 74)

I had to modify my day-to-day schedule so I wouldn't see him. (Participant 69)

I also avoided places where I knew he would normally be. (Participant 50)

Similarly, many victims restricted their social media activity to avoid coming into contact with the perpetrator online. Specifically, many victims avoided particular webpages, and changed both their email address and/or privacy settings on social networking sites to limit the perpetrator's access:

I don't go on social networking sites anymore or even own a mobile phone. (Participant 20)

I left the forum and all my blog/other social networking have privacy settings to friends only. (Participant 21)

I changed my email address after a couple of months. (Participant 59)

Therefore, many participants used some form of avoidant coping for short-term relief and although this coping strategy does not appear to improve victims' quality of life, it appears to be effective as, in most cases, it successfully terminated unwanted intrusions:

I quit the internet totally and that pretty much blocked off his communications with me. (Participant 50)

When I stopped using social networking sites, I did not have to be subjected to the abuse that I received on them. (Participant 27)

By adopting this coping strategy, victims appear to be proactively trying to protect themselves and this coping strategy successfully made individuals less accessible to the perpetrator. However, one participant expressed resistance to adopting this coping strategy as, by avoiding particular social media platforms, the victim felt paradoxically that the cyberstalker was given more control:

When I approached an anti-stalking organisation about it, they replied and suggested I stop using the forums, stop my blog or use a different name. I already did that once, and as far as I can see, that's making me act like a victim and playing right into a stalker's hands. I would prefer it if I was the one empowered, rather than the stalker. (Participant 3)

In contrast, other victims took control of the situation by ignoring the perpetrator, for instance:

I ignored the problems which was quite difficult. (Participant 30)

For some victims, adopting this coping strategy also appeared to effectively deal with the unwanted intrusions:

Ignoring him was probably the best response as any response from me appeared to either inflame him or make him happy. (Participant 64)

The only thing that helped was refusing to communicate with him at all. (Participant 67)

Ignoring and not reacting if possible, is quite effective. (Participant 54)

In contrast to taking control by ignoring the perpetrator, other participants took a more agentic stance by directly

confronting the perpetrator. By adopting this coping strategy, victims appeared to be addressing the command imbalance by attempting to regain power, for instance:

I told them to leave me alone. The e-mails stopped but stalking online didn't. (Participant 19)

However, this coping strategy may be psychologically rewarding for the perpetrator and thus, in some cases directly communicating with the perpetrator inflamed the situation, for instance:

Responding did not help. He just learned that the price for talking to me was calling 30+ times in a row. (Participant 67)

Confronting her via email just made her send more abusive emails. (Participant 76)

Any attempt to tell her to stop just makes it worse. She ramps it up even more. (Participant 7)

Moreover, for other victims, an authoritative figure directly contacted the perpetrator. It appears as though when perpetrators are addressed by a figure of authority, this may reduce the victim's vulnerability in the perpetrator's mind as adopting this coping strategy appeared to culminate in desistance, for instance:

When the police finally took action and issued a harassment order things seemed to improve. (Participant 100)

I contacted the head of my college department, as my harasser was in the same major as me, and he interceded. After that the harassment stopped. (Participant 75)

Social support seeking was also evident and primarily included disclosing the situation to friends and family members:

I contacted friends and circulated messages which had been sent privately. They then provided a barrier between myself and the individual. (Participant 22)

By sharing the abuse with a close circle of friends/relatives and dealing with it in journalistic terms, at no time have I become paranoid, despite much anxiety suffered. (Participant 85)

My father wrote him a priority letter threatening him that if he did not desist we would get the police involved. (Participant 69)

However, indirectly communicating with the perpetrator may in some cases inflame the situation, for instance:

Allowing a friend to respond on my behalf inflamed the situation. (Participant 48)

Although for others, this coping strategy was effective:

It only improved after my father rang him to ask him to stop. (Participant 25)

