LIVED EXPERIENCES OF VICTIMS OF CYBERSTALKING

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Abstract - From the late 1990's to the early 2000's, cyberstalking evolved into a social phenomenon with the goal of wreaking havoc on society. Many people take advantage of the opportunity to deceive and victimize those who spend their time online. This study aims to narrate the lived experiences of victims of cyberstalking, as well as the effects of the victimization and thevictims' journey to recovery. It used a phenomenological study to reveal the experiences of five victims of cyberstalking through personal in-depth interviews, which were supplemented by data from previous studies. The study discovered, through each respondent's routine, that the victims did experience both short-term and long-term effects as a result of their victimization.Through each of their experiences, the respondents felt hopelessness, anger, exhaustion, fear, and pain, creating a negative perception of victimization. Despite having experienced cyberstalking, the respondents demonstrated a variety of coping mechanisms that would aid them in their healing journey. Cyberstalking is a worldwide phenomenon that many people fall prey to.Understanding the factors of cyberstalking may lead to its awareness, allowing you to avoid falling victim to it in the future. It is also a way to improve law enforcement's efforts to prevent cybercrime.

Keywords - Cyberstalking, Victimization, Victims, Experiences, Cybercrime.

I. INTRODUCTION

With its global reach, the internet now provides an infinite number of opportunities to meet new people, build personal and professional networks, and encounter new social situations. (Reyns et al., 2011). Developing a personal relationship with a virtual stranger is a real possibility and very simple on the online platform. However, harassing one person has also become easier, even between intimate partners. With this in mind, the rapid evolution of time has resulted in a modern form of stalking: cyberstalking (Paulett et al., 2009).

Parsons-Pollard and Moriarty (2008) defined cyberstalking as an extension of stalking but through varying delivery modes. Sheridan and Grant (2007) listed some of the possible methods of cyberstalking commission, which include: seeking and compiling information on the victim in order to harass, threaten, and intimidate the victim online or offline; repeated unsolicited e-mailing and Instant Messaging; electronic sabotage such as spamming and sending viruses to the target; identity theft; sending or posting hostile material, misinformation, and false messages; and, tricking other Internet users. In general, cyberstalking is persistently bothering someone online.

While cyberstalking is common in most parts of the world, including the Philippines, there is little evidence of the crime. Sosa (2008) published a country report on the prevalence of cybercrime in the Philippines. The data ranged from 2003 to 2008, with the highest number of cybercrimes reported in 2007, with a total of one thousand eight hundred and forty-three (1843) cases reported. Cyberstalking is defined by the Philippine National Police Anti-Cybercrime Group as stalking or harassment carried out over the internet. They list motives for cyberstalking, such as controlling or intimidating victims or gathering information for use in other crimes such as traditional stalking or identity theft.Joaquin Parcero of the National Bureau of Investigation (NBI) discusses that the agency receives an average of 2,000 complaints of cyberstalking per month, most of which occur on the social networking site Facebook (Chua, 2011). Because cyberstalking is still a new concept to most people, the data does not show it.

With the increase in victimization experiences, it could be argued that victimization can have negative consequences. Victimization and social information processes that describe how a person copes with these experiences are thought to play a significant role in the stabilization of victim sensitivity—specifically, the tendency to expect others to be untrustworthy (Thunberg, 2020).

People consistently differ in their sensitivity to being victimized by others, particularly in their habitual tendencies to perceive, interpret, and react to social situations; victimization experiences shape future expectations about other people's trustworthiness, according to Gollwitzer et al (2015).

Cyberstalking can be considered a new type of deviant behavior. It has a negative impact on both the victims of the crime and the community. The negative impact of cyberstalking on victims appears to be similar to that of offline stalking. It has had an impact on the victims' well-being, specifically their psychological, social, interpersonal, and economic aspects of life. Cyberstalking and other forms of stalking should be taken seriously.

II. DETAILS EXPERIMENTAL

This study used the qualitative method, which accurately depicted the respondents. It made use of phenomenology, with the case being a recent occurrence. The method entails telling the victim's story, their victimization process, and their coping mechanisms.

