



Cyberstalking in Intimate Partner Relationships

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Introduction

- Contrary to popular perception, most cyberstalking victims are stalked by someone they know and have previously met offline (Cavezza & McEwan, 2014; Dreßing, Bailer, Anders, Wagner, & Gallas, 2014; Groban, 2016; Sheridan & Grant, 2007).
- 52% of cyberstalkers are current or former intimate partners, with acquaintances accounting for 28% (Cavezza & McEwan, 2014).
- Only 20% of cyberstalkers are a stranger to their victim (Cavezza & McEwan, 2014).
- Intimate partner cyberstalking (IPCS) is characterized by the use of technology to control, intimidate, and isolate an intimate partner through a “pattern of repeated and unwanted attention, harassment, contact, or any other course of conduct directed at a specific person that would cause a reasonable person to feel fear” (Groban, 2016; United States Department of Justice [USDOJ], 2016).

Approximately 60.8% of female victims and 43.5% of male victims of stalking are stalked by a current or former intimate partner (Groban, 2016)

Case Example

In *United States v. Sayer*, 748 F.3d 425, a man was convicted of cyberstalking after impersonating his ex-fiancé online and posting fake requests for rape fantasy fulfillment, which included identifying physical information, her home address, and informed male respondents that any resistance from the victim was simply part of the “act”. Numerous men showed up at the victim’s home (Groban, 2016).

Statement of Problem

- Although domestic violence rates have decreased considerably in the past 20 years in the U.S., technology has given abusive partners new means of harassing and terrorizing victims (Smoker & March, 2017; Truman & Morgan, 2014).
- The confluence of intimate partner violence (IPV) and technology is uniquely dangerous as cyberstalking has become an increasingly effective tool in establishing and maintaining control and power imbalances in relationships (Grobar, 2016; King-Ries, 2011).
- Minimal research has investigated the role of cyberstalking in adult intimate partner relationships and the role cyberstalking might have on intimate partner violence.

Types of Intimate Partner Cyberstalking (IPCS)

- Over half (55.3%) of female stalking victims receive unwanted voice and text messages, and 54.5% receive unwanted phone calls (Groban, 2016).
- Domestic abusers may monitor victim communications by reading personal emails, texts, or online postings, and checking call logs.
- Vehicle GPS, cell phones, and social media can be used to track an individual’s movements (Southworth, Finn, Dawson, Fraser, & Tucker, 2007).
- By impersonating a victim online, a domestic abuser can damage a victim’s reputation and relationships with friends and family (Logan, 2010).
- “Sextortion” occurs when a victim is threatened with the release of private or sensitive information unless he or she provides sexual favors, intimate photos, or other demands are met (USDOJ, 2016).
- The release of sexually explicit photos or video of an ex-intimate partner without their consent is known as “revenge porn” (USDOJ, 2016).

Relevant Research

- Intimate partner stalking is correlated with increased rates of intimate partner femicide.
- 76% of women killed by an intimate partner had been stalked by their partner (Groban, 2016).

Intimate partner cyberstalking is associated with increased rates of physical violence
(Logan, 2010)

- Despite the high prevalence and violent nature of cyberstalking, there is no comprehensive, current national data on the magnitude of cyberstalking in the U.S. (Catalano, 2012).
- Cyberstalking and offline stalking are believed to be substantially underreported (USDOJ, 2016).
- Research on cyberstalking in dating relationships has largely focused on college students.
- College students and college-aged students are at higher risk of IPCS than the general population (Marganski & Melander, 2018; Smoker & March, 2017).
- 73% of university students in an intimate relationship report experiencing IPCS in the past 12 months.
- Of the students who experience IPCS, 56% also report being physically abused by the same partner during the past 12 months (Marganski & Melander, 2018).
- In the general population, women under the age of 30 are at a significantly higher risk of being cyberstalked by an intimate partner than women over the age of 30 or men of either age range (Lenhart, Ybarra, Zickuhr, & Price-Feeney, 2016).
- Recent research has demonstrated that cyberstalking victims experience serious personal, psychological, and medical consequences from being cyberstalked (Dreßing et al., 2014; Sheridan & Grant, 2007; Short, Linford, Wheatcroft, & Maple, 2014; Short, Guppy, Hart, & Barnes, 2015)

Forensic Implications

- Despite state and federal laws, and clear evidence of harm, cyberstalking cases are rarely prosecuted.
- Although there is no publicly available data on federal cyberstalking charges or convictions, sources indicate that only 10 federal prosecutions of cyberstalking occurred between 2009 – 2012 (Citron, 2014).
- As technology advances, domestic abusers find increasingly sophisticated methods to stalk, harass, intimidate, and isolate their intimate partners while avoiding detection (King-Ries, 2011).
- Technology has increased the challenge of identifying, investigating, and prosecuting cyberstalkers as abusers can hide their identity online (King-Ries, 2011).
- To address the growing IPCS crisis, law enforcement must first recognize the seriousness of digital domestic violence.
- Adequate training is necessary to fully understand the substantial physical and psychological risks digital abuse poses to victims (King-Ries, 2011).
- Further, cyberstalking should be treated with the same seriousness as offline stalking, with comparable consequences for perpetrators.

Conclusion

In a society that increasingly normalizes loss of autonomy and privacy, technology has provided a way for IPV offenders to intimidate and harass victims in a manner that can be difficult to prove, prosecute, or prevent (Marganski & Melander, 2018). Intimate partner cyberstalking may represent a new, covert way to perpetrate violence that, at least initially, does not leave physical evidence. Intimate partner cyberstalking should be carefully considered as a potentially new and life-threatening form of intimate partner violence, and quite possibly a modern resurgence of traditional domestic violence.