

RESEARCH ARTICLE/ARAŞTIRMA MAKALESİ

A field study on cyber stalking among university students

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Abstract

Internet and technology devices not only connected people around the world but also opened new ways of cybercrime including cyberstalking. Ease in accessibility of social media brought criminals to the online world and facilitated the opportunities to do crimes in the cyber world. As the internet and social media are becoming inseparable parts of human life, it is important to make these environments safe for everyone, especially youth who are driven by social media the most. Understanding the prevalence of cyberstalking will help in finding ways to combat it and also to make a safer cyber environment.

Aim: The study aims to examine the prevalence level of cyberstalking in university students between the ages of 18-30. This study will also assess the difference of cyber stalking prevalence between men and women.

Materials and Methods: A preliminary investigation was made on the prevalence level of cyber stalking in university students between the age of 18-30. Cyber Obsessive Stalking Scale (Siber Obsesif Takip Ölçeği (SOTÖ)) was used to examine the stalking behaviours that people are exposed to while using electrical devices. While examining research participants, their age, gender, their anxiety about cyberstalking and if they had experienced cyberstalking or seen this behaviour in people around them were taken into account.

Conclusion: Developing technology has caused criminals to move to the online world. The severity of the situation will be brought to light by revealing the prevalence of victimization through studies. The prevalence level can direct researchers and technology developers to create safer online environments.

Keywords: Stalking, cyberstalking, cyber violence, violence, cyber

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1. INTRODUCTION

Stalking is the act of following and harassing another person. The status of stalking as a crime is relatively new, having emerged in the early 1990s, but the behaviours that characterise stalking have changed with the development of technology. In the early 21st century, the explosive growth of social media has resulted in a new line in stalking behaviour. As social interaction is increasingly taking place in the digital world, traditional definitions of stalking are changing with the advancement of technology (Best, 2023).

A frequent threat or harassment sent via email or other computer-based communication that would cause someone to be concerned about their safety is known as cyberstalking (Strawhun et al., 2013).

Cyberstalking is the act of receiving continuous and unwanted messages from someone while being on the Internet. It can involve any number of incidents, including threats, libel, defamation, sexual harassment or other actions to control, influence or intimidate their targets (Sammons & Cross, 2017). These acts are repeated over time, which create fear in the threatened person and involve a violation of the person's right to privacy (Spitzberg and Hoobler, 2002). Stalking a person online can also involve stalking the target person in real life (Sammons & Cross, 2017).

The act of stalking can be carried out in certain places and stages. The concept of stalking includes following the victim on the internet, trying to find out where and what they are doing, sending e-mails or writing letters many times, disturbing the victim by calling them constantly if they have a phone, scrutinising the victim's profile on social media, using complimenting or threatening language against the victim, receiving gifts inappropriately, threatening to spread the victim's personal information, following the victim in places such as workplaces and shopping malls, and at the highest point, applying physical violence to the victim (McFarlane & Bocij 2003).

Cyberstalking can be perpetrated by a person closely known or professionally acquainted with

the target or by a stranger (Sheridan & Grant, 2007; Baum, 2011). The perpetrator can be an ex-girlfriend or ex-boyfriend, an ex-friend, an ex-employee or an acquaintance who wants to control, possess, intimidate, threaten or actually

harm the target. In most cases, cyberstalkers have access to certain personal information, accounts, inboxes or other private information related to their target's daily routine, lifestyle or life choices (Reyns, Henson, & Fisher, 2011). With advances

in communication devices, services such as text messaging, instant messaging, and email provide the advantage of anonymity to persistent cyberstalkers (Best, 2023).

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1. Sample

The sample of the study consisted of 251 students. Of the participants, 149 were female and 96 were male and 6 were other.

2.2. Data Collection Tools

Personal Information Form: A personal information form was created and used by the researchers in order to determine the socio-demographic characteristics of the participants (gender, frequency of victimization, anxiety thoughts of participants)

This review may give an idea to the researcher that there may be a cause-effect relationship; but it certainly cannot be interpreted as cause and effect.