The study used thematic analysis to analyze the data, in which certain themes were interpreted from the responses of the respondents.The study was conducted in Baguio City via audio/video call, at any time and in any location where the respondents felt comfortable being interviewed. The study's population was determined through purposive sampling where the respondents are made up of direct victims of cyberstalking. Other respondents who are related to the direct victim of cyberstalking were asked some questions in order to gather more information for the study and better understand the direct victims' experiences. The study's respondents were chosen based on their experience with cyberstalking. Cyberstalking had both long-term and short-term consequences. And the respondents had already dealt with the victimization. The cyberstalking incident must also have ended. To determine the end of a cyberstalking incident, the cyberstalking must not have occurred within a time frame of at least six (6) months.

Data on respondents' experiences with cyberstalking, the impact of such victimization, and their coping mechanisms were collected by observing their conditions, asking questions via an interview guide with structured open-ended questions and semi-formal interviews, and interpreting textual messages between the victims and the perpetrator which were collected with express consent.

A psychologist was requested during the interview in case the respondent had an episode that the researcher couldn't handle. Before, during, and after the interview, the psychologist would observe the respondents. The psychologist was on hand to assist the researcher if any of the questions provoked the respondents. The interview began with small talk until the respondents gradually opened up about the topic. The researcher only recorded the interview with the respondent's permission. The researcher took notes on the respondent's responses and let them continue talking so as not to interrupt them. The procedure was repeated on indirect victims.

The data gathered from the questions given to the respondents was collected, analyzed, and interpreted based on what the researcher discovered, with the respondents' verification. Answers given in Tagalog, Ilocano, or other languages were translated into English to make them appropriate for the study. Similarly, the respondents wished to remain anonymous, which is why they were designated as respondents with their corresponding numbers.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Experiences of Cyberstalking

The respondents recount and interpret the experiences of cyberstalking. Textual sources are used to supplement the information gathered from respondents.

Parsons-Pollard and Moriarty (2008) define cyberstalking as a crime with various modes of delivery, one of which is false reporting. This mode of delivery is defined as falsely relays a target's account as abusive or otherwise harmful in order to have it suspended or shut down. The respondents describe how the perpetrator reported their accounts in order to limit their access to online platforms.

Respondent 1 expresses, "He even reported my Twitter account, and that got suspended because they said I was spamming when in fact, I only use Twitter to be updated with the news," while Respondent 3 expresses, "He also went and reported my account, and I was suspended for seven days." The respondents tried waiting for the suspension period to expire before they could use their accounts again. It was ineffective because the perpetrator would return and spam comments on their accounts and continue falsely reporting them.

Although it was not stated how long the perpetrator had been reporting their accounts, both respondents have only mentioned their accounts being suspended once. The respondents stated that they had their accounts reported for something they had not done. They did mention reporting his account, but he would create new accounts to specifically target the respondents on the same application program.

According to Alasaad et al. (2021), perpetrators use simple methods to report accounts with innocent account holders. They could use basic scripts provided by a platform, as well as Google Chrome extensions to report a single account that could result in suspension, and they've already victimized thousands. The reason for reporting accounts varies, but it does not always involve deleting an account so that the account holder will never be able to use it again.

Not only were the victims subjected to false reporting, but they were also subjected to hateful speech. Hate speech is defined as a pronouncement that targets a specific aspect of a person's identity, such as race, ethnicity, gender, religion, sexual orientation, and even disability. This is a method of cyberstalking in which the perpetrator seeks and compiles information on the victim in order to harass them (Sheridan and Grant, 2007).

The perpetrator of the crime would leave malicious and hateful comments in each of the respondents'

comment sections where anyone could see them. He focuses on Respondent 1's history of sexual assault and calls her out on her bipolar disorder. He also sees male Respondent 2 as the next 'boy-toy' for Respondent 1. Respondent 3's mental disorder was also raised, and it was discovered that she suffers from Disruptive Mood Dysregulation (DND) Disorder. Respondent 4 and 5 would also be targeted regularly.

The perpetrator called 'Respondent 1' malicious names like "slut" and "whore," as well as targeting the mental health of both 'Respondent 1' and 'Respondent 3', information that both victims had trusted the perpetrator with. When using online applications, users are always encouraged to report malicious activities. According to Facebook, their administrators will first review the report, and if it violates their community standards, they will take the necessary action to ensure it does not happen again. To this day, most applications adhere to this standard. However, in the study, reporting was ineffective because the offender continued to spam and post malicious comments online.Not until November 2019 did the perpetrator stop making hateful and malicious comments.

