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# Cyber Stalking: Impact Of Gender, Cyber Stalker-Victim Relationship And Proximity

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CYBER STALKING: IMPACT OF GENDER, CYBER STALKER-VICTIM  
RELATIONSHIP AND PROXIMITY

by

Billea Jo Marie Ahlgrim  
Bachelor of Arts, University of North Dakota, 2010

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty

of the

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for the degree of

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This thesis, submitted by Billea Ahlgrim in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Science from the University of North Dakota, has been read by the Faculty Advisory Committee under whom the work has been done and is hereby approved.



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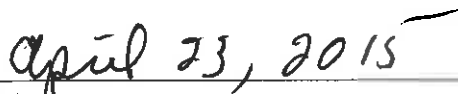


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This thesis is being submitted by the appointed advisory committee as having met all of the requirements of the School of Graduate Studies at the University of North Dakota and is hereby approved.



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Dean of the School of Graduate Studies



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Title Cyber Stalking: Impact of Gender, Cyber Stalker-Victim Relationship, and Proximity

Department Forensic Psychology

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Billea Jo Marie Ahlgrim  
4/21/2015

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My friends; for their encouragement to never give up, and endless advice

Kaver; who makes life a whole lot less stressful

To my mum.  
You mean the world to me.

## ABSTRACT

Cyber stalking is a relatively new phenomenon that is currently limited in empirical research. Consequently, despite the seriousness of the crime, prevalence rates are unreliable and estimates suffer from vast variation. Cyber stalking may be underreported due to limited community understanding of what behaviors constitute cyber stalking. Many factors unique to cyber stalking may impact the extent to which the crime is reported, and the extent to which the perpetrator or victim is held responsible. The current study aimed to examine the impact of perpetrator gender, relationship between the perpetrator and victim, and the perpetrator's proximity to the victim on perceptions of cyber stalking and victim blame. The current study further aimed to gather data on the prevalence of cyber stalking, by measuring cyber stalking behaviors experienced by participants and cyber stalking behaviors engaged in by participants. Participants read one of eight scenarios that varied victim gender, cyber stalker-victim relationship, and proximity. Perpetrator gender and proximity both impacted perceptions of the scenario as cyber stalking and its severity. While cyber stalking-victim relationship was found not to impact perceptions of the scenario, contrary to previous stalking research. Finally, both participant gender and self-reported prior cyber stalking victimization was found to impact attitudes toward cyber stalking. Implications are discussed.

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Since the late 1980s and early 1990s, stalking has gained attention in both the media and research as an important issue (Basile, Swahn, Chen, & Saltzman, 2006; Moriarty & Freiburger, 2008). Research on stalking has focused on overt in-person behavior, which can also be referred to as offline stalking. The first offline stalking laws were developed in 1990 in California, and since this time there has been extensive research on the topic (Fox, Nobles, & Fisher, 2011; Kinkade, Burns, & Fuentes, 2005; Pinals, 2007). After more than two decades of research there is still no solid definition of offline stalking agreed upon in the literature (Pittaro, 2007; Sheridan, Blaauw, & Davies, 2003). Confusion over what defines stalking has been further complicated with the development of cyber stalking and the need to incorporate this concept into laws and research. As the rate of cyber stalking increases along with advancements in technology the need for a solid definition also increases (Pinals, 2007; Pittaro, 2007). There is a lack of understanding surrounding cyber stalking due to a lack of research (Pittaro, 2007). Traditional or offline stalking is often mistakenly seen as more serious than cyber stalking, which is most likely due to the limited face-to-face contact the victim has with the perpetrator (Pittaro, 2007). The Internet has become a part of every aspect of our lives, and as such the opportunity for victimization has also increased (Reyns, Henson, & Fisher, 2011)

## Stalking

Stalking is a concern for millions of individuals in the United States, and research continues to report that magnitude of the issue has not diminished over the decades (Basile et al., 2006). Stalking is a term that is not easily defined as numerous definitions can be found throughout the research literature. At its broadest, stalking is defined as the unwanted repeated following, harassing, or threatening of another person (Buhi, Clayton & Surrency, 2008; Fox et al., 2011; Kinkade et al., 2005; Spitzberg & Veksler, 2007). Stalking generally involves a repeated set of actions that often invade a person's privacy even if the action is occurring in a public space (Spitzberg & Hoobler, 2002). Other definitions may include a credible threat or fear, such as an intentional repeated pattern of behaviors that contain a credible threat and a reasonable person would consider it threatening or fear inducing (Roberts, 2008; Sheridan et al., 2003; Spitzberg & Hoobler, 2002; Spitzberg & Veksler, 2007). This has had important implications on the attention and method used in both stalking research and the development of legal definitions (Bussile et al., 2006).

Stalking itself is a relatively new crime that was first criminalized in 1990 in California (Fox et al., 2011; Kinkade et al., 2005; Lambert et al., 2008; Parsons-Pollard & Moriarty, 2009). All 50 states currently have stalking laws, but there is great variation between legal standards, with virtually no two legal standards being the same (Fox et al., 2011; Kinkade et al., 2005; Lambert et al., 2008). The National Institute of Justice developed the model Anti-stalking Code, which requires that stalking include purposeful action directed at a specific individual and the action must cause a reasonable person fear (Cass, 2011). These three common elements to stalking laws are that; the act must be

intentional, entail a credible threat, and cause fear (Dennison & Thomson, 2005; Meloy, 2007; Pinals, 2007; Roberts, 2008).

Legal definitions can potentially differ on all three of these elements, as well as what behaviors constitute stalking, the number of times the behavior must be repeated, and what is considered a negative effect (Blaauw, Sheridan, & Winkel, 2002). In most states, offline stalking requires repetitive acts that the victim is aware of and reports, and the victim's emotional response determines the presence of victimization (Cass, 2011). There is continued debate on what constitutes a credible threat, as this is often left to the victim's subjective perception and reaction to the behavior (Dennison & Thomson, 2005; Fox et al., 2011; Hills & Taplin, 1998; Parsons-Pollard & Moriarty, 2009). This is a complex definition that lends itself to confusion within the law and public communities (Cass, 2011).

Further adding to the complexity, as technology has advanced there has been the development of stalking behaviors on the Internet, which has created further complexities in all areas of stalking research and the development of comprehensive laws to protect victims. Cyber stalking is most often defined as the repeated pursuit of an individual to intimidate, control, monitor, or harass using electronic or other Internet capable devices (Lyndon, Bonds-Roqcke, & Cratty, 2011; Reyns et al., 2012; Roberts, 2008; Piotrowski & Lathrop, 2011; Sheridan & Grant, 2007). Like offline stalking, cyber stalking behaviors are often conceptualized as persistent, unwanted, premeditated, and aggressive (Pittaro, 2007; Reyns et al., 2012). Other researchers include an element of fear in the definition of cyber stalking, which is also seen in offline stalking definitions (Ngo & Paternoster, 2011; Pittaro, 2007). Cyber stalking is perpetrated in an unregulated online

environment with limited protection, which requires further attention to better protect victims.

### **Cyber Stalking**

The Internet has allowed for the easy invasion of another's privacy, while maintaining one's anonymity (Drahokoupilova, 2007; Reyns, Henson, & Fisher, 2012; Shimizu, 2013). The line between what is public and what is private information has become blurred with the openness of shared information on the Internet (Alexy, Burgess, Baker, & Smyak, 2005; Drahokoupilova, 2007; King-Ries, 2011; Parsons-Pollard & Moriarty, 2009). This environment has impacted the expectations of what privacy is, what it entails, and the degree of privacy that can be expected (Alexy et al., 2005; Drahokoupilova, 2007; King-Ries, 2011; Parsons-Pollard & Moriarty, 2009). These privacy expectations have changed the way communication occurs, and allowed for the growth of opportunities to monitor, harass, and pursue another individual (Dreßing, Bailer, Anders, Wagner, & Gallas, 2014; Reyns et al., 2011).

Technology may encourage individuals that are predisposed to act in deviant and disinhibited ways to become especially isolated, aggressive, superficial, and anonymous while on the Internet (Bocil & McFarlane, 2003; Drahokoupilova, 2007; Pinals, 2007). There is a general sense of depersonalization and disinhibition that using technology allows the cyber stalker to have when victimizing an individual (Pinals, 2007; Sheridan & Grant, 2007). Cyber stalkers can place physical and emotional distance between themselves and the victim while still inflicting a great deal of harm (Bocil & McFarlane, 2003; Pinals, 2007; Pittaro, 2007; Reyns et al., 2012; Roberts, 2008). There is an ever



increasing amount of personal information stored online that can be remotely accessed with programs that are commercially available (King-Ries, 2011; Roberts, 2008). A single perpetrator can gain access to a large number of victims with relative ease and remain anonymous (Bocij, Bocij, & McFarlane, 2003; Pinals, 2007; Pittaro, 2007; Roberts, 2008).

Cyber stalking can be seen as either, an extension and variation of stalking, or as an entirely separate set of deviant actions (Bocij et al., 2003; Dreßing et al., 2014; Moriarty & Freiburger, 2008; Parsons-Pollard & Moriarty, 2009; Sheridan & Grant, 2007). Both cyber stalking and offline stalking are pursuit based and focus on harassment and control of another individual (Pittaro, 2007; Reynolds et al., 2012). Cyber stalking behaviors fall within the existing conceptualization of offline stalking, but these behaviors have been modified to be utilized with new technologies by individuals (Roberts, 2008). This suggests that cyber stalking is a variation of offline stalking that simply utilizes novel behaviors and technologies.

There are some unique stalking opportunities that cyber stalkers can take advantage of that differentiates the behavior from offline stalkers (Pittaro, 2007; Reynolds et al., 2012). A major difference is that cyber stalkers can pursue their victims regardless of geographic separation (Pinals, 2007; Reynolds et al., 2012; Roberts, 2008; Shimizu, 2013). Large amounts of personal information are stored on-line about virtually everyone and is easily accessed by cyber stalkers (Bocij et al., 2003; Pinals, 2007; Pittaro, 2007). This kind of easy access has led to an increase in the number of victims and incidents of stranger cyber stalking (Bocij et al., 2003; Reynolds et al., 2012; Roberts, 2008). The cyber stalker can create multiple identities online to harass a single victim, and they can easily

encourage third party stalking (Goodno, 2007; Roberts, 2008; Shimizu, 2013). The cyber stalker can also remain virtually anonymous, which increases the opportunity for deception (Cavezza & McEwan, 2014; D'Ovidio & Doyle, 2003; Goodno, 2007; Reynolds et al., 2012; Shimizu, 2013). Due to these differences, researchers can view cyber stalking as being a separate, unique form of deviant criminal behavior than that of offline stalking (Moriarty & Freiburger, 2008; Pinals, 2007; Pittaro, 2007; Roberts, 2008), while others may view cyber stalking as a variation of offline stalking (Cavezza & McEwan, 2014; Dreßing et al., 2014; Nobles, Reynolds, Fox, & Fisher, 2014).

### **Methods of Cyber Stalking**

Technology can be used as a tool to prey upon, harass, threaten, and generate fear in victims, and as technology advances, it is easy to access thus cyber stalking has become easier to execute (Alexy et al., 2005; Pinals, 2007; Pittaro, 2007; Reynolds et al., 2012). Cyber stalking behaviors are an exaggerated and extreme version of normal social interaction that are used to exert control and normally causes fear in the victim (Drahokoupilova, 2007; Lyndon, Bonds-Raacke, & Cratty, 2011). The technology commonly utilized by cyber stalkers can include email, instant messages, chat rooms, bulletin boards, blogs, internet sites, social networking, monitoring devices, GPS, cameras, listening devices, viruses, and computer programs (King-Ries, 2011; Pinals, 2007; Reynolds et al., 2012; Roberts, 2008).

Email has been found to be the primary method used by most cyber stalkers because it allows for harassing, threatening, hateful, and obscene messages to be sent in written, audio, video, or pictorial formats (Pinals, 2007; Pittaro, 2007; Roberts, 2008). Email also allows the cyber stalker to hide viruses or Trojans in the message without the

victim being aware their computer has been compromised (Pinals, 2007; Pittaro, 2007). Both public and private information stored online can be easily accessed either through personal knowledge of the Internet or through paid online information agencies that gather the information for an individual (Drahokoupilova, 2007; Goodno, 2007; Reyns et al., 2012; Shimizu, 2013).