Siber Obsesif Takip Ölçeği (SOTÖ) was used to examine the stalking behaviours that people are exposed to when using electrical devices. The survey was distributed both online and physically to the participants. The study participants were examined based on their age, gender, concerns about cyber stalking, and whether they had experienced cyber stalking or had seen this behaviour around them.

2.3. Operation

Data were collected both face-to-face and via Google Forms survey method. Permission to

participate in the research was obtained through the Informed Consent Form from the participants between the age of 18-30. Participants completed Personal Information Form and Cyber Obsessive Stalking Scale (Siber Obsesif Takip Ölçeği (SOTÖ))

2.4. Data Analysis

IBM SPSS 25 (The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) was used for data analysis. Descriptive Analysis test was performed.

3. RESULT

The gender of the participants was 149 female, 96 male and 6 other.

Table 1. Frequency of Victim Participants

Frequency of exposure to cyberstalking				
	Once	1-4 defa	5-9 defa	10 ve üzeri defa
N=99	29	49	9	12

Exposed to Cyber Stalking (N=99)

Table 2. Gender of All Participants and Anxiety Thoughts Towards Cyber Tracking.

Anxious thoughts about cyberstalking					
			Hiç	Bazen	Sık Sık
Gender	Female	149	25	105	19
	Male	96	50	40	6
	Other	6	1	3	2
	Total	251			

Table 3. Scale Form

	None	Once	2-3	4-5	More than 5
Sending messages of influence (e.g., poems, songs, electronic greeting cards, praise, etc.).	114	24	56	19	37
Sending exaggerated messages of affection (e.g., expressions of affection that imply a more intimate relationship than the existing one, etc.).	123	27	54	11	35
Sending very specific messages (e.g. giving inappropriate information about life, body, family, hobbies, sexual experiences, etc.).	134	41	44	10	21

Sending overly needy or overly demanding messages (e.g., pressuring to meet, persistently offering to meet, arguing for another chance, etc.)	143	32	37	9	29
Don't sabotage your reputation (e.g., spread rumors about what you've done to your friends, family, partner, etc.).	185	35	19	4	7
Sabotaging your reputation in the school/work environment (e.g., spreading rumors about you, your relationships, or your activities on organizational networks, electronic bulletin boards, etc.)	209	22	13	3	3
"Bugging" your car, home, office (e.g. placing a eavesdropping or recording device, etc.)	233	1	3	1	0
Changing your electronic identity or profile (for example, breaking into your system and changing your signature, personal information or how you identify yourself, etc.)	195	35	18	1	1
Hacking your electronic identity or profile (e.g. using your identity in chat rooms, bulletin boards, pornographic sites or singles sites, etc.)	213	23	12	2	0
Directing other people towards you in a threatening way (e.g., making speeches on your behalf and suggesting risky sexual behavior, fantasizing about kidnapping someone, etc.)	215	21	13	1	0
Stalking you after first meeting online (e.g. stalking you while you're driving, at school, at work, at the gym, or at social events, etc.)	199	21	16	6	8
Breaking into (trying to break into) someone's life after the first meeting online (for example, unexpectedly appearing at work, in front of the door, in the parking lot, trying to force a conversation, etc.)	208	28	11	0	3
Threatening you after first meeting online (for example, threatening sexual intercourse, rape, physical coercion, or harming your property, pets, family, or friends)	288	15	5	0	1

Online Harm you after first meeting you (for example, meeting you through online dating sites and then stalking, harassing, or otherwise monitoring you)	232	12	6	0	0
Stalking you after an initial meeting online (for example, meeting you through online dating sites (or as an acquaintance) and then harassing, harassing, or otherwise stalking you).	196	35	14	3	0

4. DISCUSSION

This study investigated the prevalence rate of cyberstalking in university students between the ages of 18-30 and the difference of prevalence rate between men and women, the result of the study demonstrated the high prevalence rate of cyberstalking among university students, especially the rates were higher for women. Similarly, in another study by Dreßing et al. (2014), a notably greater proportion of women than men reported having experienced cyberstalking. Our study also looked for the participant's concerns about experiencing cyberstalking and a high number of participants sometimes felt concerned about experiencing cyberstalking.