The pervasiveness of social media and its technologies, with hateful speech being one of many online manifestations. It has become one of the factors that contribute to harassment, bullying, and other violent incidents directed at individuals, making it difficult to feel welcome in both digital and physical spaces (Saha et al., 2019). The offender used the information he had already gathered to target the victims and harass them online.

With the various ways to commit cyberstalking, sending or posting hostile material (revenge porn) is one of the options (Sheridan & Grant, 2007). According to the Cyber Civil Rights Initiative (2021), revenge porn is "the distribution of private, sexually-explicit images (or videos) of individuals without their consent." In this particular section, only 'Respondent 1' experienced 'Revenge Porn.'

"He would also post my nudes somewhere and show them to others," 'Respondent 1' says. “Is it right? To post someone’s nude photos taken during the course of the relationship, and even edit some of those explicit photos as if I’m having sex with another man.”

According to Gordon (2021), it is one of the most common types of sexual harassment. Gordon explains that revenge porn is a form of slut-shaming (2021). It is present in the study because the perpetrator was the victim's ex-lover, and he was so upset by the breakup that he shared her nude or partially nude images online, even editing a nude photo of the victim with another person.

'Respondent 1' has experienced her ex-unwanted lover's posting of private, sexually-explicit images or videos, also known as Revenge Porn. Respondent 2 was present at the time. The story's orientation occurred between November 2018 and September 2019 in cyberspace, specifically on the platforms where the perpetrator shared the explicit images. Respondents 1 and 2, the people to whom the explicit images and/or videos were shared, and the perpetrator were all involved. The narrative's complicating action was having 'Respondent 1's' nudes' sent to different people without her consent.

'Respondent 1' chose to report and block the content as well as report and block her ex-lover to resolve the issue. Another ineffective method of dealing with cyberstalking and the offender because the offender always returns. "He'd always find a way to target Respondent 1, and I think it's because he doesn't like seeing Respondent 1 living happily without him," responds Respondent 2.The victim was not only slut-shamed, but her explicit photos and videos were also illegally distributed. The victim attempted to report to the police once but never did so again because of an incident with the offender in which he attempted suicide.

3.2. Effects of Cyberstalking

The effects of cyberstalking on victims are classified into two types: short-term effects and long-term effects of victimization.The first short-term effect interpreted from the respondents' data would be a sense of rage. According to Bennett (2019), anger is an easily accessed and primal response that can be dangerous if the individual succumbs to it frequently without properly dealing with it. Anger is healthy when but not when it is excessive felt infrequently and appropriately, One of the themes derived from the interpreted data is anger, which 'Respondent 1' and 'Respondent 3' expressed during their narrations.

“I became enraged when he mentioned my mental disorder, which was bipolar disorder, and it honestly hurts,” says Respondent 1 'Respondent 3' adds, "I felt really mad, like really mad. Because I'm just a kid, and he'd do that to me."

According to Fleming (2020), anger is a basic survival instinct that is triggered in response to provocation, frustration, or threats, and it triggers a person's flight or fight response, implying that an angry person will either run away angry or fight angry. The study's subjects are known to be active online. The perpetrator triggered them with malicious comments such as slut-shaming and exposing the victims' personal information, resulting in a legitimate reaction of rage from the victims.

One short-term effect of victimization would be exhaustion. Exhaustion can be caused by a change in routine, a disruption in sleep, or the appearance of stressors in your life (Brennan, 2020). According to Brennan (2020), symptoms of exhaustion may include depression, anxiety, a lack of goal setting, a lack of concentration, and a disconnect from relationships. It is also known as fatigue, and it becomes a problem when it affects a person on a

daily basis, causing harm to one's health and safety, according to Brennan (2020).

Exhaustion is another theme derived from the interpreted data, as stated by Respondents 1 and 2. "You know when you're really exhausted, you're on the floor, and even if someone would offer you help, you know they're also tired," 'Respondent 1' says. "What am I going to do? It's a difficult time. But it was difficult to tell because it made you doubt your friends. It makes you want to avoid your friends. It makes you want to distrust everyone," she adds. Exhaustion is accompanied by hopelessness, which is another short-term effect affecting cyberstalking victims in this study. Although Respondent 1 states that she felt exhausted the researcher interpreted that she felt hopeless whilst dealing with her perpetrator.

Respondent 2 also felt helpless in the face of cyberstalking. He expresses hopelessness by saying, "I felt hopeless because all of these were happening online, and it was harder to have to deal with it." He expresses hopelessness because, even if he wanted to help, he couldn't because the stalking was happening online.

