

Gender Inequalities in the Prevalence, Perception, and Reporting of Cyberstalking in Malaysian University Students

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Abstract

Violence against women online is common yet likely under-reported and is often manifested through cyberstalking. The relatively new phenomenon of cyberstalking has yet to gain the attention it deserves in developing countries such as Malaysia, which is still struggling to implement any specific law pertaining to stalking, let alone cyberstalking. This study investigates the prevalence, perception, and reporting of cyberstalking among Malaysian University students in association with gender. Based on the interviews from respondents, it was found that females experience a higher prevalence of cyberstalking than males, perceive cyberstalking as more harmful, and are taken less seriously when reporting cyberstalking incidents. The limited awareness around gender discrepancies in cyberstalking in Malaysia may have a cultural component, as there is little to no acknowledgment of the issue in the Malaysian law, and individuals are not encouraged to conduct research and reports on this particular subject in the country. This gap in the prevalence, perception, and reporting of cyberstalking calls attention to the inequality between women and men. Future studies should consider the larger societal gender issue of gender discrepancies that is perpetuated online.

Keywords: gender, gender-based violence, violence against women, online violence, cyberstalking, inequality

Introduction

Although stalking is a familiar concept to many, few people realize its pervasiveness among female adolescents and young adults in the online sphere. Gender-based violence against women online stands as a relatively new phenomenon and is a growing issue that has not been widely reported in Southeast Asia.

Before delving into gender-based violence, it is imperative to note that there are people who identify differently from their biological sex, as well as those who identify as both male or female or neither, and violence against these people is beyond the scope of the paper. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), gender describes the characteristics that a society or culture delineates as masculine or feminine, and “refers to the socially constructed characteristics of women and men – such as norms, roles and relationships of and between groups of women and men” (World Health Organization, 2017). The United Nations defines violence against women as any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or mental harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life (World Health Organization, 2017). Although the UN General Assembly made a Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women in 1993, a third of women still experience physical or sexual violence twenty years later (“UN Champions Prevention”, 2017, UN General Assembly, 1993).

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According to The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey Report in 2010, 1 in 5 women and 1 in 71 men in the United States have been raped in their lifetime, while 19.3 million women and 5.1 million men in the United States have been stalked in their lifetime (Black et al., 2010). These gender trends extend across the world to Malaysia. In 2011 and 2012 Malaysian police statistics on domestic violence cases showed that 75% of the victims were women (Wangsawijaya, 2013). Violence against women acknowledges the heightened vulnerability that females face from their early childhood that extends through adulthood, as well as the profound, long-term effects and detriments that physical and sexual violence have on women throughout their lives ("UN Champions Prevention", 2017). The UN Broadband Commission for Digital Development calls attention to the presence of gender-based violence online and defines cyber violence against women and girls as "hate speech (publishing a blasphemous libel), hacking (intercepting private communications), identity theft, online stalking (criminal harassment) and uttering threats. It can entail convincing a target to end their lives (counselling suicide or advocating genocide). The internet also facilitates other forms of violence against girls and women including trafficking and sex trade" (UN Broadband Commission, 2015).

Online stalking or cyberstalking is a dangerous and less well-characterized form of gender-based violence that has become increasingly prevalent due to the widespread use of technology. According to the Association for Progressive Communications (APC), "Online Stalking or Cyberstalking includes (repeatedly) sending threats or false accusations via email or mobile phone, making threatening or false posts on websites, stealing a person's identity or data or spying and monitoring a person's computer and internet use. Sometimes the threats can escalate into physical spaces" (APC, 2011). With the expansive use of the internet, cell phones, and instant messaging, online violence, particularly online stalking, has recently emerged as a threat. This threat often targets students. A 2015 Pew Research Center report indicated that young adolescents between the ages of 13 and 17 use social media more than any other age group, with 71% of adolescents between 13 and 17 using Facebook (Lenhart, 2015)

