



Article

Cyberstalking and Previous Offline Victimization in Italian Young Adults: The Role of Coping Strategies

Daniela Acquadro Maran and Tatiana Begotti *

WOW—Work and Organisational Well-Being Research Group, Department of Psychology, Università di Torino, 10124 Torino, Italy

* Correspondence: tatiana.begotti@unito.it

Abstract: The aim of this study was to examine the association between different coping strategies and physical and emotional consequences, depressive symptoms, state anxiety, and trait anxiety, distinguishing between victims with previous offline victimization experiences (e.g., bullying, domestic violence) and those without such experiences. A self-administered questionnaire was distributed in a snowball system to more than 700 young adults in Italy. A total of 689 individuals completed the instrument. Of these, 305 participants (44%) reported having been victims of at least one form of cyberstalking. A total of 201 participants (66% of victims) reported having experienced both cyberstalking and other forms of victimization in their lifetime, while 89 (29% of victims) reported having experienced only cyberstalking. Overall, the results of this study show that victims with previous victimization had significantly higher scores on physical, emotional, depressive, and anxiety symptoms than victims who had never been victimized. In addition, results showed that victims who have been victimized before are more likely to use all three strategies (proactive, avoidant, passive) to stop cyberstalking than victims who have never been victimized. The results of this study may be useful in developing interventions to mitigate the effects of cyberstalking and prevent future victimization.



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1. Introduction

Cyberstalking is a relatively new phenomenon that has developed in the context of the Internet and new technologies. As suggested by [Kircaburun et al. \(2018\)](#), this phenomenon represents antisocial and deviant online behavior (see also [Pieschl and Porschl 2017](#); [Pieschl et al. 2017](#)). It shares some similarities with other behaviors, such as cyberbullying. However, while cyberbullying refers to repeated, intentional, and harmful online behavior towards weaker individuals and could be associated with psychopathy and sadism, cyberstalking is the intentional, repeated, and malicious pursuit or harassment of another person in an online context. Cyberstalking may include behaviors such as remote monitoring of the victim, constant contact with the victim, and/or direct threats to the victim.

Research on cyberstalking is still in its infancy and only recently has it received more attention through empirical studies aimed at better understanding its characteristics ([Kaur et al. 2021](#)). The lack of a sufficiently consistent reference point has led to problems in operationalizing the concept and ensuring the generality of the results, which compromises the value of the research and makes it difficult to interpret and compare data from multiple studies ([Wilson et al. 2022](#)). Estimating the prevalence of this phenomenon is also complicated, with frequencies ranging from 3.2 to 82% of the population depending on the inclusion criteria used and the reference context ([Sheridan and Grant 2007](#); [Dreßing et al. 2014](#)). Recently, an attempt has been made to define the phenomenon. In this study, conducted by Wilson and colleagues (2022), the definitions and scales used in 33 quantitative scientific articles were compared to find recurring or distinguishing elements. As

described by the authors, all of the selected studies agreed that the presence of almost one undesirable online misbehavior is the fundamental characteristic of the phenomenon.

For the present work, the definition of cyberstalking by [Bocij et al. \(2002\)](#) was used. The phenomenon was defined as a group of behaviors in which an individual, a group of individuals, or an organization uses information technology to harass one or more individuals. These include, but are not limited to, the transmission of threats and false accusations, identity theft, data theft, damage to information and equipment, computer surveillance, and solicitation of sexual acts.