Last, a preponderance of victims adopted a coping strategy known as cognitive reframing. These participants attempted to reframe the meaning of their experiences and tried to understand the perpetrator's behavior by basing it in a framework, for instance:

Even after everything she has done, I don't hate her. I just want her to get some treatment and leave me alone. (Participant 7)

She needs mental health support. I was scared but understand she needs care. (Participant 19)

Here, victims were trying to find a way to construe the ordeal as filled with meaning and these participants did not accept victimhood or blame themselves for the ordeal. Thus, the ability to cognitively reframe thoughts could enable the reestablishment of some emotional control, laying the course to a more resilient path. By empathically representing their stalker as a person in distress and in need of help, a repositioning of their own responsive behavior and stance was enabled. Thus, reframing the experience less as a self-focused emotional ordeal and more in terms of other-focused emotional understanding changes how the victim experiences and reacts to the ordeal placing it in an understandable framework while also making it even less about "blaming" the self. In fact, a preponderance of victims were empathic toward their stalker, stating that such behavior must emerge as a result of a mental health difficulty in the perpetrator. For example,

Worrying emails that obviously came from a mentally ill mind. (Participant 40)

By this time I was aware that he had multiple addictions and appeared delusional. (Participant 93)

The extent to which such representations reduced or exacerbated fear or anxiety could not be extracted from the data however.

## Discussion

### *Findings and Implications*

The thematic analysis of material voluntarily offered within an online survey launched by the NCCR has provided nuanced insights about both the emotional and restrictive lifestyle consequences of cyberstalking, and the experience of care from law enforcement and other professional agencies. The current findings suggest that the emotional impact of cyberstalking predominantly includes comorbid anxiety and depression. Profound states of chronic anxiety and low mood negatively influenced victims' working lives and

impaired their relationships with significant others. Victims employed a wide array of coping strategies to deter perpetrators and manage the negative emotional impact of the unwanted pursuit. Common coping strategies adopted by victims included avoidant coping, ignoring the perpetrator, confrontational coping, support seeking, and cognitive reframing. Unfortunately, when victims sought help, it seems that the way they were dealt with by police officers and significant others increased, rather than decreased, the negative impact of the ordeal.

It appears that the psychological consequences of experiencing cyberstalking are broadly comparable with those of traditional stalking, including depressive symptoms, heightened anxiety levels, and posttraumatic stress responses (Kuehner et al., 2007; Pathé & Mullen, 1997; Purcell et al., 2005). The qualitative findings reported here are also in line with earlier quantitative cyberstalking research which showed that over half of victims reported feelings of helplessness and anxiety (Dreßing et al., 2014). Further to this, the coping strategies employed by victims of cyberstalking are consistent with the typology of common coping strategies offered by Cupach and Spitzberg (2004) as being employed by victims of traditional stalking. For instance, confronting the perpetrator and cognitive reframing reflect “moving toward” coping strategies, avoidant coping reflects “moving away” coping strategies, ignoring the perpetrator reflects “moving inward” coping strategies, and seeking support from external sources reflects “moving outward” coping strategies.

The relationship between cyberstalking victimization and emotional distress is likely to be influenced by the resilience or vulnerabilities of the victims and, as coping strategies have been linked to psychological functioning, they represent viable targets for intervention. The ability to cognitively restructure thoughts may enable resilience as, based on the comments made by our sample, being able to empathically represent the stalker as themselves a distressed person and internally framing their behavior appears to form part of dealing with the ordeal effectively. However, the reports of many victims did not indicate that this cognitive coping strategy was adopted, instead they reported modifying their usual daily activities and restricted their social media activity to avoid coming into contact with the perpetrator. Although this coping strategy successfully made victims less accessible to their stalker, as the Internet has become increasingly important in many facets of life, especially communication and social interaction, there were negative social consequences associated with avoiding the online milieu, such as social disconnectedness and job losses. More specifically, restricting access to social media platforms often separates victims from positive social connections with friends and family, and this may subsequently reduce access to social support and increase feelings of isolation. As coping strategies have the potential to determine the mental health outcomes experienced by victims, coping responses should represent a key

target for therapeutic intervention, and establishing adaptive, cognitive coping strategies may be beneficial in helping victims regain a sense of empowerment and mastery.