Cyberstalking is not a new concept, yet there is still a lack of awareness around the issue. A 2009 study by the Bureau of Justice Statistics in the US found that one in four victims had been cyberstalked as a result of growing internet-based services (Baum, Catalano, Rand & Rose, 2009). Countries around the world have slowly begun to take the issue more seriously. Some countries are having discussions between the media and government about the need for anti-stalking laws, and laws relevant to preventing or policing stalking now exist in Southeast Asian countries such as the Philippines and Singapore (MacKenzie et al., 2011). Despite this progress, many countries including Malaysia and most of its Southeast Asian neighbors still lack specific anti-stalking laws and familiarity with the concept of online stalking. Malaysia has yet to implement any law pertaining to the broader category of stalking, or its lesser known sub-category of cyberstalking. While the US has made great headway by introducing specific anti-stalking laws in 1991, Malaysia has failed to introduce any specific offence of stalking, and the JAG (Joint Action Group of non-governmental organizations in support of human rights and women's rights of Malaysia) is still in conversation with the government and media about enacting specific anti-stalking laws (Indramalar, 2017; Saunders, 1998). Malaysia has a distinct culture and religion from the West and it is unclear if the differences in cultural background influence the issue of online violence.

There remains a need to better characterize online violence against women, particularly cyberstalking against women in Southeast Asian countries, for the development of preventive laws and strategies. The majority of research in Malaysia regarding online stalking targets broader subject groups such as Malaysian adolescents and preadolescents or specific social media platforms, which call attention to young adults' lack of awareness around their current online behaviors and how these behaviors may be linked to cyber-related crimes, thus presenting a greater threat when engaging in internet activities. (Chew, 2014, Gnasigamoney & Sidhu, 2013). In the past decade, local newspapers in Malaysia have called attention to the prevalence of cyberstalking. According to Cyber Security Malaysia, the country's national cyber security center, there was a two-fold increase in the number of cyberstalking cases reported, from 72 in 2008 to 151 in 2009 (The Star, 2010). With the growing prevalence of cyberstalking and the paucity of research in this area, there is a need for better characterization of victim demographics such as gender, race, and age. This sentiment has been echoed by researchers studying the trends of cyber-related crime among adolescents and preadolescents in Malaysia (Gnasigamoney & Sidhu, 2013, p. 13). The lack of research on the topic of cyberstalking relating specifically to gender may be a contributing factor to the general lack of awareness around this growing issue in Malaysia.

Malaysia has been slow to recognize online stalking as a crime. The local women's and human rights organizations (JAG) have been working with the Attorney General Chambers and Parliamentary Women's Caucus since 2013 to lobby for stalking to be included in the penal code (Indramalar, 2017). Four years later, there has been no follow through on the draft bill. Cyberstalking, let alone stalking, has yet to be addressed. Malaysia was the first country in the Asia Pacific region to recognize domestic violence as a crime when the Domestic Violence Act was passed in 1994, and these local organizations remain hopeful that new laws will be implemented to provide adequate protection for victims, mostly female, against the broad category of stalking, especially cyberstalking, which is particularly pervasive and invasive (Indramalar, 2017). As technology advances and becomes more accessible globally, the threat of cyberstalking and its repercussions on society grow larger. A recent study published in the National Center for Biotechnology Information Journal asserts that the detriments of cyberstalking can have major psychosocial effects on individuals, with the serious consequences of reported victimization experiences including increased suicidal ideation, fear, anger, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptomatology (Short et al., 2014).

This study aims to characterize and compare male and female experiences of online violence in Malaysia. We hypothesize that cyberstalking is more common in women than men among university students, which is a gender gap that we believe can be attributed to the longstanding history of a patriarchal society that has treated women as subordinate (Herring, 1996). We set out to address if there are gaps between males and females in the prevalence, perception, and reporting of cyberstalking among Malaysian university students, as well as the actions taken to address the issue.

Methodology

2.1 Participants

Our cohort includes both male and female students who claimed to have previously experienced cyberstalking. Interviews were conducted with current Malaysian students attending Taylor's College, a tertiary education institution, and identified as either male or female between the ages of 18 and 30. Located in the heart of Subang Jaya, Malaysia, on the outskirts of the nation's capital, Kuala Lumpur, Taylor's College is encompassed by a suburban city that houses a population of between 500,000 to 1 million people ("Populations of Cities", 2017).