1.1. Cyberstalking and Stalking

Much of the research on cyberstalking has focused on the relationship between cyberstalking and stalking. Early research on this topic assumed that stalking encompasses behaviors in the physical world that are intended to harass a person as well as those that occur electronically ([Nobles et al. 2014](#)). Subsequently, the debate has evolved to clarify whether cyberstalking can be considered a new weapon for the stalker or whether it is a fundamentally different entity with its own characteristics and factors, or whether certain forms of cyberstalking may constitute one or the other ([De Fazio and Sgarbi 2012](#)). Clearly, there are many similarities between the two phenomena: Both are characterized by intrusive and repetitive behavior (even though the behavior may occur through a single modality, such as spying) to threaten or harass the victim ([Sheridan and Grant 2007](#); [De Fazio and Sgarbi 2012](#); [Nobles et al. 2014](#)), and both are driven by a sense of anger, power, and control that may result from actions or inactions of the victim ([Marganski and Melander 2018](#); [Ahlgrim and Terrance 2021](#)), have similar motivations and behaviors such as threatening and stalking the victim, contacting friends and relatives of the victim, false accusations, suicide threats, and manipulation ([Short et al. 2014](#)), and result in similar emotional reactions, protective actions, and the victim's tendency to disclose the incident to third parties ([Sheridan and Grant 2007](#)). [Nobles and colleagues \(2014\)](#) concluded that cyberstalking is ultimately a specific form of stalking given the definitional criteria, and ruled out the possibility that the two phenomena are mutually exclusive or that certain cases of cyberstalking may not be classified as stalking, while others may evaluate cyberstalking as a possible negative consequence of stalking ([Diaz 2022](#)).

Moreover, there are numerous studies that highlight the differences between the two terms, such that cyberstalking is considered a new, deviant, and illegal behavior, at least from a criminological perspective (see, e.g., [Bocij et al. 2002](#); [Reyns et al. 2011](#); [Reyns et al. 2012](#); [Abu-Ulbeh et al. 2021](#)). First, cyberstalking involves different means than online stalking, which has a significant impact on the nature and execution of the crime. For example, [Pittaro \(2007\)](#) and [Fissel \(2022\)](#) point out the importance of the geographical distance between the victim and the offender. In traditional stalking, both parties must live or work nearby for contact to be possible, whereas the cyberstalker can communicate with his victim from anywhere in the world, including across regional and state boundaries, and requires only an Internet connection. In addition, [Reyns \(2010\)](#) stated that online stalking removes many barriers compared to offline stalking. The ability to use tools such as computers, laptops, cell phones, Wi-Fi devices, and any other accessory or device that allows interaction over the Internet facilitates contact between the stalker and the victim through the exchange of written and verbal messages, pictures, and other forms of communication. The Internet also mediates the way the crime is carried out, facilitating the invasion of privacy in the case of cyberstalking or enabling physical violence in the case of stalking ([Short et al. 2014](#)), and in the first case, it easily leads to a reduction in contact with friends and family, while in the second case it seems to be more of a change in the victim's social and professional life ([Sheridan and Grant 2007](#); [Cavezza and McEwan 2014](#); [Fissel and Reyns 2020](#)).

1.2. Consequences of Cyberstalking in Victims

It is estimated that between 20 and 40 percent of online users worldwide have been victims of cyberstalking at least once, and numerous cases are reported to online harassment authorities and associations each year (Tokunaga and Aune 2017). As Berry and Bainbridge (2017) point out, complaints represent only a portion of cases: A portion of cases are not reported to authorities at all because in many cases the police do not recognize the cases as cyberstalking and/or as a crime. One of the most obvious and commonly associated variables with victims is Internet use: frequent connections to social networks have been shown to increase the likelihood of being a victim of cyberstalking (Marcum 2010), as has being an experienced online user (Berry and Bainbridge 2017). Research has also shown that victims are on average 32 years old (Alexy et al. 2005), but the “ECHO project” (a British study of 353 victims of both sexes conducted to investigate the characteristics of cyberstalking and supported by the association “Network for Surviving Stalking”) emphasized that this phenomenon can affect any age group, from adolescents to the elderly (Maple et al. 2011). A possible explanation for the presence of adolescents can be derived from the characteristics of the group itself. Namely, they belong to the category of so-called “digital natives”, who are characterized by having grown up with and learned to use tools such as computers, cell phones, and other technological devices since childhood (Salem and Shabbir 2022). This has obviously made them more adept, flexible, and, most importantly, confident in their use of the Internet, which may make it easier for them to confront cybercriminals. In addition, adolescents are not as cautious when communicating with strangers online as they are when talking face-to-face and speak openly with unfamiliar people, which further increases the risk of being targeted by cyberstalkers (Lyndon et al. 2011).