Third party stalking is also a common behavior that cyber stalkers engage in (Bocij, & McFarlane, 2003; Drahokoupilova, 2007; Goodno, 2007; Parsons-Pollard & Moriarty, 2009). Third party stalking occurs when the cyber stalker gets other individuals to knowingly or unknowingly harass victims. This can be accomplished by asking individuals to knowingly engage in harassing behaviors or the cyber stalker can pose as the victim online and post information that causes other individuals to send the real victim threatening and harassing messages (Goodno, 2007; Pinals, 2007; Pittaro, 2007; Shimizu, 2013). All of these behaviors allow for increased rates of cyber stalking and victimization.

### **Prevalence**

As a relatively contemporary crime, there is little information on the prevalence of cyber stalking. There are currently no reliable rates of cyber stalking, and many studies that have attempted to establish these rates suffer from methodological issues (Piotrowski & Lathrop, 2011; Reyns et al., 2011; Reyns et al., 2012; Sheridan & Grant, 2007). For example, many of the studies collapse offline stalking and cyber stalking into one category, and other studies do not remove rates of offline stalking that occur with some harassment occurring online, and it is estimated that 26 to 41% of individuals who are stalked offline also experience some form of cyber stalking (King-Ries, 2011; Reyns et

al., 2011; Sheridan & Grant, 2007). Studies on cyber stalking also suffer from small sample size, victims being unaware of their victimization, and samples taken from very specific populations, such as undergraduates or women reporting to victimization hotlines (Roberts, 2008).

Cyber stalking rates are estimated at anywhere from 1 to 82% (Bocij, et al., 2003; Dreßing et al., 2014; Piotrowski & Lathrop, 2011; Reyns et al., 2012; Sheridan & Grant, 2007). It is thought that cyber stalking is severely underreported, with possibly only half of all incidents being reported (King-Ries, 2011; Parsons-Pollard & Moriarty, 2009; Pitrowski & Lathrop, 2011). Cyber stalking likely goes unreported because it is not thought of as a criminal offense, the victim did not think it would be taken seriously, or the victim was not sure if it was a crime (Alexy et al., 2005; Lambert et al., 2008; Parsons-Pollard & Moriarty, 2009). As such this contributes to a lack of reliable prevalence rates being established.

### **Legal Considerations**

As a new crime that is a growing international criminological issue, cyber stalking requires further consideration (D'Ovido & Doyle, 2003; Reyns et al., 2012; Roberts, 2008). There is confusion to what cyber stalking actually is and how it should be defined within the legal system (Parsons-Pollard & Moriarty, 2009). Cyber stalking laws vary from state to state. Only a handful of states have cyber stalking specific laws, many others have made alterations to their existing stalking laws to include online behaviors, and a few have made no alterations to their existing laws (D'Ovido & Doyle, 2003; Parsons-Pollard & Moriarty, 2009). Since 2008, 44 states have had some form of legal

recourse for cyber stalking, leaving 6 states with no cyber stalking laws (D'Ovidio & Doyle, 2003; Pittaro, 2007; Roberts, 2008; Shimizu, 2013).

Many of the laws make protecting victims extremely difficult, with some of the laws making the legality of cyber stalking behaviors ambiguous in some jurisdictions (Parsons-Pollard & Moriarty, 2009; Pittaro, 2007; Shimizu, 2013). States that have amended existing stalking laws often require a credible threat to be present, but cyber stalking is often perpetrated by an anonymous individual (Parsons-Pollard & Moriarty, 2009; Reynolds et al., 2012; Roberts, 2008). Although it may induce fear, it can be difficult to establish a credible threat (Parsons-Pollard & Moriarty, 2009; Reynolds et al., 2012; Roberts, 2008). In some cases victims are unable to obtain civil protection orders or have them enforced on the basis of cyber stalking, but these crimes are unlikely to be prosecuted (Roberts, 2008; Shimizu, 2013).

There are also a few major issues facing cyber stalking laws. Internet providers are not required to release personal information to the police allowing individuals to remain anonymous (D'Ovidio & Doyle, 2003; Pittaro, 2007). One of the largest issues is jurisdiction; it is estimated that 26% of cyber stalkers reside in a different jurisdiction than their victims (D'Ovidio & Doyle, 2003; Pinals, 2007; Pittaro, 2007). When defining cyber stalking there are unique criminal components that should be considered. These components can include the use of electronic communications, the absence of a physical threat, geographical separation, the ability to remain anonymous, indirect communications, encouraging third party stalking, and individual behaviors that may seem normal and legal when not in the context of all the actions perpetrated (Dunlap et al., 2012; Pinals, 2007; Reynolds et al., 2012; Shimizu, 2013).

To best address all of these issues, it has been suggested that cyber stalking laws should follow three general principles: first, to maintain a consistency in legislation between offline stalking and cyber stalking; second, to not refer to specific technologies that are likely to become outdated; and finally, to enable prosecution across jurisdictions (Roberts, 2008). It takes more advanced computer knowledge to identify, understand, and protect against the threat of cyber stalking than it does to engage in cyber stalking behaviors (King-Ries, 2011). It is important to come to a definitive definition of cyber stalking because it impacts how laws are made, how legal and investigative resources are distributed, and how victims are treated (Parsons-Pollard & Moriarty, 2009).

Cyber stalking can take many forms and is thus, hard to detect and understand by both law enforcement and the public (Bocij et al., 2003; King-Ries, 2011; Lambert et al., 2008; Parsons-Pollard & Moriarty, 2009; Pittaro, 2007). Coupled with lack of police training, expertise, and resources, effective investigation and prosecution of cyber stalking is almost nonexistent (King-Ries, 2011, Roberts, 2008). Victims of cyber stalking are better able to provide evidence or proof of the cyber stalking due to the ability to log online communications, but it is generally difficult to identify cyber stalkers, even with this information (Roberts, 2008).

The biggest hurdle in cyber stalking investigation and prosecution is jurisdiction. Cyber stalking often occurs over multiple jurisdictions that will likely have different legal standards (Roberts, 2008). This results in law enforcement agencies not knowing where to prosecute the crime (Roberts, 2008). Prosecution could depend on where the act occurred, the perpetrators country of origin, the victims' current location, or the victims' country of origin (Roberts, 2008). As more cyber stalking cases are tried with these

jurisdictional issues it appears there is a legal precedent forming that the crime should be prosecuted in the jurisdiction where the criminal conduct occurred (Roberts, 2008).

While difficult, it is important that cyber stalking laws try and keep ahead of the technology being used, in order to better identify perpetrators (Pinals, 2007).

### **Perpetrators**

Due to the limited research conducted on cyber stalking perpetrators there have been inconclusive findings on gender distribution (Dunlap, Hodell, Golding, & Wasarhaley, 2012; Piotrowski & Lathrop, 2011; Sheridan & Grant, 2007). Some studies have found men and women are equally likely to engage in cyber stalking while others have found higher rates of male perpetrators (Dunlap et al., 2012; Moriarty & Freiburger, 2008; Reynolds et al., 2012; Piotrowski & Lathrop, 2011). One possible explanation for this is that some studies do not remove offline stalkers that engage in some form of online behavior from their cyber stalking rates, and much of the research has found that offline stalking is primarily perpetrated by males (Lambert et al., 2008; Roberts, 2008; Sheridan, Gillett, Davies, Blaauw, & Patel, 2003). The gender of the perpetrator may have important legal implications if women perpetrators are not perceived as being dangerous. As a result the criminal justice system or the community at large may not take cyber stalking perpetrated by women seriously.

Cyber stalkers are commonly young, averaging anywhere from 16 – 24 years old; although some studies have found them to be older individuals with stable employment and community ties (Bocij et al., 2003; Piotrowski & Lathrop, 2011; Pittaro, 2007; Reynolds et al., 2012). They are most often white middle to upper class individuals (Pittaro, 2007; Reynolds et al., 2012). Cyber stalkers are more likely to be educated, with computer and

technology skills, and have above average intelligence than offline stalkers (Bocij et al., 2003; Cavezza & McEwan, 2014; Pinals, 2007; Piotrowski & Lathrop, 2011; Roberts, 2008). There is rarely a history of mental illness, although perpetrators tend to be emotionally distant and seek out attention and companionship (Bocij et al., 2003; Bocij & McFarlane, 2003; Pittaro, 2007). Cyber stalkers often suffer from an Internet addiction and sometimes use pornography (Pinals, 2007; Piotrowski & Lathrop, 2011; Sheridan & Grant, 2007). There is rarely a history of criminal activity or substance abuse (Pinals, 2007; Pittaro, 2007; Sheridan & Grant, 2007). One possible exception to these findings is when looking specifically at forensic samples, at which point perpetrators of cyber stalking are similar to offline stalkers in all of the above respects (Cavezza & McEwan, 2014).

Using extremely limited information about a victim, a cyber stalker is able to contact nearly anyone from anywhere with little to no fear of ever being identified (Bocij & McFarlane, 2003; Pinals, 2007; Reynolds et al., 2012). Perpetrators are also able to be geographically distant from their victim(s), which increases the rate of stranger cyber stalking (Bocij et al., 2003; Piotrowski & Lathrop, 2011; Reynolds et al., 2012; Sheridan & Grant, 2007). This also allows for the period of victimization to be quite lengthy (Dreßing et al., 2014). Furthermore, the Internet has allowed for an almost endless supply of victims for cyber stalkers who can inflict a great deal of harm from a distance (Bocij & McFarlane, 2003; Reynolds et al., 2011). The rates of stranger cyber stalking remain equivocal. Stranger cyber stalking may go unreported because the victim does not perceive it as dangerous due to social acceptance of reduced privacy. Another possibility



is because offline stalking is mainly perpetrated by known individuals, people are under the misconception that cyber stalking is also perpetrated by known individuals.

### **Victims**

Cyber stalking is not often thought of as a serious issue, and the psychological harm that can come to victims is often over looked (Drahokoupilova, 2007; Sheridan & Grant, 2007). The Internet has widened the opportunity for victimization to such a degree that anyone individual can become the victim of cyber stalking (Pinals, 2007; Pittaro, 2007; Roberts, 2008). Victims are often chosen at random by cyber stalkers (Pinals, 2007; Pittaro, 2007; Roberts, 2008). Cyber stalking victims are normally young, with college populations at an increased risk (Reyns et al., 2012; Sheridan & Grant, 2007). Unlike offline stalking cyber stalking may have a more equal victim gender distribution, although this is not found in all studies (Moriarty & Freiburger, 2008; Pittaro, 2007; Roberts, 2008; Sheridan & Fisher, 2012).

For instance, in general population samples women appear to be more likely to suffer victimization (Purcell, Pathe & Mullen, 2001; Sheridan, Gillett, Davies, Blaauw. & Patel, 2003; Sheridan & Grant, 2007; Spitzberg & Hoobler, 2002). Although men are potentially at risk of being cyber stalked but they are unlikely to report such incidents, which could be a result of gender roles that make it socially unacceptable for men to be seen as a victim (Sheridan & Grant, 2007). The nature of the relationship between perpetrator and victim is also potentially different in cases of offline stalking and cyber stalking. Victims of offline stalking are more likely to be stalked by a former intimate, whereas cyber stalking victims are at increased risk to be stalked by a stranger (Lambert et al., 2008; Reyns et al., 2012; Roberts, 2008; Weller, Hope & Sheridan, 2012). This has

implications for the prosecution of stranger cyber stalkers, if they are not seen as a threat, action may not be taken against them.

There are certain behaviors that place an individual at increased risk for being cyber stalked. Allowing strangers to view one's social media online profile and/or personal information, being female, being in a relationship, using online dating sites, and generally being open to meeting strangers online (Reyns et al., 2011; Roberts, 2008; Spitzberg & Hoobler, 2002). Online dating sites can facilitate the development of one-sided obsessive relationships by a stranger (Roberts, 2008). Large numbers of photos posted on social networking sites, frequent updates on social networking sites, the use of multiple social networking sites, and the use of instant messaging have all been correlated with an increase in the likelihood of harassment and cyber stalking occurring (Reyns et al., 2011). These victims are often unaware of when cyber stalking will occur, if it will reoccur or stop, and how geographically close their cyber stalker is (Parsons-Pollard & Moriarty, 2009; Pinals, 2007). It is likely that a cyber stalker will not be geographically close to his or her victim, which may be perceived as less dangerous. If this is the case it may result in the crime being taken less seriously leading to individuals not protecting themselves against a potentially dangerous situation. It is almost impossible for victims of cyber stalking to escape their stalkers, and surveillance is more likely to go undetected (Goodno, 2007; Roberts, 2008).

