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‘...her aim was to ruin my reputation’: Cyberstalking Victimization Experiences among University Students in Nigeria

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Abstract

While global knowledge about cyberstalking is growing, intellectual engagement of the phenomenon in Nigeria is still at infancy and focused mainly on awareness. Scanty attention has however been paid to the nature of victimization experiences and its effects on victims. Against this background, this study investigated the nature and effects of cyberstalking among victims at the University of Ibadan. Using purposive and snowball sampling techniques, 30 victims of cyber stalking were subjected to in-depth interview. Results indicated that their active online activities and the anonymity guaranteed in cyberspace contributed to their victimization. While one of the social and psychological effects of cyberstalking is social estrangement of victims, most victims failed to report to the Police owing to fear of repeat victimization and lack of trust in the policing institution. Instead, they accessed informal coping mechanisms from friends and family.

Keywords: Cyberstalking, harassment, social network sites, cyberspace, victimization

Introduction

The cyberspace has become a confluence of conformists and deviants, including criminals who exploit the loopholes provided by actors who lack etiquette. With the democratization of the Information and Communications Technology (ICT), there has been increase in the number of people using the internet, with new dimensions of crimes and victims as well. Put differently, the increasing surfing of the net occasioned by increasing access to communication technologies has produced mixed outcomes: positive and

negative. Out of the unintended consequences of the internet is the growing rate of and dimensions of cyberstalking. Comprising a corpus of illegal online behaviours, cybercrimes such as cyberstalking has created new forms of victims. Beyond the losses usually incurred by victims, cyberstalking also threatens national security system. This explains why concerns are being raised about how technologies encourage or aid online and offline stalking (Woodlock *et al.*, 2019). The nature of cyberstalking as a social phenomenon constantly evolves alongside advancements in technology.

Cyberstalking involves using electronic or internet-able devices to harass or stalk a person. It may also involve the communication by intimidation and other forms of threats (Bocij, 2002). Accordingly, to Reyns *et al.* (2018), a victim of cyberstalking is someone who experiences insecurity and fear arising from recurring chase on the internet, email, or other electronic communication. Available studies have focused on victimization risk, demographic profiles as well as on victim-offender relationships (Welsh and Lavole, 2012; Smoker and March, 2017; Short *et al.*, 2015). Todd *et al.* (2020) examined how technology influences domestic homicide and cyberstalking. They found supporting evidence that technology and social media facilitate these behaviours. In another study, March *et al.* (2020) investigated how personality traits affect intimate partner cyberstalking (IPC). They found that those who exhibited control behavior in their relationship are more likely to be engaged in IPC. Women have been more likely predisposed to do IPC (Smoker and March, 2017) to accomplish bonding (Purcell, Pathe & Mullen, 2001) or initiate a relationship (Duntley & Buss, 2012). In relation to cyberstalking experiences among university students, studies have showed that about 3.4% students experience cyberstalking every year with others reporting it as 9%. However, what is interesting is the submission that a little below 50% of university students would be cyberstalked in their life existence (Reyns *et al.*, 2018; Kraft and Wang, 2010; Reyns *et al.*, 2011).

Cyberstalking study is very much at infancy in Nigeria. A study by Ndubueze, Hussein and Sarki (2017) examined awareness of cyberstalking among university students and found that although majority was aware, they did not consider it a big offence. Much attention of scholars has been concentrated on different aspects of cyber fraud, such as internet theft, social organization of internet fraud, cybercrime, cyberspiritualism and National Security in Nigeria (Adebusuyi, 2008; Laura, 1995; Tade and Aliyu, 2011; Tade, 2013; Tade 2019). There is therefore the need to investigate victimization experiences of cyberstalked victims. Understanding their victimization experiences and its nature will provide insights into the nature of this crime in Nigeria and how it can be prevented.

Cyberstalking is capable of ruining marriages, causing death, economic loss and social estrangement. For instance, Nigerian Nollywood actor, Yul Edochie alerted the public to the harassment by a gay stalker who alleged an interest in him. The fear that the stalker might carry out his threat to damage his reputation made him raise the alert. Edochie feared that the message of the

gay stalker on his twitter handle was capable of destroying his marriage¹. Top Nigerian actor and politician, Desmond Elliot, experienced cyberstalking too. While these few cases have been reported in Nigerian newspapers, there is gap in knowledge in relation to what factors are responsible for its occurrence in Nigeria². In filling this gap, we examine the nature of cyberstalking and its effect on the victims. Considering the fact that the victim is one of the decision makers in a crime episode (Fissel, 2018), understanding their experiences will unpack the nature of cyberstalking and its associated effects.