The phenomenon can have profound negative physical and psychological effects on victims (Parsons-Pollard and Moriarty 2009), the consequences of which can easily spill over into relationships with friends and family (Maple et al. 2011; Lowry et al. 2013). Worsley and colleagues (Worsley et al. 2017) also note that the most common symptoms experienced by victims are anxiety, agitation, depressive symptoms, negative feelings, and negative impact on perceptions of mental health. According to Reyns and Fissel (2019), approximately three out of four victims experienced negative consequences of cyberstalking, but it was also found that only 57.4% of victims sought professional help or reported the crime to authorities (Fissel 2022). In addition, experience with offline forms of violence could affect online victimization; for example, previous victimization could explain difficulties in using effective coping strategies and, consequently, associated physical and emotional complaints (Classen et al. 2005). Oksanen and Keipi (2013) found in a cross-sectional survey in Finland that prior violent victimization (e.g., harassment) was strongly associated with cybervictimization. In a study of stalking victims in healthcare settings, Acquadro Maran and Varetto (2018) found that of 270 self-identified victims, 54% had experienced violence in their lifetime.

In addition, Classen et al.’s (2005) literature review found that two-thirds of individuals who had been sexually victimized were at risk for re-victimization. Previous victimization (both online and offline, in this or another form of deviant behavior) had a greater impact on victims’ physical and emotional well-being; when re-victimized, they exhibited more anxiety, more difficulties in interpersonal relationships, more depression, and lower self-esteem than victims who had not experienced previous victimization (Daniels et al. 2021). A study by Begotti and Acquadro Maran (2019) found that victims of cyberstalking who had experienced prior victimization in their lives exhibited more physical and psychological consequences, depression, and anxiety symptoms than victims of cyberstalking alone.

1.3. Coping Strategies

Coping is defined as a set of behaviors aimed at protecting people from psychological harm caused by a social experience (Pearlin and Schooler 1978; Folkman 2020). Understanding how a person may respond to a series of cyberstalking attacks is important for understanding which strategies are most effective and which instead cause harm (Tokunaga

and Aune 2017). Tokunaga and Aune (2017) classified the strategies used by victims and their relative effectiveness by collecting and thematically analyzing 51 statements from U.S. college students who were victims of cyberstalking. Seven behaviors emerged from this study: avoidance (ignoring, avoiding responding to cyberstalkers), active technological distancing (making one's online information visible only to verified friends and blocking harassing online contacts), seeking help (e.g., gathering evidence, filing a complaint with law enforcement and/or ISPs), negotiation/threat (e.g., confronting the cyberstalker directly, filing a threat complaint), verifying privacy (e.g., changing email address, installing protective systems), and refraining (e.g., publicly denouncing the cyberstalker, refraining from their harassment attempts). Regarding the effectiveness of each strategy, the study concluded that, from the victims' perspective, controlling their privacy is the best choice to deal with cyberstalking, followed by actively distancing oneself from the technological channels. Avoidance, help-seeking, and negotiation were moderately effective, while compliance/apology and deviance were the worst choices, as they were also the least used by victims. However, Wright (2018) indicated that help-seeking and perceived support lead to more effective coping strategies and reduce the risk of depression.

A study by Begotti et al. (2020), involving 433 young Italian adults, used Podaná and Imříšková's (2016) classification of coping behaviors into three categories: Proactive behavior (e.g., meeting the aggressor in person, reporting the incident to the police, or changing the address), avoidance behavior (e.g., avoiding contact with the aggressor or changing his habits), and passive behavior (e.g., not changing the behavior or ignoring the stalker). Results showed that cyberstalking victims tended to use avoidance strategies, such as limiting Internet use or cutting off online contact, rather than proactive and passive strategies.