The harm that is faced by victims of cyber stalking is estimated to be equal to that experienced by offline stalking victims (Moriarty & Freiburger, 2008; Parsons-Pollard & Moriarty, 2009; Pinals, 2007; Pittaro, 2007; Roberts, 2008). Cyber stalking victims can suffer economically, psychologically, socially, and physically (Lambert et al., 2013;

McEwan, Mullen & Purcell, 2007; Moriarty & Freiburger, 2008; Sheridan & Lyndon, 2012). Cyber stalking victims may suffer from severe and chronic psychological distress, such as flashbacks, post-traumatic stress disorder, fear, anxiety, apprehension, paranoia, depression, anger, helplessness, suicidal ideation, and other mental disorders (Kraft & Wang, 2010; McEwan et al., 2007; Moriarty & Freiburger, 2008; Roberts, 2008; Sheridan & Lyndon, 2012). Social and economic costs to cyber stalking victims can include loss of job, change of routine, moving, loss of friends, theft/fraud, replacing technology, and loss of savings if legal fees are necessary (McEwan et al., 2007; Moriarty & Freiburger, 2008; Pittaro, 2007; Sheridan & Lyndon, 2012). Cyber stalking victims are also at increased risk for physical violence and harm, especially when the cyber stalker is a former intimate (Drahokoupilova, 2007; Kraft & Wang, 2010; Sheridan & Lyndon, 2012). Cyber stalking victims are exposed to severe long-term harm that is difficult to escape due to the nature of the crime, and can face serious potentially long-term consequences (Drahokoupilova, 2007; Pinals, 2007).

### **Participant Gender**

Participant gender has previously been shown to impact perceptions of offline stalking scenarios, but limited attention has been given to gender difference in perceptions of cyber stalking scenarios. Women more readily view behaviors as stalking, which is consistent with social expectations of women being sympathetic, empathetic, and more concerned with preventing harm than men (Finnegan & Fritz, 2012; Lambert et al., 2013; Phillips et al., 2004). Men tend to view cyber stalking as more similar to courtship behaviors, thus misperceiving behavior as indicating romantic interests rather than harassment (Lambert et al., 2013). Furthermore, men have been found to be more

likely to blame victims for their situations (Lambert et al., 2013; Phillips et al., 2004). This may result from social expectations of men as tough and dealing with situations personally, rather than seeking help (Lambert et al., 2013; Phillips et al., 2004). A lack of education and understanding by the general public can impact perceptions of what constitutes cyber stalking and how damaging the situation could potentially be (Alexy et al., 2005).

Taken together, the limited research on cyber stalking has shown that it is a serious social issue equal in harm to that of stalking. Examination of prevalence rates indicates that both genders can be perpetrators or victims of cyber stalking. It also shows that many victims do not know their cyber stalker, which can have as many harmful effects as if the perpetrator is known. Cyber stalkers are often geographically distance from their victims, but this does not reduce the harm they can inflict. Societal gender stereotypes and normative sharing of information may both play a significant role in perceptions of cyber stalking. The extent to which victim gender, proximity of cyber stalker, and the prior relationship in cyber stalking cases is understudied and is addressed in the proposed study.

### **Current Study**

The current study had a two-pronged aim: first, to gather data on prior cyber stalking victimization and attitudes surrounding cyber stalking, and second, to evaluate the impact of perpetrator gender, cyber stalker-victim relationship, and proximity on perceptions of both the perpetrator and victim. Due to the increasing amount of stalking that occurs in cyberspace it is important to gain an understanding of what is perceived as cyber stalking (Sheridan & Grant, 2007). Cyber stalking will likely only continue to

increase as technology advances. There is currently limited research on cyber stalking in general, and there is virtually no research on the perceptions of cyber stalking. This has left a gap in the understanding of what cyber stalking is, how it is perceived, and how best to educate people about cyber stalking. The general public may not demand changes to the legal system, because they do not understand what cyber stalking is or its implications (Lambert et al., 2012). In a similar vein, victims may not report for this same reason.

It remains equivocal if the gender distribution of perpetrators is equivalent or significantly different. There may be variation in the distribution due to male victims underreporting, and their claims of cyber stalking not being taken seriously. This is important in developing awareness about cyber stalking in the legal community, the criminal justice system, and society. This may also help us to understand the gender distribution of victims, and victim blame. The first aim of the current study sought to contribute to knowledge in who perpetrates cyber stalking and who is victimized. It further aimed to gather general attitudes about cyber stalking in regards to its prevalence, severity, and causes.

The second aim sought to gain further understanding of participants' perceptions of a cyber stalking scenario. Stalking behavior is often seen as more dangerous when the perpetrator is a stranger (Scott, Nixon & Sheridan, 2013), but it is unknown if this trend would be maintained for cyber stalkers. It is expected that male perpetrators will be viewed as more dangerous and as engaging in illegal cyber stalking behaviors, due to gender role expectations. It is further anticipated that the victims of female perpetrators will be given less credence than victims of male perpetrators, also due to stereotypes

surrounding gender roles. Past research on offline stalking, suggests that victims of male perpetrators may be viewed more sympathetically than victims of women. It is also anticipated that the victims of male perpetrators of cyber stalking will be more readily and sympathetically viewed as a victim than victims of female perpetrators.

Cyber stalking research has currently suggested that stranger stalking is an increased risk, unlike in offline stalking cases. If this is true, and it is also perceived as less dangerous there are implications for police procedures, legal prosecutions, and Internet safety (Bocij et al., 2003; Sheridan & Grant, 2007). It is expected that the perpetrator who is a stranger will be perceived as more of a threat than the perpetrator who is known to the victim. Research has also suggested that cyber stalkers are geographically distant from their victims, but are able to inflict the same level of emotional, psychological, social, and financial difficulties (Bocij et al., 2003; Sheridan & Grant, 2007). As a large number of cyber stalkers have no previous history, and do not live in close proximity to their victim or victims, but pose a threat the effect of proximity may also have important impacts. Therefore it is important to address the potential impact of proximity. It is anticipated that the perpetrator that is geographically close to the victim will be perceived as more dangerous than one farther away, due to their physical proximity. If geographically distant cyber stalkers are perceived as less dangerous there are again implications for criminal responsibility, and Internet safety awareness programs. There is value in asking individuals their perceptions of these topics.

## CHAPTER II

### METHOD

#### Participants

A total of 582 participants (289 men and 272 women) participated in the study examining perceptions of social issues were included in the analyses.<sup>1</sup> Participants ranged in age from 18 – 74 years ( $M = 27.53$ ,  $SD = 10.95$ ). Male participants had a mean age of 29.20 ( $SD = 10.65$ ), while female participants had a mean age of 25.59 ( $SD = 10.99$ ). Ethnicity was primarily Caucasian/White ( $n = 376$ , 85.45%), with other categories including Black/African American ( $n = 17$ , 3.86%), Asian - American ( $n = 18$ , 4.09%), American Indian/Alaska Native ( $n = 10$ , 2.27%), Hispanic ( $n = 12$ , 2.72%), and “other” ( $n = 5$ , 1.14%), ( $n = 2$ , 0.45% “prefer not to respond”). A majority of participants identified as heterosexual ( $n = 415$ , 94.32%), with the remaining participants reporting as either gay/lesbian ( $n = 11$ , 2.50%) or bisexual ( $n = 14$ , 3.18%). A number of participants reported a personal history of cyber stalking victimization ( $n = 79$ , 17.95%). Approximately half of participants were recruited from undergraduate psychology courses, and participated in exchange for course credit. The remaining participants were recruited via Amazon’s Mechanical Turk, who were financially compensated (\$0.40).

#### Materials

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<sup>1</sup> Of 582 participants, 142 were discarded for non-completion of the study, failure to indicate age or being under the age of 18, and failure of the manipulations checks. A total of 440 participants (236 men and 204 women) participated in the study examining perceptions of social issues were included in the analyses

**Vignette.** Within the context of a heterosexual dyad, this study used a 2 (gender of perpetrator: male vs. female) x 2 (cyber stalker-victim relationship: known vs. stranger) x 2 (proximity: 5 miles vs. 2000 miles) between subjects factorial design. Vignettes were developed for the purpose of this study based on reported cases of cyber stalking (Murphy, 2013; Schiller, 2011; Swirko, 2013; Appendix A).

The vignette was designed as a fictitious newspaper article depicting a case where the police had already arrested the offender on allegations of cyber stalking. The accused was stated to have sent “more than 300 messages through various means,” with statements such as “I want to watch you suffer,” and “I will come for you.” It is also stated that the victim never responded to any of the messages. All scenarios were identical with the exception of manipulations to reflect the independent variables of interest. Specifically within a heterosexual context, the perpetrator is portrayed as either male or female. In the known relationship condition the victim and perpetrator had previously dated, whereas the cyber stalker is presented as a stranger in the unknown relationship condition. Finally, proximity was varied by presenting the perpetrator being either 5 or 2000 miles from the victims’ residence.

## **Measures**

**Demographics.** Participants responded to a demographics questionnaire that assessed several demographic statistics: age, gender, race, and sexual orientation (Appendix B). A very brief personal cyber stalking history assessment was also included. This asked participants to respond to four questions; if they had ever been cyber stalked, if so by whom, if they had reported the incident, and if so to whom.



**Cyber-Obsessional Pursuit Victimization and Perpetration Scale.** Participants responded to a 23-item questionnaire assessing cyber stalking behaviors engaged in and experiences (Spitzberg & Hoobler, 2002; Appendix C). Participants responded to this measure using a multiple-choice format: never, 1-3 times, 4-6 times, 7+ times. They answered this questionnaire twice. The first time participants responded to having ever experienced obsessional pursuit behavior. The second time participants responded to whether they themselves had ever engaged in cyber stalking behaviors against another person.

This measure was developed as a measure of offline and cyber stalking victimization, and has been utilized in previous studies (Spitzberg & Hoobler, 2002; Spitzberg, Nicastro, & Cousins, 2009). Frequency of affirmative responses would indicate the rate of experienced obsessional pursuit behavior, and the rate of engaged in cyber stalking behaviors against another person.

**Attitudes Toward Cyber Stalking.** Participants responded to a 21 item attitudes toward cyber stalking scale using a 5-point Likert scale that assessed participants attitudes towards cyber stalking as a criminal offense (Lambert et al., 2013; Appendix D). This scale was originally designed as a stalking measure, and as such all stalking terms were changed to cyber stalking for the purpose of this study. Lambert et al., identified seven factors that could be assessed by this measure including: pervasiveness, harmfulness, victimology, relational partners, motivations, (cyber) stalking vs. courtship, and victim blame (factor loadings ranging from 0.49 to 0.91). These subscales are described below.

**Pervasiveness.** Participants completed two items assessing their beliefs on the pervasiveness of cyber stalking. Specifically, participants were asked to indicate to what extent they agree that “Is cyber stalking rare” and “I think cyber stalking occurs frequently in the United States.” This first item was reverse coded and the items were then collapsed to create a mean that assessed participants’ beliefs about the pervasiveness of cyber stalking ( $r = 0.69$ ). Higher scores indicate a stronger belief that cyber stalking is pervasive.

**Harmfulness.** Participants completed six items assessing their beliefs in the harmfulness of cyber stalking. Specifically, participants were asked to indicate to what extent they agree that a) “Cyber stalking does great emotional harm to the victim,” b) “Most cyber stalkers will not hurt the person they are cyber stalking,” c) “Generally, cyber stalking has little harm on the person being cyber stalked,” d) “Most cyber stalkers are harmless,” e) “Rarely is the person being cyber stalked harmed in anyway,” and f) “Nothing good comes of cyber stalking.” Of these items, four were reverse coded<sup>2</sup>. All items were collapsed to create a composite score that assessed beliefs about the harmfulness of cyber stalking ( $\alpha = 0.80$ ). Higher scores indicate a stronger belief in the harmfulness of cyber stalking.