Method

This study employs exploratory design and involved students and staff who confessed to have experienced cyberstalking at the University of Ibadan. Using purposive and snowball sampling techniques, a total of 17 male and 13 female victims were subjected to in-depth interviews. Their ages range between 20 and 55 years. Each interview lasted for 30 minutes. Some of the respondents betrayed their emotions while narrating their experiences. We saw such emotional outburst as a reflection of the extent of the emotional trauma experienced via cyberstalking. The recorded interviews were transcribed and coded for words which fuse to form themes such as 'the nature of cyberstalking', 'psychological and social effects of cyberstalking on victims', 'coping mechanisms employed by victims', and 'actions taken by victims'. The data were then subjected to thematic analysis.

Nature of cyberstalking

By nature of cyberstalking, we identified certain characteristics peculiar to the cyberstalking experienced by our participants to be able to narrow the nature of cyberstalking to either be vindictive or intimate. Vindictive cyberstalking is characterized by the rage deployed in stalking their victims. By its nature vindictive cyberstalking is usually motivated by ill feeling, hatred and meanness. Our participants stated that their stalkers exhibited some sort of malicious jealousy and anger and desired to dent their image. A male victim stated thus:

...the stranger was sending disturbing messages to my friends on my Facebook list intentionally to ruin my reputation and to make me lose the department election. (*A male victim /IDI/Student*)

¹<http://thenet.ng/2015/05/pete-edochies-son-yul-cries-out-again-over-gay-stalker/> (accessed 7-10-2017).

²Apparently reacting to the phenomenon, Nigeria enacted a law that captures cyberstalking in 2015. The law prescribes a fine of not more than N7,000,000.00 or not more than 3 years or both.

Intimate cyberstalking is caused by the desire to get the attention or become emotionally attached to the victim. Sometimes it could be out of passion to be intimate with their target. This is why they use all available electronic means to follow their targets and send messages which contain information about where the victim lives, and her routines and this induces fear in the victim. A female victim explained:

He keeps sending me messages that he is interested and that he loves me. It was getting too much and annoying. I just wished it could stop. In fact, he went further by posting things directly to my wall, on my personal page, my timeline saying things like he is in love with me. He started threatening me that if I don't go out with him anything could happen. Well, that's the kind of harassment I went through. When it was getting out of hand, I deactivated my account and, still, I was scared for my safety thinking he is keeping a close watch on me. (*A female victim /IDI/Student*)

Another person stated that:

A strange number sent me sweet and romantic messages on my WhatsApp, the message kept coming in as if the girl knows me. When I replied her messages, asking who she was, and I checked her display picture, the face didn't look familiar to me but along the line we became friends by exchanging messages. She said she is interested in knowing me more intimately which I didn't like. When I kept ignoring her messages, she started stalking me with calls and messages to get me angry. (*A male victim/IDI/Student*)

Being turned down is what the cyberstalker cannot accept and this is why they continue pestering the lives of their victims with anonymous identities. Most of the participants indicated that they did not know or have an idea of the identity of their stalker. More than half of the participants reported that their stalkers were strangers or someone they did not know. Others stated that they knew who the stalkers were. Some were friends while another was described as ex-boyfriend of the victim. To unveil their cyberstalkers, some victims had to conduct discreet investigations.

The Internet allows people to play with different identities. While some display their real identities in cyberspace, others simply use unreal names and images with no information to trace them. Such anonymity which Internet communication enables is what cyberstalkers leverage on by not supplying real names, address, and profile pictures among others. This makes them believe that they cannot be caught or unveiled as they unleash stalking behaviour against their targets.

Even though she refused to disclose her identity (name), she disclosed that she belonged to my department. I informed my friends about the stalking because her aim was to ruin my reputation. (*A male victim/IDI/student*)

Arising from the above, it is safe to argue that the Internet provides a safe haven for anonymity which provides opportunity for cyberstalking behaviours and victimization. How then do the online behaviours of cyberstalking victims contribute to their experiences?

'I spend 18 hours daily online': Online behavior of cyberstalked victims

One common characteristic of our participants is their online active behaviours. This online active behavior increased their susceptibility to be stalked and their online information can become useful to a cyberstalker. Most of our participants spend considerable hours online. A female victim stressed this.