2.2 Instruments

The interview consists of four sections with a total of ten questions (Appendix 1). The questions were adopted from previous studies on cyberstalking (Bocij, 2003; Spitzberg & Hoobler, 2002) and were modified to suit the objectives of this research. Special attention and considerations at the undergraduate, graduate, and post-graduate levels were taken into account. This includes the nature and phrasing of the questions and collecting data for qualitative research as well as creating a suitable environment for interviewees to complete the questions to the best of their ability (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007). The interview included both structured and open-ended questions. Thirty-four interviews, each taking 15-20 minutes, were completed over 3 days. Results for closed-ended questions were compiled and analyzed by gender category. For clarity of quantitative analysis, it was determined a priori that the four most common behaviors identified in the interview responses to Questions 4 and 5 (Appendix 1) would be reported and analyzed according to gender.

2.3 Sampling and Procedure

School administrators from Taylor's University College approved the interview and granted permission to administer the interview to students during a special three-day event on educating students on the topic of Online Violence Against Women. Students invited to attend the event had previously indicated that they had experienced some form of cyberstalking and were aware of the option to be research subjects. Given the sensitive nature of this topic and the importance of consent, it was determined that the interview participants would be selected from the students attending the event in which the participants are chosen based on predetermined criteria. This criterion included being a student at Taylor's College who had claimed to have previously experienced cyberstalking, and this distinction provided information-rich subjects. Informed consent was obtained in verbal format from all subjects.

2.4 Ethical Considerations

Given the sensitive nature of the topic at hand, subjects were interviewed individually with the guarantee that all responses collected would be confidential and anonymous. Interviews were conducted in a quiet, private environment to provide a safe space for respondents to share their personal experiences. Questions were repeated to those who were unclear and clarified by researchers to ensure understanding.

2.5 Data Analysis

The verbal responses from the interview were recorded and manually transcribed, then compiled as previously described. The data was cross-checked by coordinators from Taylor's College, as well as staff members from EMPOWER Malaysia, a non-profit women's rights organization in Petaling Jaya, Malaysia, to ensure that the transcriptions were accurate. Quantitative statistical analysis of the data was performed (Microsoft Excel) and cross-checked.

Results

3.1 Demographics

Of the 34 Malaysian students who completed the surveys, 41% identified as male, and 59% identified as female. None of the respondents identified as any other gender. The age range was 18-30 with a median age of 21 and mean (SD) age of 22.3 (3.2). All of the respondents reported using the internet every day. A minority (14.7%) of respondents spent less than 1 hour online every day. 85.3% of respondents spent over 2 hours online every day, with 44.1% of respondents spending between 2 and 5 hours online every day and 41.2% of respondents spending over 6 hours online every day. Of the participants who indicated that they spent over 6 hours online, 58% of them claimed to have been harassed online. Of the participants who spent between 2-5 hours online, 47% of them claimed to have been harassed online. Of the participants who spent less than 1 hour online, 20% of them claimed to be harassed online.

3.2 Prevalence of Online Stalking or Cyberstalking

The four most common behaviors identified in the interview responses to questions 4 and 5 (Appendix 1) are summarized in Table 1 and listed as Behavior A, B, C, and D.

Table 1. Proportion of female and male participants who stated that they had experienced certain cyberstalking behaviors.

Behavior	Percentage of male and female respondents who were victims	Percentage of female respondents who were victims	Percentage of male respondents who were victims
Behavior A: Somebody posting or distributing your personal and private information in an aggressive or threatening manner	86.8	62.1	37.9
Behavior B: You have been sent abusive (extremely offensive or insulting) emails, notes or messages over any social media platform that directly or indirectly threatened to harm you, your friends, family, possessions, etc.	79.4	63	37.0
Behavior C: Someone creates a persona based on your identity, and falsely represents him/herself online or through another electronic medium	73.5	64	36
Behavior D: Someone has deliberately tried to access confidential information on your computer such as e-mail messages	76.5	53.8	46.2

Of the students (58.8%) who reported experiencing all four behaviors listed, 60% of which were female.

A minority of participants (11.8%) claimed to have experienced just one or none of the four behaviors. 17.6% of the students reported to have experienced at least two of the behaviors, and 11.8% reported to have experienced three of the listed behaviors. Only 2.9% of respondents experienced none of the four behaviors listed, and this group was comprised of all males. When taken at face value, this figure suggests that over 97% of respondents have claimed to have experienced cyberstalking in one form or another.