**Victimology.** Participants completed two items assessing their beliefs in the occurrence of victim types in cyber stalking. Specifically, participants were asked to indicate to what extent they agree that “Cyber stalkers rarely cyber stalk strangers” and “Famous people are more likely to be cyber stalked than everyday people.” Of these

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<sup>2</sup> The four items reverse coded were a) “Most cyber stalkers will not hurt the person they are cyber stalking,” b) “Generally, cyber stalking has little harm on the person being cyber stalked,” c) “Most cyber stalkers are harmless,” and d) “Rarely is the person being cyber stalked harmed in anyway.”

items one was reverse coded<sup>3</sup>, then items were collapsed to create a sub-scale that assess participants beliefs about victimology of cyber stalking ( $r = -0.22$ ). Higher scores indicate a stronger belief that cyber stalking occurs to strangers and famous people.

**Relational partners.** Participants completed two items assessing their beliefs in the occurrence of relational partners in cyber stalking. Specifically, participants were asked to indicate to what extent they agree that “Most cyber stalking involves formerly romantic partners” and “Cyber stalking usually occurs after a relationship breaks up badly.” Items were collapsed with higher scores indicating a stronger belief that cyber stalking more often occurs with past relational partners ( $r = 0.70$ ).

**Motivation.** Participants completed five items assessing their beliefs on the motivation behind cyber stalking. Specifically, participants were asked to indicate to what extent they agree that a) “Most cyber stalkers are in love with the person they are cyber stalking,” b) “cyber stalking is generally driven by sexual fantasies on the part of the cyber stalker,” c) “Cyber stalking is persistent pestering,” d) “Most cyber stalkers are shy and do not know how to approach other people,” and e) “One reason cyber stalking occurs is because some people play hard to get.” These items were collapsed to create a composite score that assessed the perception of the motivation of cyber stalkers ( $\alpha = 0.47$ ). Higher scores indicate a stronger belief that the motivation behind cyber stalking is based on desire on the part of the cyber stalker.

**Cyber stalking vs. courtship.** Participants completed two items assessing their beliefs on the difference of cyber stalking and courtship. Specifically, participants were asked to indicate to what extent they agree that “There is a fine line between trying to get

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<sup>3</sup> The single item that was reverse coded was “Cyber stalkers rarely cyber stalk strangers.”

a person to like you romantically and cyber stalking” and “There is a fine line between cyber stalking and getting a person to go out on a date.” Items were collapsed to create a sub-scale that assessed participants’ beliefs about the difference between cyber stalking and courtship ( $r = 0.84$ ). With higher scores indicating a stronger belief that cyber stalking is similar to courtship behavior.

**Victim blame.** Participants completed two items assessing their beliefs on the blame of victims in cyber stalking situations. Specifically, participants were asked to indicate to what extent they agree that “People who claim they are being cyber stalked are oversensitive about the matter” and “I think most of the concern over cyber stalking is because people overreact in our society.” Items were collapsed with higher scores indicating a stronger belief that victims are blame worthy in cyber stalking situations ( $r = 0.70$ ).

**Manipulation Check.** Participants were asked three items to ensure manipulations of the independent variables. Participants were asked to indicate the gender of the perpetrator, the relationship of the perpetrator to the victim, and finally to indicate the distance the perpetrator was arrested from the victim’s home. Only participants that successfully passed the manipulation checks were included in the final analyses.<sup>4</sup>

**Perceptions of Cyber Stalking Scenario.** Participants responded to a 23-item questionnaire assessing their perceptions of the scenario (Appendix E). Participants responded to a number of statements related to the vignette using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 “strongly disagree” to 5 “strongly agree” to the extent of, their agreement

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<sup>4</sup> Of the 582 participants, 21 were discarded for failure of the manipulation checks.

with each statement. Questions for this measure were based on previous research (Sheridan et al., 2003; Hills & Taplin, 1998; Lee, 1998; Phillips, Quirk, Rosenfeld, & O'Connor, 2004), and developed for the purpose of this study. Questions from this questionnaire were collapsed into five different subscales to assess the severity, legal perception, the mental health of the offender, victim blame, and courtship behavior.

**Legal perception.** Participants responded to four items assessing perceptions of the scenario as cyber stalking and further the legality of the scenario. Specifically, participants were asked to indicate to what extent they agree that a) “Is Steve/Sarah cyber stalking Sarah/Steve,” b) “Was police intervention necessary for the resolution of this case,” c) “Were criminal charges necessary for the resolution of this case,” and d) “Did Steve/Sarah’s behavior violate laws.” All items were collapsed to create a composite score ( $\alpha = 0.80$ ), which assesses participants’ perceptions of the scenario as cyber stalking and their legal perception of the scenario. Higher scores indicate that participants were more likely to believe the situation was illegal and required legal/police intervention.

**Severity.** Participants responded to five items assessing their perceptions of the severity of the scenario. Specifically, participants were asked to indicate to what extent they agree that a) “If you think this is a case of cyber stalking, how severe do you believe it to be,” b) “How likely is this scenario to result in bodily injury (to the victim),” c) “Was Sarah/Steve in danger from Steve/Sarah,” d) “Steve/Sarah intended to cause harm,” and e) “Steve/Sarah’s behavior is strange.” These items were collapsed to create a composite score ( $\alpha = 0.73$ ), that assessed perceptions of the severity of the scenario. Higher scores indicate that participants were more likely to believe the situation was

severe.

***Mental health.*** Participants responded to three items assessing perceptions of the offenders' mental health. Specifically, participants were asked to indicate to what extent they agree that a) "Is Steve/Sarah in need of therapy/psychiatric help," b) "Steve/Sarah is emotionally unstable," and c) "Steve/Sarah is mentally unstable based on their behavior." The three items were collapsed to create a sub-scale ( $\alpha = 0.80$ ), which assesses the mental health of the offender in the scenario. Higher scores indicate that participants were more likely to view the perpetrator was mentally unstable.

***Victim blame.*** Participants responded to six items assessing their perceptions of victim blame in the scenario. Specifically, participants were asked to indicate to what extent they agree that a) "Is Sarah/Steve responsible for encouraging Steve/Sarah's behavior," b) "Could the actions of Sarah/Steve have alleviated the situation," c) "Sarah/Steve over-reacted to the situation," d) "Sarah/Steve's reaction to Steve/Sarah's behavior was unexpected," e) "How normal was Sarah/Steve's reaction," and f) "Did Steve/Sarah bring it on themselves." One item was reverse coded<sup>5</sup>, than all items were collapsed to create a composite score ( $\alpha = 0.84$ ), which assesses the amount of victim blame in the scenario. Higher scores indicate that participants were more likely to blame the victim for the cyber stalking.

***Courtship behavior.*** Participants responded to five items assessing perceptions of similarities of the behavior to courtship behaviors. Specifically, participants were asked to indicate to what extent they agree that a) "Sarah/Steve should be flattered by Steve/Sarah's attention," b) "Sarah/Steve should be flattered by the attention," c) "How

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<sup>5</sup> The single item that was reverse coded was "How normal was Sarah's/Steve's reaction?"

romantic is Steve/Sarah's behavior," d) "How flattering is Steve/Sarah's behavior," and e) "How justified is Steve/Sarah's behavior." The five items were collapsed to create a sub-scale ( $\alpha = 0.88$ ), which assesses if the behavior was indicative of courtship in the scenario. Higher scores indicate that participants were more likely to believe the situation was indicative of courtship behaviors.

### **Procedure**

This study utilized an online data collection software company called Qualtrics Research Suite. The Psychology Department's web-based experiment sign-up system, SONA, was used to recruit UND students in psychology classes where the study link was provided. The general public was recruited via social media (i.e. Facebook, MTurk) where the study link using Qualtrics Research Suite was made available. Participant recruitment took place during the fall semester of the 2014-2015 academic year.

Participants were presented with an electronic consent form, providing them with information regarding the purpose of the study and contact information should they have any further questions (Appendix F). Prior to participating, participants indicated that they had read and agreed to the informed consent information. If they choose to participate, they clicked on a link that took them to the study within Qualtrics Research Suite.

## CHAPTER III

### RESULTS

#### Demographics of Experience of Cyber Stalking

Male participants reported being cyber stalked 19.5% of the time ( $n = 46$ ). Of the 46 male participants reporting being cyber stalked five identified the perpetrator as a male acquaintance, 10 identified the perpetrator as a female acquaintance, 21 identified the perpetrator as a female ex-intimate, five identified the perpetrator as a male stranger, and five identified the perpetrator as a female stranger. Male participants reported the cyber stalking 4.2% of the time ( $n = 10$ ). Of those incidents that were reported three told the police, three told Facebook administration, two told their parents, two told the college/teacher, and one told a mutual friend.

Female participants reported being cyber stalked 16.2% of the time ( $n = 33$ ). Of the 33 female participants reporting being cyber stalked 13 identified the perpetrator as a male acquaintance, two identified the perpetrator as a female acquaintance, five identified the perpetrator as a male ex-intimate, nine identified the perpetrator as a male stranger, and four identified the perpetrator as an unknown stranger. Female participants reported the cyber stalking 2.9% of the time ( $n = 6$ ). Of those incidents that were reported three told the police, two told the college/teacher, two told their parents, one told the perpetrators parents, and one told friends.

#### Cyber-Obsessional Pursuit Victimization and Perpetration Scale



A significant portion of participants reported experiencing some form of cyber-obsessional pursuit victimization (Table 1). As the severity of the pursuit behavior increased the percentage of participants reporting experiencing that behavior decreased. Specifically, whereas 49% of participants reported experiencing receiving “exaggerated messages of affection,” only 5.1% of participants reported experiencing someone “attempting to disable your computer.” Further, approximately 18% of participants self-reported as victims of cyber stalking, and 13.2% of participants reported experiencing “first meeting you online and then stalking you.” Furthermore, female participants were more likely to report common cyber stalking behavior than male participants, such as 41.4% of male participants reported experiencing receiving “exaggerated messages of affection,” and 56.5% of female participants reported experiencing this behavior. Conversely, male participants were generally more likely to report experiencing more severe behavior than were female participants. For instance, 8.6% of male participants reported experiencing someone “attempting to disable your computer,” whereas only 1.7% of female participants reported experiencing that behavior.

This discrepancy between reports of experienced and engaged in behaviors remains consistent for more severe cyber-obsessional pursuit behavior. Specifically, whereas 25.4% of participants reported receiving “sexually harassing messages,” only 5.5% of participants reported engaging in this same behavior. This trend is also seen when looking at gender differences. Both men and women are more likely to report experiencing the behavior than to engage it. Furthermore men are more likely than women to report engaging in the behavior. Specifically, 15.9% of male participants

reported engaging in “obtaining private information without permission,” but only 5.6% of women reported engaging in this behavior.

### **Attitudes Toward Cyber Stalking**

A 2 (participant gender: male vs. female) x 2 (previous cyber stalking victimization: yes vs. no) analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted on all five scales.

**Pervasiveness.** Participant gender,  $F(1, 436) = 18.12, p < 0.001, \eta^2 = 0.04$ , was significant, such that women ( $M = 3.98, SD = 0.64$ ) were more likely to view cyber stalking as being a pervasive issue than men ( $M = 3.58, SD = 0.84$ ). Prior cyber stalking victimization,  $F(1, 436) = 10.88, p = 0.001, \eta^2 = 0.02$ , also yielded significance.

Participants who reported previous cyber stalking victimization ( $M = 4.00, SD = 3.71$ ) were more likely to view cyber stalking as pervasive than those participants who did not report prior cyber stalking victimization ( $M = 3.71, SD = 0.71$ ).

**Harmfulness.** A main effect of participant gender,  $F(1, 436) = 36.30, p < 0.001, \eta^2 = 0.08$ , indicates that women ( $M = 3.84, SD = 0.57$ ) were more likely than men ( $M = 3.42, SD = 0.64$ ) to view cyber stalking as being harmful. Prior cyber stalking victimization,  $F(1, 436) = 5.49, p = 0.020, \eta^2 = 0.01$ , also attained significance, such that participants who had not reported previous cyber stalking victimization ( $M = 3.66, SD = 0.64$ ) were more likely than those participants who had reported prior cyber stalking victimization ( $M = 3.44, SD = 0.66$ ) to view cyber stalking as harmful.