1.4. Current Research

In 2009, the crime of stalking was introduced into Italian law by Article 612a of the Criminal Code, which reads as follows: "The penalty is imprisonment for a term of six months to four years for anyone who, by repeated conduct, threatens or harasses others in order to induce a prolonged and serious state of anxiety or fear, or to induce a well-founded fear for the personal safety or the safety of a relative or of a person linked to him by an affective relationship, or to force him to change his habits." As noted by Fissel et al. (2022), it is interesting to note that even in the first written version, many elements attributable to the crime of cyberstalking, such as the repetition of the behavior and the development of a persistent state of anxiety in the victim, emphasize the importance of using coping strategies such as seeking help and supporting the victim. A previous study in the Italian context (Acquadro Maran and Begotti 2019), involving 107 victims of cyberstalking with and without prior victimization, found that 72 of them (67.3%) had been victims of both cyberstalking and other forms of offline victimization in their lives. They were also more likely to suffer from depression and anxiety symptoms than victims of cyberstalking without prior victimization. In a study by Begotti et al. (2020), results showed that victims of cyberstalking tended to use avoidance tactics rather than proactive behavior and passivity strategies. Moreover, the results showed that there was a significant and positive relationship between passive coping strategies, depressive symptoms, and state and trait anxiety.

Based on the above theoretical premises, the main objective of this study was to analyze the consequences of cyberstalking and the use of different coping strategies (proactive, avoidant, and passive coping) in a sample of cyberstalking victims. More specifically, the study aimed to assess the association between the different coping strategies and physical and emotional consequences, depressive symptoms, state anxiety, and trait anxiety, distinguishing between victims with previous offline victimization experiences (e.g., bullying, domestic violence) (hereafter referred to as PV) and those who had no such previous experiences (referred to as Not-PV). We hypothesized that cyberstalking negatively affects victims' well-being and contributes to an increase in physical and emotional symptoms,

anxiety, and depression, particularly among victims who have been previously victimized. Because there are no studies (to our knowledge) on the differential use of coping strategies in PV and Not-PV and their relationship to physical and emotional outcomes, anxiety, and depressive symptoms in the two groups, we set an exploratory goal on this particular topic. The results could provide useful information about the state of knowledge on this topic and the planning of effective intervention strategies.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Participants

A self-administered questionnaire was distributed to a group of young adults in Italy. Using a snowball system, the researchers contacted 120 students attending various courses and asked them to each recruit at least five people from their circle of acquaintances. The potential sample size was 720 participants. The final sample consisted of 689 people who completed and returned the questionnaire.

Of these, 305 participants (44%) reported having been victims of at least one form of cyberstalking. A total of 201 participants (66% of victims) reported experiencing both cyberstalking and other forms of victimization in their lifetime, while 89 (29% of victims) reported experiencing only cyberstalking; the remaining 15 individuals (5%) did not answer this question and were excluded from the analysis. The final sample of the study consisted of 290 individuals, 77% of them were female and 23% were male; their ages ranged from 18 to 30 years ($M = 22.74$; $SD = 2.5$). Most victims were single (55%), 38% were engaged, and 5% were living in a partnership; the remaining 2% did not provide information on their marital status. A self-administered questionnaire was distributed to more than 700 young adults in Italy using a snowball approach: the researchers contacted university students attending various courses and asked them to recruit subjects from their circle of acquaintances. A total of 689 people filled out the instrument.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Prevalence of Cyberstalking

The prevalence of cyberstalking was measured using the scale developed by [Reyns et al. \(2012\)](#). Items adapted for an Italian sample have been used in previous research on cyberstalking in Italy ([Acquadro Maran and Begotti 2019](#); [Begotti et al. 2020](#); [Begotti et al. 2022](#)). Respondents were asked whether they had been repeatedly victimized by one or more forms of cyberstalking, specifically Contacting (“Has anyone ever contacted or tried to contact you online on more than one occasion, or tried to contact you after you asked/said to stop?”), Harassment (“Has anyone ever harassed or tried to harass you online on more than one occasion?”), Unwanted sexual advances (“Has anyone made unwanted sexual advances to you online on more than one occasion?”), Threats of violence (“Has anyone spoken to you violently or threatened to physically hurt you online on more than one occasion?”), or Identity fraud (“Has anyone impersonated you online without your permission?”) (possible responses for each item: yes/no). Participants could indicate one or more behaviors (single or multiple victimization; e.g., harassment only, harassment, and threats of violence). As suggested by [Reyns et al. \(2012\)](#), those who answered “yes” to at least one of the forms of cyberstalking behavior were considered victims of cyberstalking. Participants were also asked whether they had been a victim of another form of victimization (e.g., bullying, domestic violence) in the past (one item; response options: yes/no).