3.3 Perception of online stalking or cyberstalking

The four most common behaviors considered harmful by subjects (questions 4 and 5 in Appendix 1) are summarized in Table 2 and listed as Behaviors A, B, C, and D below.

Table 2. Proportion of male and female participants who considered each of the cyberstalking behaviors as harmful

Behavior	Percentage of male and female respondents who consider this act as harmful	Percentage of female respondents who consider this act as harmful	Percentage of male respondents who consider this act as harmful
Behavior A: Somebody posting or distributing your personal and private information in an aggressive or threatening manner	23.5	62.5	37.5
Behavior B: You have been sent abusive (extremely offensive or insulting) emails, notes or messages over any social media platform that directly or indirectly threatened to harm you, your friends, family, possessions, etc.	32.4	63.6	36.4
Behavior C: Someone creates a persona based on your identity, and falsely represents him/herself online or through another electronic medium	23.5	75	25
Behavior D: Someone has deliberately tried to access confidential information on your computer such as email-messages	23.5	75	25

Less than one third of the participants considered each of the individual behaviors presented as harmful (Table 4). A little less than half of the participants (47%) did not consider any of the four behaviors listed as harmful, with males making up the majority of this group. Around 15% of respondents considered two behaviors as harmful, which was comprised mostly of females. None of the participants considered all of the behaviors listed as harmful.

Overall, it was found that women considered online stalking as more harmful than men did. Less than a fourth (23.5%) of the respondents considered the statement, "Someone has deliberately tried to access confidential information on your computer such as email-messages" as harmful, with 75% of these respondents being female and only 25% being male. The interviews also provided the students with an additional scenario that were read aloud to them (refer to question 10 in Appendix 1), "You have been repeatedly monitored, followed or tracked by another individual/group through a cell phone, laptop, or another type of technology in a way or to an extent that made you feel scared, intimidated or threatened", and the students were asked to apply this definition to themselves and share whether or not they personally felt cyberstalked. A quarter of the students responded "yes" to this question, over 75% of which were female. Of the remaining respondents that felt they had not been cyberstalked, the majority were male.

3.4 Reporting cyberstalking

All two thirds of students who had experienced cyberstalking revealed that they had been cyberstalked by family members, ex-partners, work-colleagues and friends, while one third did not know who was targeting them online.

The majority of students who had experienced some form or act of cyberstalking (64.3%) did not share their experience with anyone else. Over two thirds of these students were female. Four students who identified with at least one of the behaviors listed in the table declined to answer questions regarding whether or not they reported their experiences and the action or lack of action taken in response to that report, all of which were male.

For those who did share their experiences, only about half reported being taken seriously with some sort of action taken to remedy the situation.

3.5 Reasons for not reporting cases of cyberstalking

Of the 64.3% of students who didn't report, most said it was because they did not think their experiences were deserved the attention and were not worth coming forward about; they thought that "it was a minor incident," "it was not a big deal," or "it was just normal;" or they believed their experiences lacked severity and did not deserve the attention. Of the students who did choose to report and were not taken seriously (50%), all of them were female. Each of these students classified their experiences as small matters that lacked severity.

Female Student 5: "I didn't think it was a huge deal."

Female Student 13: "It seemed like a minor incident at that time and I did not know any better."

Female Student 29: "It was not as intense for it to be reported. It's a matter that I could have handled."

Among the students who chose to not share their personal cyberstalking experiences with anyone, some of them claimed there was no channel to voice their concerns on the issue. These students believed they did not have the right approach, resources, or available person to report to, due to a lack of trust in family, friends, or authority. Another reason given for choosing to stay silent on incidents of cyberstalking included the fear of the obscurity and vagueness surrounding the concept cyberstalking among other individuals who had little to no understanding of the it.

Female student 33: "I didn't do it because I don't exactly trust anyone."

Female student 27: "I didn't report the incident because I had no avenue to report."

Female Student 30: "Because cyber-security isn't a considered thing in my country."