Respondent 1 expressed hopelessness because she felt there were few people who could help her and nothing she could do because her ex-lover continued to bother her. Respondent 2 expresses hopelessness because of the circumstances surrounding the cyberstalking—where it was taking place online and they couldn't really catch the perpetrator. It was more difficult for victims to act in cyberspace because the perpetrator could easily avoid responsibility.

To reiterate, exhaustion can lead to additional stressors that drain a person. Respondent 1 stated that dealing with her ex-lover became quite exhausting or tedious as a result of her cyberstalking experiences. It was also exhausting for her to fully trust those around her. Respondent 2, on the other hand, claims he became tired of attempting to apprehend the perpetrator because he couldn't juggle everything on his plate at the same time. The data gathered allowed the researcher to conclude that, while the victims' reasons for exhaustion varied, they all stemmed from cyberstalking.

Fear was discovered to be one of the long-term effects in the data collected. According to Fritscher (2022), fear is a primitive human emotion that can arise from real or imagined dangers. Certain objects or situations, future and/or imagined events, real environmental dangers, and the unknown, she continues, may cause fear. The respondents in this study expressed their fear of the perpetrator's actions against them.

"It had gotten to the point where I didn't even want to open any app anymore, afraid that he'd be there," respondent 1 says, adding that she was afraid of doing something she'd done countless times before because she knew she'd have to face her ex-lover. According to Fritscher (2022), some psychological symptoms of fear include feeling overwhelmed, upset, out of control, or a sense of impending death. Respondent 1 was so terrified that she couldn't even visit a social media site for fear of being attacked again.

"Well, truth be told; he's quite scary," respondent 2 adds. "Uh, one person creating a slew of accounts solely to target Respondent 1. It was terrible to tell you the truth, hmm." Respondent 2 is concerned about what might happen to his friend. He is aware that the perpetrator creates multiple accounts in order to target not only Respondent 1, but also others such as himself. As a result, he revealed that he was terrified of the perpetrator.

Respondent 1's fear created a sense of impending danger whenever she opened the app where her ex-lover attacked her the most. Respondent 2 was concerned about the perpetrator's future actions. The researcher interprets the data given that fear arose as a result of the victim's ex-harmful lover's acts, whether directly or indirectly.

Another effect that victims may have to live with for a long time is the feeling of being hurt. Hurt, according to Hartney (2020), is emotional pain that stems from non-physical sources. She goes on to say that it is also most likely the result of the actions of others. This study's respondents express their anguish at being victimized.

"But, to be honest, even if I assumed it wasn't a friend who did it, it still hurt at the time. It's still... you know. It messes with your mind and emotions a lot," Respondent 1 explains. She discusses how hurt she felt after having doubts with some of her friends. "But still, it was hard to tell like it makes you doubt your friends. It makes you want to avoid your friends. It makes you want to distrust everyone," she adds. Her hurt made it difficult for her to trust her friends.

Not only was it emotionally difficult for her to trust her friends, but she also shared how the perpetrator's actions had hurt her. "It's still painful," she says. And it hurts that the way he's treated me this whole time." Respondent 1 shares her cyberspace experiences with her ex-lover and what he's done to her. She was hurt and scared as a result of those experiences.

Respondent 3, 4, and 5 also express their pain asvictims of the case. "And, uhm, it hurts because he was my friend, and he chose to stab... to stab me in the back," one Respondent exclaims. "I felt so betrayed and mad, and I was hurt," she says, explaining that she felt betrayed because they were friends before the breakup and before the cyberstalking.

According to Hartney, fear can cause a variety of mental health problems (2020). It may result in depression or anxiety. Respondent 1's emotional pain caused her to be anxious and even doubtful about her

routines as a result of her experiences. "Like nothing, I felt like if I go out there and enjoy myself, and then someone would see me, am I safe?" she says. “Will people believe me? Will anyone believe me? I’d rather not, because no matter what I do reality would punch me right in the face again. There is no way to win… Like you know, old, old accounts, and I just wanted to delete them all; if I can't kill myself in real life, I might as well kill myself on the internet, right?" says Respondent 1. “That's how it felt... You know, I thought back then that if I didn't have a kid, you wouldn't hear from me now,” she continues.