2.2.2. Physical and Emotional Consequences of Cyberstalking

The physical and emotional consequences of the cyberstalking experience were measured with 23 items from the Italian version of the Stalking Questionnaire ([Acquadro Maran et al. 2017](#)). Here, 12 items examined physical symptoms (e.g., weakness, loss of appetite, sleep disturbance), and 11 items examined emotional consequences (e.g., anxiety, irritation, confusion); possible responses for each item: yes/no.

2.2.3. Depressive Symptoms

Depressive symptoms were measured with the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI, short version) (Beck et al. 1961; Scilligo 1992). It consists of 13 items that can be used to determine different levels of severity: no or minimal depression (scores 0–4), mild depression (5–7), moderate depression (8–15), or severe depression (>15) (in this study, Cronbach's α was 0.89, indicating excellent internal consistency).

2.2.4. Anxiety Symptoms

Anxiety symptoms were measured using the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (Spielberger 1983; Pedrabissi and Santinello 1989). It includes two subscales (STAI-Y1 and STAI-Y2; 20 items each) that capture how participants feel in the moment (state anxiety) and how they feel most of the time (behavioral anxiety). Total scores can range from 20 to 80; the threshold of 40 is considered indicative of anxiety symptoms. The rating scale includes different severity levels: mild (from 40 to 50), moderate (from 51 to 60), and severe (>60). The Cronbach's α -values in this study were 0.94 for state anxiety and 0.93 for trait anxiety, both indicating excellent internal consistency.

2.2.5. Coping Strategies

The measures used to analyze participants' coping strategies were taken from the Italian version of the Stalking Questionnaire (Acquadro Maran et al. 2017). Based on Podanà and Imriskova's model (2016), 12 items were used to classify the different coping strategies into three general categories: proactive behaviors (e.g., gathering evidence; trying to contact and engage in conversation with the cyberstalker), avoidance tactics (e.g., limiting Internet use; stopping online contact), and passivity (e.g., increased alcohol abuse; increased use of psychotropic substances). Each category included four items (possible response options: yes/no).

2.3. Ethical Statement and Procedure

This research project was approved by the local ethics committee of the University of Turin (N.277326/2017). Together with the questionnaire, each participant received an information letter and an informed consent form according to the Declaration of Helsinki. The cover sheet clearly explained the research objective, the voluntary nature of participation, the anonymity of the data, and the processing of the results. Four research assistants collected the data after project approval and special training by the researchers. It took about 20 min to complete the questionnaire. Respondents participated in the study voluntarily and received no compensation (or additional recognition) for their participation.

2.4. Data Analysis

Data were processed with SPSS version 28 (IBM Corp., Armonk, NY, USA). Descriptive measures (frequencies and percentages) were calculated; to assess differences between PV and Not-PV, as the two groups had unequal sizes the non-parametric Mann-Whitney U Test was performed; differences were considered statistically significant when $p < 0.05$. Bivariate Pearson correlations were performed to test the associations between variables.

3. Results

3.1. Victims of Cyberstalking: Descriptive Statistics

Looking at the specific cyberstalking behaviors, of the 290 victims included in the study, 169 (58%) reported being a victim of cyberstalking through online contact, 113 (39%) through online harassment, 163 (56%) by unwanted online sexual advances, 65 (22%) by online threats of violence, and 58 (20%) by online identity fraud (total percentages exceed 100% because the different cyberstalking behaviors are not mutually exclusive). More detailed information on the gender of the victim, the gender of the perpetrator, and previous offline victimization is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Characteristics of the victims of cyberstalking (in parentheses value in percent).

	Online Contact (n = 169)	Online Harassment (n = 113)	Online Unwanted Sexual Advances (n = 163)	Online Threats of Violence (n = 65)	Online Identity Fraud (n = 58)
Victim's gender					
Male	36 (21%)	21 (19%)	18 (11%)	22 (34%)	19 (33%)
Female	133 (79%)	92 (81%)	145 (89%)	43 (66%)	39 (67%)
Perpetrator's gender					
Male	112 (66%)	75 (66%)	120 (74%)	34 (52%)	16 (27%)
Female	16 (10%)	4 (4%)	3 (2%)	14 (22%)	5 (9%)
Unknown	41 (24%)	34 (30%)	40 (24%)	17 (26%)	37 (64%)
Previous offline victimization					
yes	124 (75%)	98 (88%)	121 (78%)	52 (87%)	37 (66%)
no	41 (25%)	14 (12%)	34 (22%)	8 (13%)	19 (34%)

As shown in Table 1, the majority of victims of all types of cyberstalking were male; on the other hand, victims indicated that they were predominantly harassed by men, with the exception of identity fraud, in which the perpetrator was unknown to the majority of respondents. Regardless of cyberstalking behavior, most victims reported that they had also been victimized offline.