A third of students chose to report personal incidents of cyberstalking, and this group was made up of 70% females. Only half of this group of students who reported felt that they were taken seriously, with the majority being male. Those who identified as male shared that the issues of cyberstalking were quickly sorted out, with social media authorities, teaching staff, administration, and friends all contributing to pacifying and resolving the issue. Three male students who claimed to have experienced Behavior C (someone creates a persona based on your identity, and falsely represents him/herself online or through another electronic medium) found that their experiences were dealt with appropriately when reported.

Male Student 18: "Teaching staff, administration and friends all helped. They reported the fake identity and posted a warning regarding the profile."

Male Student 7: "I received public support to shut down the rogue account."

Male Student 10: "Reported to the social media authority, and it was rectified."

The women who experienced personal incidents of cyberstalking reported being stalked by mostly family members, and they told their family, friends, and the police about the cyberstalking. Despite reporting to various support systems, the women received little to no support or willingness to appease or resolve the situation. Three female students claimed to have been cyberstalked but not taken seriously by immediate family and relatives.

Female Student 5: "After I found that my cyberstalker was one of my family members then I decided to contact their families. But still, there was nothing their family did."

Female Student 16: "I reported to my mother. Her response was 'It's not that big of a deal. Push it aside.'"

Female Student 15: "It was a massive misunderstanding among my family members and somehow it was just ignored."

Female students who had been cyberstalked were told by authorities that their cases lacked severity or did not deserve attention, while others who also decided to report their personal experiences to social media platforms received little to no response or action.

Female Student 11: "I was cyberstalked by a family member, I had to deactivate my social media and delete all my photos. I reported to Facebook and Google but not much was being done."

Female Student 4: "Reported to the police; they said my report was not their priorities cause too many harassment cases."

Female Student 28: "Reported to authority. No further action was recorded because they claimed that no harm was done."

Discussion

This study confirms that university students in Malaysia have experienced various forms of cyberstalking. As expected, more time spent online appears to make individuals more susceptible to experiencing online stalking. Surprisingly, among the individuals who did experience cyberstalking, many did not report these incidents, and of those that did, half were not taken seriously. Apart from revealing a high prevalence of cyberstalking, a low rate of reporting to others, and a lack of perceived harm by the students, this study also highlights discrepancies between men and women regarding cyberstalking prevalence, perception, and subsequent actions taken. Women are more likely to be the target of cyberstalking, view cyberstalking as more harmful than men, and are taken less seriously than men when reporting cyberstalking incidents.

Online violence against women is detrimental and has the potential to translate into the offline world, as online sexual harassment tends to mirror the levels of harassment that women often find in real life (Herring, 1996). There is growing concern in the UN that online violence is just as harmful as physical violence and may cause women to purposely limit the time they spend online (UN Broadband Commission, 2015; Bonewit & Marzocchi, 2015). Mlambo-Ngcuka, the executive director of UN Women, vocalized the threat of women's digital rights being curtailed, and asserts that "to be disconnected from technology in the 21st century, it is like having your freedom disrupted: your right to work, your right to meet people, your right to learn, your freedom of speech. So if women become so intimidated and traumatized from the experiences they may have, it is a whole world that will be lost to them for the rest of their life" (Alter, 2015). Therefore, it is important to underscore the necessity of addressing gender-based violence in the online sphere, especially since it has the potential to be just as damaging as physical threats in the real world or deny individuals their human rights online.

Based on the low proportion of students who perceive cyberbullying as harmful, it appears that many individuals have become accustomed to the behavior that cyber-stalking entails, blurring what is considered acceptable versus unacceptable behavior. As described by the interview responses, many do not recognize the potential harms of cyberstalking. Therefore, the variability in expressed concern about cyberstalking may suggest that such behaviors have been normalized. The decision to not report cyberstalking may stem from the trivialization of the act. This stems from a lack of understanding of what constitutes the behavior, as well as a perceived lack of harm by students, parents, school, social media, and authorities. Many people may not view cyberstalking as a pressing issue because of how accustomed they have grown to the rampant nature of it. Similarly, due to the proliferation of technology, accessible format of the internet, and sharing of information on social media, people may be overwhelmed by its widespread universality and feel completely powerless to stop it. The lack of awareness of the harms of cyberstalking likely serves as an explanation for the low rates of reporting, as well as the trivialization of the matter. The high prevalence of cyberstalking, low levels of its perceived harm, and overall lack of understanding around what constitutes cyberstalking suggests that the authorities should raise awareness and develop strategies to minimize all forms of online violence, especially against women. They should strive to create a holistic understanding of the definition of online stalking that does not normalize the online violence. Further research could look at the effect of interventional programs and how education on cyberstalking affects public opinions or online practices.