**Victimology.** Participant gender,  $F(1, 436) = 1.34, p = 0.248$ , failed to yield significance, such that men ( $M = 3.29, SD = 0.64$ ) were equally likely as women ( $M = 3.26, SD = 0.65$ ) to view cyber stalking as occurring to famous people and strangers.

Attitudes towards victimology failed to differ with regards to the presence or absence of prior cyber stalking victimization,  $F < 1$ . Participants reporting prior cyber stalking victimization ( $M = 3.28$ ,  $SD = 0.66$ ) were equally likely to view cyber stalking as occurring to famous people and strangers as were participants who did not report prior cyber stalking victimization ( $M = 3.28$ ,  $SD = 0.64$ ).

A one sample t-test tested against the mid point of the scale,  $t(439) = 25.43$ ,  $p < 0.001$  yielded significance, such that participants were likely to agree that cyber stalking is more likely to occur to famous people and strangers ( $M = 3.28$ ,  $SD = 0.64$ ).

**Relational Partners.** Participant gender,  $F(1, 436) = 3.04$ ,  $p = 0.082$ , failed to attain significance, such that men ( $M = 3.37$ ,  $SD = 0.86$ ) were equally likely as women ( $M = 3.18$ ,  $SD = 0.86$ ) to view cyber stalking as being more likely to occur within romantic relationships. Prior cyber stalking victimization,  $F(1, 436) = 0.53$ ,  $p = 0.467$ , also failed to yield significance. Participants who reported previous cyber stalking victimization ( $M = 3.35$ ,  $SD = 0.92$ ) were equally likely as those participants who did not report prior cyber stalking victimization ( $M = 3.26$ ,  $SD = 0.85$ ) to view cyber stalking as often occurring within romantic relationships.

A one sample t-test tested against the mid point of the scale,  $t(439) = 18.91$ ,  $p < 0.001$  yielded significance, such that participants were likely to agree that cyber stalking is more likely to be between romantic partners and after a break up ( $M = 3.28$ ,  $SD = 0.87$ ).

**Motivation.** Attitudes towards motivation of cyber stalkers failed to differ with regards to participant gender,  $F < 1$ , such that men ( $M = 3.10$ ,  $SD = 0.53$ ) were equally likely as women ( $M = 3.03$ ,  $SD = 0.54$ ) to view cyber stalking as being motivated by desire. Prior cyber stalking victimization,  $F(1, 436) = 2.64$ ,  $p = 0.105$ , also failed to yield

significance. Participants who reported previous cyber stalking victimization ( $M = 3.16$ ,  $SD = 0.59$ ) were equally likely as those participants who did not report prior cyber stalking victimization ( $M = 3.05$ ,  $SD = 0.52$ ) to view the motivation behind cyber stalking being based on desire.

A one sample t-test tested against the mid point of the scale,  $t(439) = 22.12$ ,  $p < 0.001$  yielded significance, such that participants were likely to agree that cyber stalking is often motivated by desire or romantic interest on the part of the perpetrator ( $M = 3.07$ ,  $SD = 0.54$ ).

**Cyber Stalking vs. Courtship.** No significant main effects were found for either participant gender or prior cyber stalking victimization, such that attitudes towards the similarities between cyber stalking and courtship failed to differ,  $F < 1$ . Men ( $M = 3.29$ ,  $SD = 1.11$ ) were equally likely as women ( $M = 3.19$ ,  $SD = 1.31$ ) to view the cyber stalking behavior as similar to courtship behaviors. Furthermore, participants who reported prior cyber stalking victimization ( $M = 3.28$ ,  $SD = 1.15$ ) were equally likely to view the cyber stalking behavior as similar to courtship behaviors as participants who did not report prior cyber stalking victimization ( $M = 3.24$ ,  $SD = 1.22$ ).

A one sample t-test tested against the mid point of the scale,  $t(439) = 12.91$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , yielded significance, such that participants were likely to view cyber stalking as similar to courtship behavior ( $M = 3.24$ ,  $SD = 1.21$ ).

**Victim Blame.** A main effect for participant gender,  $F(1, 436) = 21.93$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.05$ , attained significance. Men ( $M = 2.44$ ,  $SD = 0.84$ ) were more likely than women ( $M = 1.96$ ,  $SD = 0.87$ ) to blame victims of cyber stalking. Prior cyber stalking victimization,  $F(1, 436) = 6.64$ ,  $p = 0.010$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.02$ , also yielded significance.

Participants who reported not previously experiencing cyber stalking victimization ( $M = 2.47$ ,  $SD = 1.03$ ) were more likely than participants who did report prior cyber stalking victimization ( $M = 2.61$ ,  $SD = 0.84$ ) to blame the victims.

A one sample t-test tested against the mid point of the scale,  $t(439) = 52.43$ ,  $p < 0.001$  yielded significance, such that participants were unlikely to blame the victim for the occurrence of cyber stalking ( $M = 2.22$ ,  $SD = 0.89$ ).

### **Perceptions of Cyber Stalking Scenario**

A 2 (gender of perpetrator: male vs. female) x 2 (cyber stalker-victim relationship: known vs. stranger) x 2 (proximity: 5 miles vs. 2000 miles) x 2 (participant gender: male vs. female) ANOVA was conducted on all five subscales. Each scale was individually used as a dependent variable.

**Legal Perception.** Perpetrator gender,  $F(1, 424) = 7.84$ ,  $p = 0.005$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.02$ , was significant, such that participants in the male perpetrator condition ( $M = 4.33$ ,  $SD = 0.62$ ) were more likely than those participants in the female perpetrator condition ( $M = 4.12$ ,  $SD = 0.70$ ) to view the scenario as cyber stalking and as violating laws. A main effect for participant gender,  $F(1, 424) = 6.62$ ,  $p = 0.010$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.02$ , also yielded significance, with women ( $M = 4.31$ ,  $SD = 0.59$ ) being more likely than men ( $M = 4.15$ ,  $SD = 0.73$ ) to view the scenario as cyber stalking and as violating laws.

Cyber stalker-victim relationship,  $F(1, 424) = 1.92$ ,  $p = 0.167$ , failed to attain significance. Participants in the known condition ( $M = 4.21$ ,  $SD = 0.66$ ) were equally likely as those participants in the stranger condition ( $M = 4.23$ ,  $SD = 0.68$ ) to view the scenario as cyber stalking and as violating laws. Proximity,  $F(1, 424) = 0.62$ ,  $p = 0.433$ , also failed to yield significance. Participants in the close proximity (5 miles) condition ( $M$

= 4.23,  $SD = 0.67$ ) were equally likely as participants in the distant proximity (2000 miles) condition ( $M = 4.21$ ,  $SD = 0.67$ ) to view the scenario as cyber stalking and as violating laws. None of the interactions attained significance.

**Severity.** A main effect of perpetrator gender,  $F(1, 424) = 29.50$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.07$ , was significant, such that participants in the male perpetrator condition ( $M = 4.01$ ,  $SD = 0.60$ ) were more likely than those participants in the female perpetrator condition ( $M = 3.68$ ,  $SD = 0.60$ ) to view the scenario as severe. Cyber stalker-victim relationship,  $F < 1$  failed to yield significance. Participants in the known condition ( $M = 3.86$ ,  $SD = 0.63$ ) failed to differ in their perceptions of severity from participants in the stranger condition ( $M = 3.81$ ,  $SD = 0.61$ ) to view the scenario as moderately severe. Proximity,  $F(1, 424) = 2.92$ ,  $p = 0.089$ , also failed to attain significance. Participants in the close proximity (5 miles) condition ( $M = 3.88$ ,  $SD = 0.63$ ) were equally likely as participants in the distant proximity (2000 miles) condition ( $M = 3.79$ ,  $SD = 0.61$ ) to view the scenario as severe. Participant gender,  $F(1, 424) = 2.15$ ,  $p = 0.144$ , failed to yield significance. Men ( $M = 3.78$ ,  $SD = 0.64$ ) were equally likely as women ( $M = 3.90$ ,  $SD = 0.59$ ) to view the scenario as severe. None of the interactions attained significance.

A one sample t-test tested against the mid point of the scale,  $t(439) = 45.01$ ,  $p < 0.001$  yielded significance, such that participants were likely to view the cyber stalking scenario as being severe ( $M = 3.83$ ,  $SD = 0.62$ ).

**Mental Health of Offender.** No main effects were found for perpetrator gender, cyber stalker-victim relationship, or proximity,  $F < 1$ , attained significance. Perceptions of the male perpetrator ( $M = 4.17$ ,  $SD = 0.80$ ) did not differ from perceptions of the female perpetrator ( $M = 4.14$ ,  $SD = 0.76$ ). Perceptions of known offenders ( $M = 4.22$ ,  $SD$

= 0.75) did not differ from perceptions of an offender who was a stranger ( $M = 4.11$ ,  $SD = 0.80$ ). Participants in the close proximity condition ( $M = 4.17$ ,  $SD = 0.78$ ) did not differ from perceptions of the distant proximity condition ( $M = 4.14$ ,  $SD = 0.77$ ). Finally, participant gender,  $F(1, 424) = 1.18$ ,  $p = 0.278$ , also failed to yield significance. Men ( $M = 4.10$ ,  $SD = 0.80$ ) were equally likely as women ( $M = 4.22$ ,  $SD = 0.75$ ) to view the perpetrator as mentally unstable.

A one sample t-test tested against the mid point of the scale,  $t(440) = 44.767$ ,  $p < 0.001$  yielded significance such that participants were likely to view the perpetrator as mentally unstable ( $M = 4.16$ ,  $SD = 0.78$ ).

The interaction of perpetrator gender and cyber stalker-victim relationship,  $F(1, 424) = 6.11$ ,  $p = 0.014$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.01$ , attained significance. Simple main effects of cyber stalker-victim relationship at each level of gender yielded significance for the female perpetrator,  $F(1, 424) = 5.09$ ,  $p = 0.025$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.012$ . Female perpetrators were more likely to be perceived as mentally unstable and in need of therapeutic help when the victim was known to the perpetrator ( $M = 4.33$ ,  $SD = 0.64$ ) as opposed to a stranger to the perpetrator ( $M = 4.01$ ,  $SD = 0.81$ ). The interaction for the male perpetrator,  $F(1, 424) = 1.49$ ,  $p = 0.222$ , failed to attain significance. Irrespective of whether the male perpetrator was known ( $M = 4.12$ ,  $SD = 0.83$ ) or a stranger ( $M = 4.23$ ,  $SD = 0.77$ ) perceptions of his mental instability and his need for therapeutic help did not differ. No other interactions attained significance.

**Victim Blame.** A main effect for perpetrator gender,  $F(1, 424) = 10.96$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.03$ , yielded significance, such that participants in the female perpetrator condition ( $M = 2.10$ ,  $SD = 0.70$ ) were more likely than participants in the male

perpetrator condition ( $M = 1.83$ ,  $SD = 0.69$ ) to blame the victim. Participant gender,  $F(1, 424) = 6.53$ ,  $p = 0.011$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.02$ , also attained significance. Men ( $M = 2.06$ ,  $SD = 0.76$ ) were more likely than women ( $M = 1.86$ ,  $SD = 0.63$ ) to blame the victim.

Cyber stalker-victim relationship,  $F(1, 424) = 2.52$ ,  $p = 0.113$ , failed to attain significance. Participants in the known condition ( $M = 1.98$ ,  $SD = 0.69$ ) were equally unlikely as participants in the stranger condition ( $M = 1.96$ ,  $SD = 0.72$ ) to blame the victim for the cyber stalking. Proximity,  $F(1, 424) = 0.03$ ,  $p = 0.861$ , failed to yield significance, such that participants in the close proximity (5 miles) condition ( $M = 2.00$ ,  $SD = 0.73$ ) were equally unlikely as participants in the distant (2000 miles) condition ( $M = 1.93$ ,  $SD = 0.68$ ) to blame the victim. All of the interactions failed to yield significance.