I spend 18 hours daily online because my mobile data is always on, this makes me chat, reply messages from friends. Even when I am receiving lectures, I still communicate with my friends, I check my Facebook account every 40mins to get updates from my friends and to check uploaded photos from friends. (*A female victim/IDI/Student*)

This regular usage of the internet increases the vulnerability to cyberstalking. Our participants have their profiles on social network sites with complete information such as pictures of self, boyfriend/girlfriend, friend and family members, religious belief, interest and activities, and their full name. Very few reported not using their real names. Also, other details like age, address, schools attended and phone contacts were displayed online. All research participants gave similar reasons for uploading their personal information online. This is to allow friends to be in touch with them, which indicate the type of information they want others to know about them.

I have my name, e-mail, schools attended, phone numbers, where I did my NYSC, so that people can know where I am, because of long term friend that might want to contact, or chat me up. (*A female victim/IDI/Student*)

On social networking sites details of their personal interests and values are exposed and can be used by a cyberstalker to victimize. What social network group do our participants belong? All of them are frequent users of-Facebook, BBM, Twitter, WhatsApp and Instagram among others. Interestingly a larger chunk of our participants got stalked through Facebook showing a somewhat popularity and the volume of information available on this platform.

My account on Facebook was hacked and the hacker was using my account to send pornographic video and nude pictures to my friends on my friend list on Facebook. A friend of mine called and warned me to stop sending pornographic videos to his page. (A male victim/IDI/Student/UI)

Another respondent stated that:

He got my phone contact on my Facebook page and started harassing me with calls, extortions and threat followed. (A female victim/IDI/Student)

What these narratives imply is that the stalkers can negatively construct an individual's cyberspace activities and broadcast same using one's online network of relations.

'he kept threatening to locate me': effects of cyberstalking on victims

Cyberstalking produces different effects on their victims. Social outcomes included disrupted online behaviour and social relationship with friends, avoidance behaviours and reluctance to add strangers to their list of online friends and contacts. A variety of reasons were adduced for being stalked. For instance, a respondent attributed her victimization to the cyberstalker's jealousy and spitefulness.

Because I refused to date him, he downloaded my picture from my WhatsApp display picture photo-shopped it and he put beards on my face and hair on my chest in the picture and posted it to his friends, making mockery of me online. Aside this he kept threatening to trace and locate me where I live. (A female /IDI/student)

Effects of cyberstalking on victims vary from person to person but a majority of the respondents confirmed that they experienced psychological effects. These include worry, confusion, disappointment, irritation, fright, feeling of betrayal among others. On threat and safety issue, a victim explains:

Since I blocked him online, he became furious. He calls around 8pm and 9pm at night when am alone this shows he was always monitoring my every move, It was something that really affected me because he will call in the morning, call in the night, every day. It affected me psychologically. At a point I got scared and was worried. (A female victim /IDI/Student/UI)

Another victim affirmed

I became depressed and withdrawn from my friends. It was so just disturbing why wouldn't he want to reveal his identity, why does he choose to destroy my reputation. (*A female victim /IDI/Student/UT*)

Another male victim stated that:

It affected my social relationship online because I decided not to add strange people anymore unlike before. (*A male victim /IDI/Student*)

Another female victim explained that:

I stopped making friends with strangers who I don't recognize, if any strange person- asks to be my friend, I simply ignore them or better still block them on any of my social network sites. I no longer form familiarity as I have realized that the online atmosphere is a dangerous place to make new friends. (*A female victim/IDI/student*)

We indicated above, cyberstalking has conscripted our participants to adjust their online behavior and offline interactions. What are the mechanisms deployed to cope with cyberstalking?

'I talked with my friend, my brother and my girlfriend': mechanisms for coping with cyberstalking

Victims seek out close friends to discuss the distress of the experience and to seek for advice. Informal networks have proved useful in dealing with the problems of cyberstalking stalking by leveraging on the support from relations and friends.

I discussed it with my sister and few friends and I took to their advice which helped. (*A female victim/IDI/Student*)

Another respondent added;

I talked to my friend, my brother and my girlfriend. Their advice helped me. (*A male victim/IDI/Student*)

The phenomenon of cyberstalking has affected many people. Most of these people do not know who to report to, and the actions to take to prevent a re-

occurrence. Although law on cyberstalking has been enacted with punishment, the lack of confidence in the police, as stated by one of the participants, hold them back from reporting cases of cyberstalking especially so as not to be re-victimized by the police.