### *Lessons for Law Enforcement Personnel*

The current findings also suggest that victims frequently engage with law enforcement personnel to both gain support and to provide evidence for investigation. Victims' feedback about this engagement provides insights for practitioners as currently the support and protection available to victims of cyberstalking seems unreliable and inadequate. Most notably, the victims acknowledged that during the cyberstalking ordeal, a supportive police officer who understands the complex nature of cyberstalking is required as most victims reported that the actions of expected sources of help were ineffectual and often, victims were made to feel as though they were to blame. It is notable that, unlike preferred practice in relation to victims of face-to-face harassment, participants in this survey reported lack of consistency in their dealings with the police. Given the intense distress experienced in response to cyberstalking, parity of practice is clearly needed. Instead, victims reported being questioned by a number of different police officers, and expressed frustration due to this inconsistency. Hence, in future, the number of officers interacting with the victim should be limited to enhance consistency and continuity. Finally, in the limited number of cases where the police did act, the victims were not kept informed about the progress of the case. Thus, a further recommendation is that all victims should be informed as the case progresses according to the protocol. On balance, it is clear that victims of cyberstalking have to deal with a number of additional stressors; first as a direct consequence of the perpetrators' behavior followed by what is viewed as ineffectual support from law enforcement personnel. To minimize the feeling of revictimization, police officers should demonstrate appropriate empathy as instantiated in best practice guidance procedures associated with traditional stalking. To this end, workshops and training courses should be provided to law enforcers to increase awareness of the extent of psychological damage sustained by victims and the importance of treating cyberstalking offenses seriously from first responder. Overall, the process should culminate in a referral to suitable support agencies when necessary.

### *Lessons for Mental Health Professionals*

In line with this, given the extent of psychological damage sustained by victims of cyberstalking, a referral to psychological therapy should be made available for victims when necessary as the current findings demonstrate that the experience prompts negative evaluations about themselves, others, and/or the world. More specifically, a course of cognitive-behavioral therapy focusing on the victim's cognitions may assist in restructuring any morbid perceptions as it is common

for victims of cyberstalking to become hypervigilant and develop a view of the world as unsafe, a view of the self as helpless and to blame, and a view of the future that is hopeless and pessimistic. Thus, restoring the victim's view of himself or herself as a worthwhile individual, and correcting generalized threat-focused evaluations about the world should be of principal importance. In addition, therapists should focus not only on the victim's cognitions but also equally on their avoidance responses/"safety" behaviors. The current findings demonstrate that victims frequently avoid external cues associated with the ordeal, such as the phone ringing, incoming mail, certain websites, and places associated with the perpetrator to prevent becoming overwhelmed with difficult emotions. However, such avoidant coping or "safety" behaviors are often counterproductive as although in the short term, avoidance behaviors will be rewarded by a reduction in distress; in the long term, such behaviors may exacerbate the victim's restrictive behaviors and feelings of isolation, which may lead to detachment. For instance, one participant was advised by law enforcement personnel to restrict their social media activity by withdrawing from a particular website; however, as a consequence, the victim lost contact with his social connections and may have felt paradoxically, that the cyberstalker was empowered. Avoidance may respond to behavioral techniques, which assist victims to gradually resume abandoned daily activities such as answering the phone or addressing incoming mail and manage the associated anxiety. Taken together, interventions should focus on both restructuring any morbid perceptions and teaching victims not to adopt habitual avoidant coping strategies or "safety" behaviors.