**Courtship Behavior.** A main effect for perpetrator gender,  $F(1, 424) = 6.76$ ,  $p = 0.010$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.02$ , attained significance, such that participants in the female perpetrator condition ( $M = 1.75$ ,  $SD = 0.77$ ) were more likely than participants in the male perpetrator condition ( $M = 1.53$ ,  $SD = 0.66$ ) to view the scenario as indicative of courtship behavior. Participant gender,  $F(1, 424) = 6.81$ ,  $p = 0.009$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.02$ , also yielded significance. Men ( $M = 1.73$ ,  $SD = 0.72$ ) were more likely than women ( $M = 1.55$ ,  $SD = 0.64$ ) to view the scenario as being indicative of courtship behavior.

Cyber stalker-victim relationship,  $F(1, 424) = 1.28$ ,  $p = 0.245$ , failed to reach significance. Participants in the known condition ( $M = 1.65$ ,  $SD = 0.72$ ) were equally unlikely as participants in the stranger condition ( $M = 1.65$ ,  $SD = 0.74$ ) to view the scenario as being indicative of courtship behavior. Proximity,  $F(1, 424) = 1.35$ ,  $p = 0.258$ , also failed to yield significance, such that participants in the close proximity (5 miles) condition ( $M = 1.63$ ,  $SD = 0.73$ ) were equally unlikely as participants in the distant



proximity (2000 miles) condition ( $M = 1.67$ ,  $SD = 0.72$ ) to view the scenario as being indicative of courtship behavior. All interactions failed to reach significance.

## CHAPTER IV

### DISCUSSION

This study had a two-pronged aim: first, to gather data on attitudes surrounding cyber stalking, and second, to evaluate the impact of perpetrator gender, cyber stalker-victim relationship, and proximity on perceptions of both the perpetrator and victim. Prevalence rates of cyber stalking suffer from vast variation, and have been estimated as high as 82% (Bocij, et al., 2003), and as low as 1% (Reyns et al., 2011). This variation in prevalence rates is likely a result of victim underreporting and methodological issues in prevalence studies. Irrespective of the exact prevalence rates, cyber stalking can have substantial costs, both personally and legally, thus, making it a serious social issue (Moriarty & Freiburger, 2008; Roberts, 2008). In order to address these issues, it is important to study both individual attitudes towards cyber stalking, and individual perceptions of cyber stalking scenarios. These perceptions are of the utmost importance as they can relate to the rate of reporting, how seriously the situations are taken, and future legislation.

#### **Demographics of Experience of Cyber Stalking.**

Participants responded to a very brief personal cyber stalking history assessment. This asked participants to respond to questions, such as if they had ever been cyber stalked, if so by whom, and if they had reported the incident. This demographics data for the current study on prevalence rates of cyber stalking was similar to findings of previous research, in that is it fell into the lower end of overall percentages (Bocij et al., 2003), or

the high end of percentage for more restrictive definitions of cyber stalking (Dreßing et al., 2014). Approximately 18% of individuals in the current study self-reported as being victims of cyber stalking, consistent with definitions of cyber stalking including unwanted persistent contact, but not requiring an element of fear (Dreßing et al., 2014). This finding indicates that participants may not believe that fear is a requirement of behavior being indicative of cyber stalking. Arguably an important element of debate surrounding legal definitions of cyber stalking is the inclusion of an element of fear. As participants were not asked to indicate the degree of fear that they may have experienced, future research into participants' inclusion or exclusion of fear in defining cyber stalking is necessary as it has important implications for the development of legislation, and the exclusion of a fear element in legal statutes.

Among those who self-reported experiencing cyber stalking, the gender of the perpetrator was contrary to some research but consistent with other research (Dreßing et al., 2014; Moriarty & Freiburger, 2008; Reynolds et al., 2012). Men and women appeared to be equally likely to experience and engage in cyber stalking behaviors. Of the perpetrators, approximately 47% were male, 48% were female, and 5% the gender was unknown to the victim. This has important implications, as female perpetrators behavior was perceived as less like cyber stalking and less severe in the current study. Yet men appear to experience cyber stalking victimization at equal frequency. If this self-report data is found to be consistent across future studies it may impact the development of legislation, and the seriousness with which law enforcement treat the behavior when it is reported. If men are seen to be equally likely to experience cyber stalking victimization,

they may begin to report the behavior more frequently. With increased reporting, there may also be an increase in the seriousness the behavior is given by the legal system.

### **Cyber-Obsessional Pursuit Victimization and Perpetration Scale.**

The frequencies of reported cyber obsessional pursuit behaviors that were experienced at least once by individuals in the study was a great deal higher than the rate of individuals that self-reported as being victims of cyber stalking. This may be indicative of the normalization of online pursuit behaviors that have blurred the line of what is public and private information (Alexy et al., 2005; Drahokoupilova, 2007; King-Rise, 2011). Furthermore, the frequency of reported cyber obsessional pursuit behaviors that were experienced was much higher than the rate of behaviors that was reported as being engaged in. Participants may have viewed themselves as experiencing the behavior as it may stick out in their memory, but may not perceive their own behavior as seriously. It is possible that if these trends increase unchecked, it might lead to increasing rates of deviant behavior.

Men and women both reported experiencing high rates of common cyber stalking behavior, but as the behavior became more serious women were notably less likely to report experiencing the behavior compared to men. Conversely, men were distinctly more likely to report engaging in all the behavior than were women. This held true even for behavior that men were more likely to report experiencing, women were unlikely to report engaging in the same behavior. This could indicate that women are less likely to view their behavior as cyber stalking, thus possibly being more affected by normalization that is seen in the media of such behavior. These differences in frequency of reporting are important and future research could clarify why they are occurring.

The frequency that various cyber stalking behaviors are reported as being experienced brings to light the importance of developing comprehensive cyber stalking legislation. Although many states have some form of legal recourse, laws are often ambiguous or lack comprehensiveness needed to fully protect victims (Pittaro, 2007; Shimizu, 2013). One area that this is especially true of is third party cyber stalking. Cyber stalkers will expose private information about their victims to get other unknown individuals online to amplify the harassment and victimization experienced (Goodno, 2007). Along with this behavior cyber stalkers may also explicitly direct others toward their victims to further harass and victimize them (Goodno, 2007). Report data for the current study suggests that this behavior is a common experience, such that approximately 26% of participants reported having private information exposed about themselves and approximately 12% of participants have other individuals directed towards them in a threatening manner (see Table 1). This suggests that the prevalence of third party cyber stalking could be quite high, and as such requires legislation devoted to protect its victims and further research into the area.

### **Attitudes Toward Cyber Stalking**

**Participant Gender.** Given the equivocal nature of cyber stalking prevalence rates, and the lack of legal protection that is afforded victims it is important to learn how members of the general population view cyber stalking, and its severity. Overall, though participants in the present study viewed cyber stalking as pervasive, serious, and harmful, women were significantly more likely to do so than men. This is consistent with previous stalking research, that has found that women generally view stalking as both more pervasive, and as more harmful than do men (Finnegan, & Fritz, 2012; Lambert et al.,

2013; Phillips et al., 2004). This could be a result of women's increased level of fear of victimization of offline stalking (Lambert et al., 2013), which has carried over to increased fear of cyber stalking victimization. Further examination of if this awareness does translate into fear is worthwhile as anti-stalking legislation commonly require an element of fear for the behavior to be taken seriously. Men may not be experiencing these emotions thus their victimization may not be taken as seriously by law enforcement or the legal system, although they are at increased risk of cyber stalking victimization.

Contrary to previous stalking research, male participants were more likely to view cyber stalking as occurring between current or ex-intimate partners than women. Previous research suggests that women, not men, are more likely to view offline stalking as occurring between current or ex-intimate partners, while men view offline stalking as a stranger crime (Lambert et al., 2013; Purcell, Pathé & Mullen, 2001). Future research should further examine if these findings could be a result of male victims being at increased risk of victimization of cyber stalking.

Regardless of participant gender cyber stalking behaviors and courtship behaviors were perceived as similar to each other. Participants were also likely to view cyber stalking as being motivated by romantic interest and/or desire. These results are consistent with previous research that has reported a perceived fine line between courtship behaviors and stalking (Lambert et al., 2013). This is possibly a result of the normalization of online pursuit behaviors. Specifically the media's portrayal of aggressive courtship behavior as desirable and acceptable has lead to normalization (Lambert et al., 2013; Scott, Rajakaruna, & Sheridan, 2014). Exposure to aggressive courtship and relational behavior may normalize the behaviors making them appear to be

more acceptable to engage in during daily life. This normalization is problematic as it could possibly lead perpetrators to believe that the individuals they desire want to be pursued (Lambert et al., 2013). At the same time normalization of pursuit behaviors may also contribute to victims dismissing the seriousness of the behaviors and question the legality of the behaviors.

Participants were unlikely to blame victims for being cyber stalked. Male participants were more likely to blame victims than were women. This is consistent with prior offline stalking research findings (Finnegan & Fritz, 2012; Lambert et al., 2013). It is possible that traditional gender roles impacted these perceptions. Gender socialization could lead to lower levels of sympathy by male participants, due to the fact that hostility and aggression are often encouraged in boys while empathy and sympathy is discouraged. Due to findings that men were more likely to view the behavior as occurring between current or ex-intimate partners future research should examine if these perceptions impacted behaviors attributed to the victim that were perceived as contributing to the occurrence of cyber stalking. This would be consistent with men viewing cyber stalking as occurring between intimates because they blame the victim. As with offline stalking research it is clear that men and women view cyber stalking differently, thus further research into the basis of these differences is needed.

**Prior Cyber Stalking Victimization.** Self-reported prior cyber stalking victimization was also found to impact participants' attitudes toward the pervasiveness and harmfulness of cyber stalking. This is contrary to previous offline stalking research that has found prior offline stalking victimization does not impact participants' views (Finnegan & Fritz, 2012; Lambert et al., 2013). Participants who reported prior cyber

stalking victimization were more likely to view the behavior as a pervasive issue. This is possibly a result of having experienced the behavior making it a more accessible concept compared to an individual who has never experienced cyber stalking. Conversely, prior victimization led to seeing the behavior as less harmful than individuals who did not report victimization. One possible explanation for this finding is a victims inability to clearly judge his or her own experience, thus not viewing his or her own situation as dangerous as it possibly was (Alexy et al., 2005). Future research should further examine this difference in perceived harmfulness.

Finally, prior self-reported cyber stalking victimization resulted in higher levels of victim blame, compared to individuals who had not reported being a victim of cyber stalking. As with perceptions of harmfulness of the situation, this result could be caused by victims' impairment in judging their own previous experience. This impairment could result in prior victims inability or resistance to view themselves, and thus others, as victims resulting in higher levels of victim blame (Alexy et al., 2005). The findings of the current study suggest that further study on the attitudes of prior victims of cyber stalking and their judgments of cyber stalking situations is important.

### **Perceptions of Scenario**

Overall, previous research suggests that offline stalking is perpetrated mainly by men (Lambert et al., 2008; Roberts, 2008; Sheridan et al., 2003), however because cyber stalking research suggests that this may not be the case perceptions of perpetrator gender were studied. Overall, perpetrator gender was found to be a significant factor related to a number of perceptions concerning cyber stalking. Participants were more likely to view the scenario as being indicative of cyber stalking and being illegal in nature when the



perpetrator was male. This is consistent with societal stereotypes, such that women are generally not viewed as perpetrators of crime. Furthermore, participants also viewed male perpetrators behavior as being more severe than female perpetrator's behavior. This is also consistent with gender stereotypes of women not engaging in stalking behaviors and generally not being seen as dangerous. Further, traditional gender role of men being more aggressive and physical may impact participants' perceptions of the severity of the cyber stalking behavior (Finnegan & Fritz, 2012). Due to the online nature of cyber stalking, future research should examine if perceived gender differences reflect the reality of a perpetrators' dangerousness.

Regardless of perpetrator gender, participants viewed the perpetrator as mentally unstable and in need of therapeutic help. This is noteworthy, as prior research on cyber stalkers has suggested that they are generally mentally stable individuals (Bocij et al., 2003; Bocij & McFarlane, 2003; Pittaro, 2007). Cyber stalkers appear to be more mentally stable, and tend to engage in less criminal activity than offline stalkers (Bocij et al., 2003; Pittaro, 2007; Sheridan & Grant, 2007). Furthermore there was an interaction between perpetrator gender and cyber stalker-victim relationship status, such that a female perpetrator who was an ex-intimate partner was seen as significantly more mentally unstable than any other perpetrator. This could be a result of the social stereotype of the "crazy ex-girlfriend" that is often faced by women in the media (Manderlink, 2015; Woszczyzna, 2013). Participants further viewed female perpetrators behavior as being more similar to courtship behavior than male perpetrators behavior. This is possibly a result of social stereotypes of men's behavior as more severe and

harmful, while women's behavior was seen as more annoying and thus possibly more like courtship behavior (Finnegan & Fritz, 2012; Lambert et al., 2013).