3.2. Coping Strategies

In general, the most commonly used strategy is avoidance coping. Table 2 shows the results of the Mann–Whitney U Test conducted to compare the use of the different coping strategies in PV and Not-PV.

Table 2. Coping strategies: comparison between PV and Not-PV.

	PV (N = 201) M (SD)	Not-PV (N = 89) M (SD)	U	p
Proactive coping	1.22 (1.04)	0.68 (0.73)	4629.5	0.001
Avoidance coping	1.48 (0.84)	1.23 (0.78)	5410.5	0.03
Passivity coping	0.32 (0.67)	0.06 (0.23)	5744.0	0.002

Notes: M: mean; SD: standard deviation; (Range: 0–4).

As can be seen in Table 2, the comparison between victims who had only experienced cyberstalking and victims with prior offline misconduct showed that PVs tended to use all three strategies significantly more often.

3.3. Physical and Emotional Consequences, Depressive Symptoms, State and Trait Anxiety

Table 3 reports the results of the Mann–Whitney U Test performed to compare physical and emotional consequences, depressive symptoms, state, and trait anxiety in PV and Not-PV.

As shown in Table 3, the results indicated that victims who had ever experienced misbehavior were significantly more likely to suffer from physical and emotional consequences. Depressive symptoms were significantly higher in PV (mild level) than Not-PV (minimal degree). Finally, both PV and Not-PV exhibited mild levels of state and trait anxiety, but in both cases, the mean scores are significantly higher in PV.

Table 3. Physical and emotional consequences, depressive symptoms, state and trait anxiety: comparison between PV and Not-PV.

	PV (N = 201) M (SD)	Not-PV (N = 89) M (SD)	U	p
Physical symptoms	2.53 (2.58)	0.93 (1.54)	3665.0	0.001
Emotional symptoms	4.59 (2.33)	2.62 (2.24)	3131.5	0.001
Depressive symptoms	6.27 (6.27)	3.51 (3.69)	5682.0	0.001
State anxiety	45.36 (12.69)	40.16 (10.95)	5532.5	0.004
Trait anxiety	46.93 (11.78)	40.81 (9.80)	5521.0	0.001

Notes: M: mean; SD: standard deviation; Range physical symptoms: 0–12; Range emotional symptoms: 0–11; Range depressive symptoms: 0–39; Range state/trait anxiety: 20–80.

3.4. Correlational Analysis

To assess how the different coping strategies were related to physical and emotional consequences, depressive symptoms, state anxiety, and trait anxiety, correlation analyses were performed separately for PV and Not-PV. The results are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Correlational analysis in PV and Not-PV.

PV					
	Physical Symptoms	Emotional Symptoms	Depressive Symptoms	State Anxiety	Trait Anxiety
Proactive coping	0.099	0.190 *	0.017	0.011	−0.030
Avoidance coping	0.341 **	0.321 **	0.199 **	0.188 *	0.123
Passivity coping	0.402 **	0.398 **	0.250 **	0.202 **	0.254 **
Not-PV					
	Physical Symptoms	Emotional Symptoms	Depressive Symptoms	State Anxiety	Trait Anxiety
Proactive coping	0.144	0.392 **	0.370 **	0.268 *	0.369 **
Avoidance coping	0.254 *	0.273 *	−0.018	−0.043	−0.031
Passivity coping	0.501 **	0.186	0.127	0.222	0.197

Notes: * The correlation is significant at the 0.05 level. ** The correlation is significant at the 0.01 level.