### **Limitations**

Despite the practical implications of the current study, there are several limitations that require consideration when interpreting the findings. First, as the survey was disseminated through online channels, those victims with limited access to digital technologies may not be represented, particularly as the current findings demonstrated that it is common for victims to avoid the Internet as a consequence of their cyberstalking ordeal. Second, as the sample consisted of individuals who were self-identified victims, there is potential for bias in the responses. Participants may have already been aware of the NSS as a result of their cyberstalking ordeal. Therefore, the current sample may be considered unrepresentative of cyberstalking victims in the general population. The sample may have recruited those more aware and distressed victims, which may have influenced the current analysis. Nevertheless, these criticisms can in part be balanced against the number of responders. Equally, it is important to highlight that the reports of the victims in this particular survey may be an underestimation of the extent of negative consequences of cyberstalking. This is because the survey questions did not explicitly ask participants to reflect on their emotional

responses. As the data were extracted from a series of broad open-ended questions not tailored specifically toward mental health and well-being, the analysis is an emerging, unprompted story and this therefore is considered one of the key strengths of the current study. Thus, using the open-ended questions enabled an untainted and potentially more accurate story to be elicited and adopting this approach also enabled those critical aspects of mental health and well-being to emerge.

### **Future Directions**

Based on the sheer number of victims reporting or suspecting the presence of psychological difficulties in their stalkers, further research should investigate the link between mental health difficulties and cyberstalking behavior. Qualitative data from the perpetrators of this crime would be extremely effective in ascertaining the nature of cyberstalking and, in particular, the association between life experiences, mental health difficulties, and cyberstalking behavior. In line with this, some victims were empathic toward their stalker by acknowledging that their perpetrator needs mental health support. Further research could therefore explore gender differences among cyberstalking victims as, in line with the fear of crime literature (e.g., Warr & Ellison, 2000), female cyberstalking victims may be more likely to express fear for themselves whereas male cyberstalking victims may be more likely to express concern for their stalker. Last, as revenge porn is becoming increasingly prevalent (Kamal & Newman, 2016), future research should qualitatively examine the narratives of revenge porn victims, specifically with regard to the mental health and well-being consequences as well as the coping strategies used to manage the ordeal effectively. The authors are currently investigating this issue as to date, this phenomenon has received very little empirical attention.

### **Conclusion**

To summarize, this study is the first to qualitatively examine both the negative emotional impact of cyberstalking and individuals' coping responses. Data analysis indicates the extent of the psychological and social impairments experienced by victims of cyberstalking behavior and highlights that this phenomenon should be an immediate concern to both legal and mental health professionals alike. There is scope for improvement in how victims are dealt with and increasing general awareness is vital. It is noteworthy that the stalking threat does not have to be physical to cause psychological damage, and in this, the findings appear to consolidate previous results of quantitative studies of cyberstalking, such as those presented by Dreßing et al. (2014). The relationship between cyberstalking victimization and emotional distress is likely to be influenced by the resilience or vulnerabilities of the victims and, as coping strategies have been linked to psychological functioning,

they represent viable targets for intervention. Specifically, the ability to cognitively restructure thoughts may enable resilience as being able to empathically represent the stalker as themselves a distressed person appears to form part of dealing with the ordeal effectively. However, many victims frequently engaged in avoidance/“safety” behaviors in attempt to both avoid feelings of distress regarding their victimization and avoid coming into contact with the perpetrator. Consequently, interventions should focus on getting victims to not habitually rely on avoidant coping strategies in addition to restructuring any morbid perceptions. Intervening before avoidance or “safety” behaviors become ingrained and fostering adaptive cognitive coping strategies may enable victims to regain a sense of empowerment. In sum, as technology continues to develop, cyberstalking rates will continue to rise, therefore, a more coherent approach to understanding and addressing this nuisance behavior is necessary to prevent cyberstalking from occurring and also to mitigate the effects after such cybervictimization has occurred.

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