It was further anticipated that victims of male perpetrators would be more readily seen as victims, would be given more credence, and be given more sympathy than victims of female perpetrators. Although victims of female perpetrators (male victims) were more likely to be blamed than victims of male perpetrators (female victims), participants were generally unlikely to blame victims. With regard to male victims receiving more blame, this is possibly due to social stereotypes. Men may be thought of as better able to take care of themselves, and handle situations on their own (Finnegan & Fritz, 2012; Phillips et al., 2004). Men are often perceived as being more in control and in less need of police assistance (Phillips et al., 2004), because the vignette depicted police intervention it is possible the male victim is being blamed for breaking a gender stereotype and not handling the situation himself.

Participants' perceptions of victims is an important area for future consideration. One area of potential future consideration is the addition of measures for perceived concern for the victim, and the amount of perceived danger the victim faces. The current study found low levels of victim blame, but it would be of interest to examine if this transfers to higher levels of concern for the victim and the danger they potentially face. It is possible that victims are not being blamed for cyber stalking behaviors, but neither are participants especially concerned for them or their safety. Alternatively, it is equally plausible that low levels of victim blame may result in higher levels of perceived concern for the victim and the amount of danger they face. Determining which direction the public's perceptions goes could have important implications for law enforcement and

prosecutions response to cyber stalking. Further, these measures could help develop understanding of how cyber stalking victims are viewed, and potentially have a significant impact on the amount of aid victims are provided through the development of legislation.

Previous research on offline stalking has suggested that stranger perpetrators may be viewed as more dangerous than ex-intimate perpetrators. It remains equivocal if this is also true of cyber stalking. It was anticipated that a perpetrator who was a stranger would be perceived as more of a threat than the perpetrator who was known to the victim. Due to the unknown nature of a stranger's behavior perceived dangerousness increases (Hills & Taplin, 1998). The cyber stalker-victim relationship failed to yield significance for any of the dependent variables. This in itself is noteworthy as previous research of offline stalking suggesting that participants should view strangers as more dangerous (Hills & Taplin, 1998). This is likely due to the motives of the perpetrator being unknown or hidden, and the victim having less perceived control of the situation (Hills & Taplin, 1998). Future research should further examine perceived dangerousness and cyber stalker-victim relationship to clarify why this is not occurring.

Previous research has also suggested that the just world hypothesis may be functioning in offline stalking scenarios. This may occur due to the perception that stalking victims must have done something to provoke the stalkers behavior (Phillips et al., 2004). An ex-intimate stalker may be seen as less indicative of stalking than a stranger (Phillips et al., 2004). The fact that this did not occur in the current study on cyber stalking is interesting. Further research could help determine if victim behavior impacts participants' perceptions of cyber stalking scenarios. It is encouraging that

participants view both scenarios as cyber stalking, but problematic as they view the scenario as only moderately severe. This is especially troubling as research has found that victim outcomes of cyber stalking can be, and often are, extremely negative and detrimental to the victim (Drahokoupilova, 2007; Sheridan & Grant, 2007).

Furthermore, participant perceptions of victim blame were not impacted by the relationship between the perpetrator and the victim. Participants were generally unlikely to blame the victim for their victimization. This could be a result of limited victim behavior being presented in the vignette. It is possible that more open online behavior engaged in by a victim who is cyber stalked by a stranger may provoke more victim blame than when the same behavior occurs with an ex-intimate cyber stalker. A victim who puts more personal and easily accessible information online may be perceived as encouraging or inviting the cyber stalking behavior. Future research should further examine if online behaviors by the victim impact the amount of blame participants place on the victim.

Contrary to hypothesis, participants failed to view the close proximity perpetrator as being more dangerous than the perpetrator that was further away. It is surprising that close proximity did not increase the level of perceived risk, fear, and vulnerability, thus increasing the perceived severity of the scenario. Due to the nature of anti-stalking legislation, and the requirement of fear, this perception could lead to geographically distant perpetrators escaping prosecution. Although this was an unexpected finding it is consistent with prior research on actual dangerousness, which has found that the potential negative impacts of cyber stalking is equal to that of offline stalking (Dreßing et al., 2014; Moriarty & Freiburger, 2008). As cyber stalkers of any geographical distance can

inflict high levels of harm, future research should examine the ability of awareness programs to improve perceptions of severity of cyber stalking.

Participant gender was also examined as previous research suggests there are gender differences in the perception of offline stalking scenarios. Consistent with offline stalking research, women were more likely to view the behavior as cyber stalking and the behavior as illegal (Finnegan & Fritz, 2012; Lambert et al., 2013; Phillips et al., 2004). This is possibly due to the fact that, women are more likely to be victims of offline stalking than men (Moriarty & Freiburger, 2008; Pittaro, 2007; Roberts, 2008; Sheridan & Fisher, 2012). Furthermore, it is consistent with social expectations of women being more concerned with preventing harm, such that legal intervention is seen as being more necessary (Lambert et al., 2013). This has implications for the rate of reporting; if men are less likely to view the behavior as cyber stalking they may also be less likely to report the behavior. This is problematic as female perpetrators can be as harmful as male perpetrators (McEwan et al., 2007; Moriarty & Freiburger, 2008; Sheridan & Lyndon, 2012).

Also consistent with previous research, was the finding that male participants were more likely to blame victims than female participants. This increased level of victim blaming by men may be a result of social expectations of men as being tough, or dealing with situations on their own (Lambert et al., 2013; Phillips et al., 2004). The social expectations taught to boys may result in different values that could increase victim blaming (Lambert et al., 2013; Phillips et al., 2004). Male participants were also more likely to view the cyber stalking behavior as more similar to courtship behavior than women. This is not consistent with previous research findings, where men and women

equally perceive the line as blurry between cyber stalking and courtship (Lambert et al., 2013). This is possibly due to men being more likely to misperceive behavior of women as indicating romantic interest, while women are less likely to make this error. Future research should examine why this difference between offline stalking and cyber stalking is occurring. This could have important implications for whether cyber stalking and offline stalking are viewed as either a variation of each other or as distinct behaviors.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

Results notwithstanding, limitations to the current study should be considered. First, a potential limitation is that the explicit threat and police involvement in the vignette may have impacted perceptions of the scenario, resulting in participants generally viewing the scenario as severe. Furthermore, although participants saw the behavior as cyber stalking, this may have been impacted by the seriousness of the scenario. As such the current studies findings on severity may not be representative of views on cyber stalking in less explicit scenarios. Alternatively, it could be that participants do take cyber stalking as a serious and real problem, and would have perceived the scenario as cyber stalking regardless of the explicitness of the scenario. Future research should manipulate the explicitness of threat level, and police involvement to further determine its impact on participants' perceptions of scenarios. This could help to clarify how severe the stalking behavior must be for it to be considered cyber stalking, or how much police involvement impacts perceptions of the behavior. This could have important implications, in that it is possible that only the most severe cases of cyber stalking are in fact considered cyber stalking.

A second potential limitation of the current study is that the manipulation for proximity may not have been sufficiently salient. The nature of the statement in the scenario makes it possible that participants may not have seen the distance as a constant factor. Participants may have viewed an ex-intimate stalker that was 2000 miles away as an individual that was at one time in close proximity, and viewed a stranger that was 2000 miles as always having been that far. Although the presence of a manipulation check ensured that participants understood the current proximity of the perpetrator, this was potentially some perceived travel by the perpetrator. This could have potentially impacted perceptions of proximity on all dependent variables. Future research may want to further examine proximity and its influence on participant's evaluations of cyber stalking scenarios.

Participants were asked three simple questions about their past experience of cyber stalking, but a definition was not provided to participants. As a consequence participants defined what constituted cyber stalking for themselves. Questions could have been asked about the experience of offline stalking as well, and if the two experiences were the same or different. Since prevalence rates are remaining equivocal these questions could have shed further light on the rates of cross over, and the rate of cyber stalking occurring in isolation, thus helping to determine if cyber stalking is in fact a variation of offline stalking or a distinct and separate set of behaviors.

Data for the current study was collected entirely online, and as such it is worth pointing out that this has both advantages and disadvantages. The advantage is that there may be an increased sense of anonymity which could potentially reduce social desirability effects and result in more open and honest responses (Coomber, 1997;

Joinson, 1999). However, a potential disadvantage is that online data collection is becoming increasingly common. As such, online surveys may have lost their novelty, thus resulting in a lack of attention and engagement on the part of the participants. Ensuring survey flow and having a variety of question types may act to engage participants' attention.

A final limitation is that all the scenarios took place within a heterosexual context. It is possible that perceptions of scenarios may be different when the situation occurs within a gay/lesbian context opposed to a heterosexual context. This could possibly occur due to heterosexual bias in the perception of gay/lesbian relationships, such that gay/lesbian relationships are dismissed and devalued as not being the normal and correct type of relationship. This is an important area for future research as cyber stalking within the gay/lesbian communities is as prevalent and serious as it is within the heterosexual communities (Sheridan, North, & Scott, 2014).

Finally, future research may want to further examine third party cyber stalking. This is an important avenue of research due to the fact that it appears to be a commonly experienced behavior, which can have potentially lethal consequences. Regardless of the dangers third party cyber stalking presents it is often not recognized in legislation.



## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

Taken together, these results are of value to the further understanding of cyber stalking behaviors. This research is some of the first to examine perceptions of how perpetrator gender, cyber stalking-victim relationship, and proximity impact perceptions of cyber stalking. Findings suggest that perpetrator gender significantly impacts perceptions of the legality and severity of the scenario, the level of victim blame, and the similarity to courtship behaviors, which is an issue of concern. This is especially concerning as victimization rates may be equivalent for both men and women. Furthermore, in the present study participants' perceptions of cyber stalking differed from offline stalking research, specifically in regards to cyber stalker-victim relationship. This is a potentially important distinction between offline and cyber stalking. Finally, participant gender also demonstrated differences in perceptions of cyber stalking from previous offline stalking research.

Participant perception appears to be consistent with some findings of offline stalking, and divergent with others. Consistent findings included participant gender difference in attitudes toward cyber stalking and perceptions of the scenario. Divergent findings included prior cyber stalking victimization impacting attitudes toward cyber stalking, and perceptions of severity in terms cyber stalker-victim relationship. Future research could help to determine if cyber stalking is a distinct behavior or just a variation of offline stalking. Further research into this area could also advance the

development of appropriate legislation, and make the legal ambiguity and consequences known. Future endeavours of cyber stalking research should move forward with this goal.

## APPENDICES

## Appendix A: The Vignette

### Man/Woman arrested, accused of cyber stalking

By Rose Tyler  
Staff Writer  
January 5, 2014

**Steve/Sarah Brown** was arrested on a cyber stalking charge on allegations **he/she** sent **his/her ex-girlfriend (boyfriend)/a woman (man) he (she) had never previously met** more than 300 messages through various means, according to the arrest report.

Brown, a computer analyst, installed tracking technology known as a Trojan, which was sent by Brown in a greeting card to the victim and was installed on the victim's computer. The Trojan allowed Brown access to the victim's private information and record all out going messages.

Brown posted threatening, provocative, and offensive comments through private messages sent to email and text. These messages were also sent on various websites including blogs, social networking sites, and professional networking sites that the victim frequented. On these posts Brown made comments stating that the victim was crazy, threatened to injure **his/her** reputation, and statements that the victim was worthless.

Officials confirmed that Brown had sent more than 300 messages through various means, including 96 emails, 189 texts, 60 messages through Facebook, 26 tweets, and 87 messages on various message boards. During a single 10-hour period, Brown sent the alleged victim more than 30 text messages, and left multiple messages on the victim's Facebook account, voicemail, and email. In one message Brown writes "I want to watch you suffer" and in others states "I will come for you." The police confirmed that the alleged victim never responded to any of these messages.