The results presented in Table 4 show some different trends for PV and Not-PV. In particular, proactive coping is positively associated with emotional consequences, depressive symptoms, state anxiety, and trait anxiety in Not-PV, whereas it is positively associated with emotional consequences only in PV. Avoidant coping is positively associated with physical and emotional symptoms in both PV and Not-PV and with depressive symptoms and state anxiety in PV. Finally, passive coping is positively associated with physical and emotional consequences, depressive symptoms, and state and trait anxiety in PV, whereas it is associated only with physical symptoms in Not-PV.

4. Discussion

Overall, the results of this study show that PVs have significantly higher scores on physical, emotional, depressive, and anxiety symptoms. This is consistent with clinical research on other violent behaviors characterized by repetitive behavior, such as bullying. For example, the study by Gladstone et al. (2006) showed that the experience of bullying in childhood was strongly associated with high levels of comorbidity in adulthood.

Our findings support the hypothesis that a single victimization, even if severe, rarely has a large impact in isolation. When a victim experiences both physical and emotional consequences, anxiety, and depressive symptoms, it may be important to look beyond the immediate victimization experience and consider whether the victim has a longer history

of victimization that also contributes to distress: As suggested by [Finkelhor et al. \(2005\)](#), a variety of different prior victimization patterns may exacerbate victims' symptomatology. These findings should prompt researchers to focus not only on individual types of victimization, but also to examine the risk factors, developmental trajectories, and impact of prior victimization. In PV and Not-PV, anxiety and depressive symptoms did not reach pathological severity. However, these symptoms were more severe in PV than in Not-PV. This suggests that special attention needs to be paid to the consequences of victimization in PV. Once again, this underscores the importance of rapid intervention to prevent the risk of future victimization

Intervention with the victim is therefore of paramount importance to make them aware of what has happened and reduce the risk of re-victimization. Recognizing the victimization can help the victim seek help in coping, such as social support (e.g., from friends, colleagues, or counselors), which can be effective in stopping intrusive misconduct.

In terms of coping strategies, results showed that PVs used all three strategies (proactive, avoidant, passive) more frequently than non-PVs to stop cyberstalking. Although the avoidant strategy was successful because it made victims less accessible to their cyberstalkers, avoiding the online environment could have negative social consequences, such as social isolation, as the Internet becomes increasingly important in many aspects of life, especially communication and social interaction. In particular, limiting access to social media platforms often disconnects PV from positive social relationships with friends and family, which could subsequently reduce access to social support and increase feelings of isolation. As noted by [Worsley et al. \(2017\)](#), coping strategies may be critical to PV mental health, and developing adaptive, cognitive coping strategies may help restore a sense of self-determination and mastery. At the same time, the studies by [Scarpa et al. \(2006\)](#), [Machmutow et al. \(2012\)](#), and [Brighi et al. \(2019\)](#) show that the use of maladaptive coping strategies increases the risk for negative outcomes.

Moreover, PV and Not-PV employed coping strategies in different ways. Proactive coping is positively related to emotional consequences, depressive symptoms, state, and sudden anxiety in Not-PV, whereas it is positively related only to emotional consequences in PV: proactive coping requires great effort and exacerbates negative symptoms related to the victimization experience. Avoidant coping is positively related to physical and emotional symptoms in both PV and non-PV, and in PV also to depressive symptoms and anxiety. Finally, passive coping is positively related to physical and emotional consequences, depressive symptoms, state anxiety, and sudden anxiety in PV, whereas it is only related to physical symptoms in Not-PV.

Overall, we can say that the consequences of cyberstalking are associated with proactive coping only in Not-PV, while PVs are more likely to resort to passive or avoidance strategies when faced with severe consequences. The use of passive and avoidant coping strategies could have a negative impact on victims. Studies of violent behavior show that these coping strategies (e.g., through behavioral withdrawal, denial, and self-blame) are generally ineffective (see [Scarduzio et al. 2018](#)). Therefore, victims generally remain vulnerable to abuse. In the long term, this can lead to a vicious cycle in which victims continue to face the misconduct passively and thus ineffectively

In this context, a longitudinal study might be useful to examine the relationship between symptoms and coping strategies and to determine whether adopted coping strategies change from a single victimization event to multiple victimization events.