Another respondent added;

I did not report at the police station because I did not think the police can offer any help. They are not even educated to handle all these online stuffs. (*A male victim /IDI/student*)

A female victim stated thus:

There is no awareness on how people can use phone or internet to harass people or to trail them. It's something that we just watch in foreign films. I think there has not been any awareness on people that are being trailed. I, have actually not read it somewhere that this thing, maybe, I should have called the police. I don't trust policemen. (*A female victim /IDI/Student*)

Above shows that victims would rather use informal supports than report to formal agencies like the police because of lack of trust and fear of being re-victimised.

Discussion of findings and conclusion

The nature of cyberstalking examined in this study is in relation to the motive behind cyberstalking behavior or put differently, the nature of cyberstalking is oriented towards what the stalker intends to achieve which such behavior. In this study, we categorized the natures of cyberstalking into two: vindictive and intimate. In the case of the former, the stalker is jealous and spiteful while in the case of the latter, the stalker is interested in emotional relationship with the person being stalked. Perpetrators were mostly strangers who used the anonymity of the cyberspace to stalk their victims. Critical to the cyberstalking victimization experiences of our participants is their online behaviours. As indicated, the participants are active on the cyberspace which increases their susceptibility to being targeted for stalking (see also Finn, 2004; Griffiths, 2000).

This is why Internet active persons have been advised not to lavish their details online because of its unintended consequences such as being victimized. The information posted online by participants constituted part of what was used in stalking them. Also, it has also been found that using profile pictures could increase the vulnerability of people to being stalked online because they are easier targets than individuals who do not have any profile pictures through

which they can be easily identified and monitored. While not the sole cause of cyberstalking, social media activities enhance the likelihood of being victimized and also precipitate online deviant behaviours (Gross and Acquisti, 2005, p. 36).

The study found that cyberstalking produces different effects on their victims ranging from depression, withdrawal, reluctance to add people to their contact or network list and avoidance behavior. This finding aligns with existing studies. As a component of cybervictimisation, cyberstalking has been found to elicit fear, distress, concern and feeling of helplessness (Nobles *et al.*, 2014) and could lead to withdrawal (Brown *et al.*, 2017), isolation from groups and functions (Short *et al.*, 2015).

To cope with the effects of cyberstalking, participants relied on their informal networks, friends and family. Begotti and Maran (2019) stated that victims may seek help from family, friends, partners or report to the police as options to cope with cyberstalking. In his study, Fissel (2018) investigated how victims of cyberstalking report and seek help owing to their victimization. They discovered that offence seriousness and victim-offender relationships influenced help-seeking and the probability that a victim would report. While most victims do not formally report some do ask for help (Fisher, Peterson & Cantor, 2016) and are more likely to seek such help from informal structures than reporting to the police (Barret & Pierre, 2011). As stated by our participants, lack of confidence and trust in the Nigerian police would prevent them from reporting their cyberstalking victimization. Indeed, some felt the police do not have the capacity yet to deal with such a new form of online victimization. Duggan *et al.* (2014) found that reporting victimization experience to police was less frequent. Elsewhere however, victims are likely to report and seek formal help from the police when they experience property damage and when threatened or intimidated by the stalker or experience financial loss (Reyns and Englebrecht, 2010). Coping can also take the form of avoidance strategy such as closing social media account being used to target them (Beggot and Maran, 2019; Woodlock, 2017), and deploying confrontational strategies (verbal aggression and pleading) (Tokunaga and Aune, 2017).

Conclusion

The study examined the nature of cyberstalking and its effects on victims among students of the University of Ibadan. Younger people, especially students, are vulnerable to cyberstalking (Pew research, 2014) owing to their active online behavior. Cyberstalkers range from the familiar to the unknown just as those who offer support to cope with the effects of cyberstalking are friends and families. The study also found that the victims of cyberstalking experience anxiety, fear and helplessness. The lack of trust in the police system, as deduced from the study, prevented victims from confiding in or reporting such cases to the police. This stems from the fear of victimizations by the police officers. However, it is interesting to note that the experiences of

victimization enhanced activation of safe online and offline behaviours. To prevent cyberstalking among students, awareness needs to be launched into what cyberstalking entails and the laws available to prosecute cyberstalking offenders. The volume of information posted online by internet users need to be moderated to reduce their susceptibility to cyberstalkers. Above all, internet safety education and awareness targeted at young persons may offer best defense against cyberstalking.

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