Like in the case of offline stalking, most victims of cyberstalking know the person who is stalking them. Cyberstalking happens in approximately equal numbers of offline social connections and includes the practice known as "ex-partner stalking" in over 35% of cases (Dreßing et al., 2014). In the case of our study 18% of the participants who experienced cyberstalking knew the perpetrator and 22% of the participants experienced cyberstalking from unknown people.

The prevalence rate of cyberstalking for this study was 40%. Similarly in another study by Maran and Begotti (2019) the results demonstrated the high frequency of cyberstalking. More than 46% of the sample, they discovered, had been the victim of cyberstalking. Moreover researchers also indicated that victims had greater depression and anxiety ratings than non-victims. Specifically, compared to victims of cyberstalking alone and non-victims, victims of cyberstalking

who had previously been victimised in the past in their lives showed higher signs of depression and anxiety. These findings demonstrated how victims' quality of life is negatively impacted when solutions are not provided (Maran & Begotti, 2019).

In another study researchers indicated that, depending on the type of cyberstalking behaviours, the prevalence of victimisation from cyberstalking ranged from 39.92% to 66.76%. The results revealed that the prevalence of harassment and annoyance, posting false information, sending sexual material, pretending to be a victim, trying to disable your computer, keeping an eye on your profile, sending threatening emails or letters, and writing offensive or threatening comments to the victim in chat rooms or instant messaging sites was 66.76%, 39.92%, 64.64%, 60.00%, 57.20%, 61.30%, 64.84%, and 49.18%, respectively (Abu-Ulbeh et al., 2021). In the case of this study, our result indicated that prevalence of sending very private messages (giving inappropriate information about the body, family, sexual experiences, etc.), sending excessively demanding and excessively needy messages (pressuring and instantly asking to meet), to sabotage the target's reputation in cyberspace, being followed and harassed after the first meeting in cyberspace, and sending exaggerated love messages (expressions of endearment that imply a more intimate relationship than the existing one, etc.) were 46.53%, 43.67%, 26.53%, 22%, 51.43% respectively.

Contrary to our result in this study researchers did not find a significant relation between gender and cyberstalking victimisation but the result showed a significant relation between age and cyberstalking victimisation (Abu-Ulbeh et al., 2021). According to the study's findings, students who engage in particular online activities more often may become victims of cyberstalking. Additionally, students who display attractiveness online and reveal personal information that makes them seem like good targets for cyberstalking will become victims of cyberstalking (Abu-Ulbeh et al., 2021).

In another study by Reynolds et al. (2012) the

findings were similar to our results and it showed that more than 40% of the participants have ever been victims of cyberstalking. According to this assessment, cyberstalking could be more common than traditional stalking. Due to the fact that the sample was limited to college students between the ages of 18 and 24, who frequently have free time and access to electronic communication, the age of sample respondents may assist to explain the high incidence of victimisation. Furthermore, statistically significant disparities in victimisation imply that victims of cyberstalking who were female, non-White, non-Heterosexual, and non-Single suffered more overall victimisation from cyberstalking than victims who were men, White, heterosexual, and single (Reyns et al., 2012). The findings also revealed that 44% of individuals who experienced cyberstalking were victims of strangers. With the exception of harassment, the stranger group represented the victim-offender connection that was most commonly mentioned in all forms of electronic pursuit. It is crucial to note that, despite the stranger category being the most commonly mentioned relationship between the victim and the offender, it was more usual in every instance for the victim and the offender to know one another in some capacity (Reyns et al., 2012).

The prevalence rate of cyberstalking is demonstrated high in this study and other similar studies, especially this rate was higher for women. Taking the negative impacts of cyberstalking on the well-being of people into account, it is important to understand the reasons for the high prevalence rate of cyberstalking and finally finding ways to prevent this issue and make cyberspace safe for everyone.

5. SUGGESTION

The high rates of cyberstalking prevalence between university students is very concerning and it points to the need of creating a safer online environment. Research should be done for preventing cyberstalking and finding solutions for this global problem.

Most of the participants in this study were students from Istanbul. Therefore, further research is needed in other cities of Turkey

and around the world, to investigate the prevalence rate of cyberstalking. Moreover, women participants were higher in number in this study, which might have had an impact on the prevalence rate between men and women, therefore, other studies are needed with equal numbers of women and men participants.

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