Brown was arrested **only 5 miles/2000 miles** from the victim's residence. Police arrested Brown **in the same neighborhood/in a different state from** where the victim lived. During questioning, Brown admitted to sending the messages.

**Appendix B:  
Demographics**

**Age:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Gender:** Male \_\_\_\_\_ Female \_\_\_\_\_

**Race:** African-American \_\_\_\_\_  
Asian-American \_\_\_\_\_  
Caucasian \_\_\_\_\_  
Hispanic \_\_\_\_\_  
Native American \_\_\_\_\_  
Other \_\_\_\_\_

**Sexual Orientation:**  
Heterosexual \_\_\_\_\_  
Gay/Lesbian \_\_\_\_\_  
Bisexual \_\_\_\_\_  
Other \_\_\_\_\_

**Have you ever been cyber stalked:** No \_\_\_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_\_\_

**If Yes who was the harasser?** (please check all that apply)

Acquaintance: Male \_\_\_\_\_ Female \_\_\_\_\_  
Ex-intimate: Male \_\_\_\_\_ Female \_\_\_\_\_  
Stranger: Male \_\_\_\_\_ Female \_\_\_\_\_ Unknown \_\_\_\_\_

**Did you report the incident(s)?** No \_\_\_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_\_\_

**If Yes to who?** \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix C: Cyber-Obsessional Pursuit

Please respond to each question with: Never      1-3      4-6      7+

In your lifetime, how often, if at all, **has anyone/have you** ever obsessively pursued **you/someone** through electronic means (computer, email, chat room, etc.) over a period of time for the purpose of establishing an intimate relationship that **you/they** did NOT want?

1. Sending exaggerated messages of affection
2. Sending tokens of affection
3. Sending excessively needy or demanding messages
4. Sending excessively disclosive messages
5. Sending sexually harassing messages
6. Pretending to be someone she or he wasn't
7. Directing others to you in threatening ways
8. Meeting first online and then threatening you
9. Meeting first online and then following you
10. Attempting to disable your computer
11. Taking over your electronic identity or persona
12. Meeting first online and then intruding in your life
13. 'Bugging' your car, home, or office
14. Sending threatening written messages
15. Sending threatening pictures or images
16. 'Sabotaging' your private reputation
17. First meeting you online and then stalking you
18. Exposing private information about you to others
19. Obtaining private information without permission
20. 'Sabotaging' work/school reputation
21. Sending pornographic/obscene images or messages
22. Altering your electronic identity or persona
23. Meeting first online and then harming you
24. Using your computer to get information on others

## **Appendix D: Attitudes of Cyber Stalking**

Using the scale below, to what extent to you agree with the following statements:

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree				Strongly Agree

### **Pervasiveness of Cyber Stalking:**

- (a) Cyber stalking is rare (reverse coded),
- (b) I think cyber stalking occurs frequently in the United States;

### **Harmfulness of Cyber Stalking:**

- (a) Cyber stalking does great emotional harm to the victim,
- (b) Most cyber stalkers will not hurt the person they are cyber stalking,
- (c) Generally, cyber stalking has little harm on the person being cyber stalked (reverse coded),
- (d) Most cyber stalkers are harmless (reverse coded),
- (e) Rarely is the person being cyber stalked harmed in anyway (reverse coded),
- (f) Nothing good comes of cyber stalking;

### **Cyber Stalking Victimology:**

- (a) Cyber stalkers rarely cyber stalk strangers (reverse coded),
- (b) Famous people are more likely to be cyber stalked than everyday people;

### **Relational Partners:**

- (a) Most cyber stalking involves formerly romantic partners,
- (b) Cyber stalking usually occurs after a relationship breaks up badly;

### **Cyber Stalking Motivations:**

- (a) Most cyber stalkers are in love with the person they are cyber stalking,
- (b) Cyber stalking is generally driven by sexual fantasies on the part of the cyber stalker,
- (c) Cyber stalking is persistent pestering,
- (d) Most cyber stalkers are shy and do not know how to approach other people,
- (e) One reason cyber stalking occurs is because some people play too hard to get;

### **Cyber Stalking vs. Courtship:**

- (a) There is a fine line between trying to get a person to like you romantically and cyber stalking,
- (b) There is a fine line between cyber stalking and getting a person to go out on a date;

### **Cyber Stalking Victims:**

- (a) People who claim they are being cyber stalked are oversensitive about the matter,
- (b) I think most of the concern over cyber stalking is because people overreact in our society.

## Appendix E: Perceptions of Scenario

Please indicate the gender of the alleged Victim	Male	Female
Please indicate the relationship of the perpetrator and victim	Ex-intimate	Stranger
Please indicate the distance the perpetrator was arrested	5 miles	2000 miles

Using the scale below, to what extent to you agree with the following statements:

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree				Strongly Agree

1. Is Steve/Sarah cyber stalking Sarah/Steve?
2. If you think this is a case of cyber stalking, how severe do you believe it to be?
3. How likely is this scenario to result in bodily injury to (the victim)?
4. Is Sarah/Steve responsible for encouraging Steve/Sarah's behavior?
5. Was police intervention necessary for the resolution of this case?
6. Were criminal charges necessary for the resolution of this case?
7. Could the actions of Sarah/Steve have alleviated the situation?
8. Sarah/Steve should be flattered by Steve/Sarah's attention?
9. Was Sarah/Steve in danger from Steve/Sarah?
10. Steve/Sarah intended to cause harm?
11. Sarah/Steve over-reacted to the situation?
12. Sarah/Steve's reaction to Steve/Sarah's behavior was unexpected?
13. How normal was Sarah/Steve's reaction?
14. Is Steve/Sarah in need of therapy/psychiatric help?
15. Sarah/Steve should be flattered by the attention?
16. Did Sarah/Steve bring it on themselves?
17. Steve/Sarah's behavior is strange?
18. Steve/Sarah is emotionally unstable?
19. Steve/Sarah is mentally unstable based on their behavior?
20. How romantic is Steve/Sarah's behavior?
21. How flattering is Steve/Sarah's behavior?
22. How justified is Steve/Sarah's behavior?
23. Did Steve/Sarah's behavior violate laws?



## Appendix F: Informed Consent

*\*Participants recruited via MTurk. Underlined portion will be deleted for these participants.*

TITLE: Evaluating Relationships  
PROJECT DIRECTOR: Billea Ahlgrim  
PHONE #: 777-3921  
DEPARTMENT: Psychology

A person who is to participate in the research must give his or her informed consent to such participation. This consent must be based on an understanding of the nature and risks of the research. This document provides information that is important for this understanding. Research projects include only subjects who choose to take part. Please take your time in making your decision as to whether to participate. If you have questions at any time, please ask.

Approximately 400 people, students from the University of North Dakota, and various parts of the country will take part in this study at UND. If you join this study, you will be asked to read a vignette and respond to various questions regarding your perceptions of this scenario. The purpose of this research is to examine how people make judgments concerning online behaviors.

Your participation in the study will last approximately 60-75 minutes. You may experience frustration that is often experienced when completing surveys. The scenario you are reading, and some of the questions may be of a sensitive nature, and you may therefore become upset as a result. However, such risks are not viewed as being in excess of "minimal risk." If, however, you become upset by questions, you may stop at any time or choose not to answer a question. If you would like to talk to someone about your feelings about this study, the UND Counseling Center provides services to UND students and for those that live on campus. You may contact them at 701-777-2127. The Counseling Department also operates a clinic that is available to the Grand Forks community, and can also provide referrals. The Counseling Department can be reached at 701-777-3745.

You may not benefit personally from being in this study. However, we hope that, in the future, other people might benefit from this study because results will provide a better understanding on how people evaluate issues that may occur on the Internet.

If you are a student at UND, you may receive extra credit for your time for the psychology course of your choice in which you are currently enrolled. For participants who are from UND, and participating in this study for extra credit, if you choose not to participate in this study you may earn extra credit in your course in other ways. Please ask your instructor, who will provide you with comparable assignments that you may choose to complete (e.g. writing assignments, participation in other research experiments etc.).

You will not have any costs for being in this research study, nor will you receive monetary compensation. *You will be paid \$.40 as compensation for your participation in the study.* The University of North Dakota and the research team are receiving no payments from other agencies, organizations, or companies to conduct this research study.

The records of this study will be kept private to the extent permitted by law. In any report about this study that might be published, you will not be identified. Study results will be presented in a summarized manner so that you cannot be identified. Your study record may be reviewed by government agencies, and the University of North Dakota Institutional Review Board. The only other people who will have access to the data are the research investigators (Billea Ahlgrim, Dr. Cheryl Terrance) conducting the study.

No identifying information about participants will be reported or kept. Confidentiality will be maintained by storing your responses in a password protected file. Your name is not being collected. Data will be stored in a locked file cabinet, separate for consent forms. Data will be stored for a minimum of three years, after which it will be shredded and deleted.

Your participation is voluntary. You may choose not to participate or you may discontinue your participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with the University of North Dakota.

The researchers conducting this study are Billea Ahlgrim and Dr. Cheryl Terrance. If you have questions, concerns, or complaints about the research please contact the research advisor, Cheryl Terrance at 777-3921 during the day. If you have questions regarding your rights as a research subject, or if you have any concerns or complaints about the research, you may contact the University of North Dakota Institutional Review Board at (701) 777-4279. Please call this number if you cannot reach research staff, or you wish to talk with someone else. If you click continue, this will indicate that this research study has been explained to you, that questions have been answered, and that you agree to take part in this study.

Table 1

*Cyber--Obsessional Pursuit Frequencies*

In your lifetime, how often, if at all, **has anyone/have you** ever obsessively pursued **you/someone** through electronic means (computer, email, chat room, etc.) over a period of time for the purpose of establishing an intimate relationship that **you/they** did NOT want?

	Percentage Experienced at Least Once			Percentage Engaged In at Least Once		
	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female
Sending exaggerated messages of affection	49.0	41.4	56.5	16.3	17.5	15.0
Sending tokens of affection	36.8	34.9	38.6	18.0	20.7	15.1
Sending excessively needy or demanding messages	47.1	41.7	52.4	13.9	17.1	10.6
Sending excessively disclosive messages	33.0	34.4	31.5	6.3	8.6	4.0
Sending sexually harassing messages	25.4	22.3	28.3	5.5	8.1	2.8
Pretending to be someone she or he wasn't	29.6	35.4	24.0	13.9	13.3	14.7
Directing others to you in threatening ways	11.9	15.1	8.7	3.8	6.3	1.1
Meeting first online and then threatening you	10.5	14.6	6.6	2.8	5.3	0.0
Meeting first online and then following you	9.9	16.3	3.8	2.5	4.8	0.0

	<b>Total</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>Female</b>
Attempting to disable your computer	5.1	8.6	1.7	3.0	5.4	0.6
Taking over your electronic identity or persona	8.3	14.5	2.1	3.5	5.0	1.1
Meeting first online and then intruding in your life	12.2	17.9	6.6	4.1	6.9	1.1
'Bugging' your car, home, or office	7.2	8.9	5.4	4.4	5.8	2.8
Sending threatening written messages	25.4	25.2	25.5	4.6	7.5	1.7
Sending threatening pictures or images	10.4	13.8	7.0	2.5	4.8	0.0
'Sabotaging' your private reputation	25.4	26.9	23.9	5.5	7.5	3.4
First meeting you online and then stalking you	13.2	19.1	7.6	3.8	6.4	1.1
Exposing private information about you to others	25.5	27.5	23.4	6.8	8.1	5.7
Obtaining private information without permission	20.6	22.8	18.4	10.9	15.9	5.6
'Sabotaging' work/school reputation	17.2	19.7	15.0	5.4	6.9	3.9
Sending pornographic/obscene images or messages	20.0	23.2	16.8	5.0	8.1	1.7
Altering your electronic identity or persona	8.3	14.6	2.2	3.3	5.4	1.1

	<b>Total</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>Female</b>	<i>Total</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>
Meeting first online and then harming you	4.4	7.8	1.1	<i>2.1</i>	<i>4.3</i>	<i>0.0</i>
Using your computer to get information on others	9.2	13.4	4.9	<i>5.7</i>	<i>7.0</i>	<i>4.5</i>

*Note. Percentage of subjects indicating any response other than 'never' (i.e. 1 to 3 times, 4 to 6 times, or more than 7 times; N = 364)*

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