Despite the growing presence of cyberstalking and other forms of violence against women, current research around the issue of cyberstalking in regards to gender remains limited. Our results are consistent with work showing that women are disproportionately victims. The gendered nature of this phenomenon has been recognized, with the consensus that the majority of cyberstalking perpetrators are male and the majority of victims are female (Meloy, 1998; Reno, 1999). The prevalence of online violence against women found in this research reinforces these previous conclusions and calls attention to the inequality between women and men in Malaysia, which may be reflective of other Southeast Asian countries. In order to reduce these differences, it is imperative to analyze this phenomenon in a way that places gender at its center stage.

We must acknowledge that the issue affects men and women in different ways, and figure out how male and female cyberstalking experiences vary. This study is limited by a small sample size, as it only included students from a single small university. The data may not be applicable to a wider population, as various racial, social and economic and political factors may impact the online behaviors of university students in different cities and countries. There is a risk of selection bias, as only students who voluntarily attended the cyberstalking event were interviewed.

This may have led to over-reporting of cyberstalking prevalence if only those who had experience with cyberbullying chose to attend. However, given that many of the interviewed students did not perceive cyberstalking to be harmful, were unaware of its definition, or were unwilling to discuss their experiences due to the sensitive nature of cyberstalking, it is likely that several others did not attend due to lack of perceived personal relevance, potentially leading to underreporting. Furthermore, while the study collected information on the gender of students, it did not garner information on socio-economic status, which may also impact the prevalence of cyberstalking. However, as the objectives of the study were to analyze the perception, prevalence, and reporting of cyberstalked victims based on gender, the methods used in this study were appropriate for addressing a subject matter that could be perceived as sensitive, personal, or upsetting by triggering unwanted memories and emotions.

Conclusions

Cyber violence is prevalent among college students, and online stalking is becoming more widespread with the advance of technology and increased use of internet communication. This is the first study that uses personal interviews to analyze gender differences in cyberstalking in Malaysia. Women report experiencing cyberstalking more than men, perceive it as more harmful than men, and are more likely to not be taken seriously when reporting cyberstalking incidents to friends, family or authorities. The majority of the victims chose to not report or shares their experience due to a perceived lack of severity and belief that the incident was minor. The gender imbalance and general lack of awareness around the issue must be addressed. Technological advancements continue to extend to the online world and create larger vehicles for cyberstalking to occur. Authorities should consider the gaps between men and women among university students in regards to online violence, and educate students on strategies to recognize and deal with cyberstalking. Such education on the prevalence, definition, and harms of cyberbullying may create a platform for cultural change and engender a greater acknowledgment and understanding of issues that could fuel the enactment of future laws pertaining to the issue of online violence. Further research should focus on targeting larger groups of students, while also examining cyberstalking through the lens of education and intervention.

It is vital to promote women's interests internationally by creating more awareness around cyberstalking and establishing a virtual frontier for both men and women to navigate the online world in a safe space defined by their own terms.

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Appendix

Appendix 1 - Interview Questions



An Interview on Online Violence Against Women: Cyberstalking

1. Age:
2. Gender:
3. How much time do you spend on social media platforms a day?
4. What kinds of cyberstalking actions have you experienced online?
5. Which cyberstalking actions do you believe are harmful?
6. If you have been harassed who was the person who harassed you?
7. Did you report this harassment to anyone?

IF YES:

Can you share with us to who and what was the response or support given?

IF NO:

Can you share with us why the harassment was not reported?

8. According to this act “You have been repeatedly monitored, followed, or tracked by another individual/group through a cell phone, laptop, or another type of technology in a way or to an extent that made you to feel scared, intimidated or threatened.”, have you been cyberstalked at anytime during your life?

9. Do you think cyberstalking, where it happens online, but the stalker/harasser stop short of harassing the victim in offline world, is harmful?

10. Do you think cyberstalking can be escalated to actual threats in physical world?