This study has several limitations. First, it is a cross-sectional study, and the sample was not randomly selected. For this reason, the results should be taken with caution and should not be generalized. In addition, the positive association between coping strategies and various symptoms was determined by a correlation analysis, which does not allow conclusions to be drawn about the possible causal direction between the variables: It is possible that some symptoms lead to the use of certain coping strategies, but it is also possible that coping strategies exacerbate certain symptoms. We hypothesize that there is circularity between these variables, but the process could be further explored through

more in-depth analysis (e.g., using qualitative or mixed methods) and a longitudinal research design. In addition, some sociodemographic variables were not considered. For example, the gender of PVs (and their perpetrators) and Not-PVs could explain the motive for cyberstalking and previous victimization. In our study, the majority of participants were female. Further research could analyze gender as a possible variable explaining, for example, greater sensitivity to the phenomenon and a tendency to rate repeated behaviors as compulsive rather than romantic interest. Moreover, it may be possible that the end of a romantic relationship triggers an escalation of violent behavior that begins with offline behavior and continues with online behavior. The nature of the relationship between victim and cyberstalker was also not considered. As with other violent behaviors, such as bullying, where there is a perpetrator-victim relationship, a subject can become a victim if they misbehave. Thus, there is a possibility that a repeated behavior—for example, to build a relationship—may be the trigger for an online harassment campaign (Sung et al. 2018): Cyberstalking (or other online behaviors such as cyberbullying) can become a strategy to attack the harasser, for example, by damaging his/her social image and portraying him/her as a perpetrator of deviant behaviors.

In terms of consequences, we did not examine whether there are protective factors among victims. These factors, both at the individual and social levels, should be useful to identify and understand their effectiveness in reducing the negative consequences of cyberstalking. In addition, other variables (such as family situation, income stability, and parental support) that influence the use of coping strategies have not been studied. The study by Wright (2018) found an association between the social support of cyberstalking victims and depression. Therefore, a longitudinal study could be useful to better understand both the influence of some sociodemographic characteristics and the use of specific coping strategies. In addition, to better understand success in stopping the phenomenon, future research could examine the victim's satisfaction with the use of coping strategies relative to the cyberstalker's assumed misbehavior. Another limitation relates to bias associated with socially desirable response behavior, that is, the tendency to present a positive image of oneself when responding to questionnaires. This bias is always possible when the target of the research project is victimization: traditionally, men are less likely than women to report having been victimized, both in cyberstalking and in other phenomena involving some form of violence (Backe et al. 2018; Gilbar et al. 2022). Future research could therefore use an instrument to examine the issue of social desirability (Larson 2019). Finally, this study was conducted before the pandemic period. As hypothesized by Shoib et al. (2022), young adults used social media more during the lockdown than in the past, which led to an increase in cybercrime.

Despite these limitations, the findings of this study may be useful in developing interventions to mitigate the effects of cyberstalking and prevent future victimization. For example, educational interventions may be useful to inform the victim about the key features of cyberstalking, focusing more on the likely behaviors of the cyberstalker and the psychological consequences the victim may face, such as feelings of helplessness and useless coping strategies (Boehnlein et al. 2020). Clinical interventions can also be useful as support for victims, as they should help them emotionally process what has happened. Thus, physical, emotional, anxiety, and depressive symptoms can be treated, which can greatly affect the psychosocial well-being of victims (Tompson et al. 2021). As the phenomenon proves to be a growing social problem, more attention should be paid to the development of new prevention and information strategies, especially for young adults. An example of a prevention/information strategy would be to hold events to raise awareness of the dangers of the “wrong” use of the Internet. In addition, guidelines and codes of conduct should be established to promote ethical behavior when surfing the Internet and using electronic media.

As the systematic review by Gaffney et al. (2019) shows, there is insufficient research on effective interventions and prevention measures for this phenomenon. The number of research papers on the risk factors, correlates, outcomes, and effects of deviant online

behavior seems to be increasing, but concrete evidence on the ability of intervention programs to prevent or reduce this aggressive online behavior remains scarce. Thus, further research on cyberstalking and coping strategies is needed to better define not only the boundaries and consequences of the phenomenon but also the most effective intervention options.

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