According to Verrocchio et al., pain is a key clinical factor in understanding why people commit suicide (2016). Suicidal thoughts, suicidal tendencies, and suicide itself have all been interpreted as causes of mental pain in the study.

From hurt feelings to anxiety feelings to exhaustion feelings to suicidal thoughts, one act from a single person can elicit a wide range of emotions in another. Respondent 1 described how she was hurt, afraid, and anxious as a result of her former partner's actions. Those actions had a negative impact on her, altering her life and routines. Respondent 2 was more concerned about what might happen after he shared his experiences. And, given her previous relationship with the perpetrator, Respondent 3, 4, and 5 felt betrayed and hurt.

The victimization experienced by the respondent resulted in an increasing number of long-term consequences. These include living in constant fear, having constant anxiety, deep-seated hurt, and suicidal tendencies. Cyberstalking has caused emotional distress to those who have been victims of it. It has had a negative impact on the victims rather than a positive impact.

3.3. Coping Mechanisms

All five respondents were able to disconnect from the internet, which became a good start as a coping mechanism. Respondent 1 displayed varying emotions as she narrated her experiences with cyberstalking during the interview. She would occasionally cry as she relived her past, and her voice would become louder, indicating that she was angry. Respondent 2 was a little distant when he said he took a break from the internet. He was overjoyed as he spoke about his girlfriend, whom he obviously adores. Respondent 3, 4, and 5 all decided to take an indefinite break from social media.

Quaglio and Millar have stated that dozens of articles report on major privacy scandals, security breaches, the spread of fake news, harmful behaviors such as cyberbullying, cybertheft, revenge porn, and internet addiction as negative effects that the internet can have on social relationships (2020). To combat this, prevention and health promotion for the use of technologies and cyberspace are required (Quaglio & Millar, 2020). There are positive results from taking a break from the internet and online platforms.

Aside from taking a break, hobbies also work as a good coping mechanism. Respondent 1 describes how she was nominated for two awards, advocate of the year and top educator. She describes it as a fantastic platform for assisting other women. Respondent 1 appeared very happy and content as she told her story. She chose to turn her cyberstalking experiences into a lesson that she could teach others. Respondent 2 chose to concentrate on work because he did not want to neglect his job. Respondent 2 was the most goal-oriented of the respondents. He would mention that he has a job and that it was difficult for him to deal with both the cyberstalking and his job.Respondent 3, 4, and 5, on the other hand, claims to have been preoccupied with their soccer team as a way to distract them from the victimization. The statements made by respondents all focused on how they diverted their attention with hobbies or work.

Scott discusses that enjoyable leisure activities were associated with better physical functions and less fatigue (2020). Hobbies, she continues, have become a beneficial way to cope with stress and stressors. Hobbies can cause eustress, which is a healthy type of stress that helps people feel excited about life (Scott, 2020).

Other than that, strong ties with family and friends have worked as a good coping mechanism. Respondent 1 describes how her child has become one of her top priorities in life. She goes on to say that she chose to spend more time with her child to distract herself from all of the negativity she's been receiving via cyberspace. She also found solace in her current lover, who served as one of her advisers during the cyberstalking. According to the researcher, she was able to overcome cyberstalking thanks to the support of her family and friends. Respondent 2 says he found more support from his partner. He describes how she would tell him about her day and how much he enjoyed listening to her. His partner assisted in diverting his attention away from cyberspace. Respondent 3 also claims to have found someone who has assisted her with her mental health. She also admits that Respondent 1's ex-lover had little effect on her. While Respondent 4 and 5 aimed in building stronger bonds with their families.

According to Thatcher, spending time with family can help reduce stress and anxiety (2020). He goes on to say that spending time with family promotes a healthier lifestyle, boosts self-confidence, reduces stress, improves physical health, and improves mental health. In this section of the study, the respondent discusses how they dealt with cyberstalking through friends and/or family.A strong support system can assist victims of crime in dealing with their ordeal. The victims continue to recover from cyberstalking by spending time with their family and friends, as well as taking a break from the internet and focusing on other tasks.

IV. CONCLUSION

In light of the findings of the study, the following are the conclusions:

- The study participants' experiences vary, and the impact varies in degree depending on factors such as the form of victimization and usual activities.
- Cyberstalking can cause a psychological imbalance in the victim, which can be momentary or long-lasting.
- The victims demonstrated positive coping techniques by adopting life-changing habits that reduced their reliance on social media.

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