Title: ‘What I Would Have Liked from the Police’: Victims’ Experiences of Police Engagement During the Investigation of Cyberstalking and Cyberharassment

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"What I would have liked from the police" Victims experiences of police engagement during the investigation of cyberstalking and cyberharassment

ABSTRACT

Victims of cyberstalking and online harassment experience barriers when engaging with the police, yet little is known about the psychological and social processes involved in these interactions. This study explored how victims of cyberstalking reported to police, and what factors influenced their continuing with their investigations. Fifty-three adults (44 women, 9 men) whose police investigations were closed and had not been identified as vulnerable by the police, participated in semi-structured interviews. Data were thematically analysed within a critical realist approach. Three themes were identified: (1) victims delayed reporting due to stigma, self-blame, and not being taken seriously; (2) police responses that dismissed or undermined their complaints, reinforced these fears, while empathetic and validating police responses alleviated distress and encouraged participation; and, (3) victims actively contributed to evidence gathering, but often felt unsupported, particularly when police neglected to investigate or follow up on information provided. Findings highlight the central role of initial police contact in shaping victims trust and engagement. Trauma-informed, victim-centred, and digitally literate police practises, as well as interdisciplinary collaboration with specialist community advocates are discussed to improve outcomes and support victims in cyberstalking cases.

Introduction

Cyber abuse is now recognised as widespread and persistent. A recent Pew Research Center survey reported that 41% of U.S. adults had experienced some form of online harassment, rising to 64% among adults under 30 (Pew Research Center, 2021). In a large scale survey, 40% of adult users had experienced some form of online harassment with younger users aged between 18 and 29 particularly affected, with 65% of this group reporting some type of online harassment including cyberstalking (Duggan et al., 2014). Research in this area also highlights significant underreporting, and barriers to disclosure, such as fear of escalation, shame and evidential challenges (Al-Khateeb et al, 2017, Igwe, 2020). While there is limited research that systematically explores the experiences of stalking victims' contact with police or their experience of the criminal justice process, the available evidence sheds light on barriers to reporting. In the UK one of the most frequently reported outcomes of this process is that victims are reluctant to report and their subsequent negative experiences cause them to withdraw, with the consequences that the case is unlikely to proceed (IOPC, 2024). It is important to understand why this disengagement occurs if we are to achieve better outcomes for victims of online abuse. Finding from Taylor-Dunn & Erol 2022, indicates that specialist teams working with cyberstalking in cases of domestic abuse, particularly involving co-located Independent Domestic Violence Advisor and Stalking Advocates can improve the victims' experiences of the Criminal Justice System. Victims linked their improved experience to greater access to support and an improved understanding of the impact of stalking on their circumstances.

The high rate of attrition across all cases of stalking and cyberstalking suggests that some aspects of interacting with police officers may unintentionally lead to victim disengagement. Generally, victims report that these crimes are dealt with ineffectively by police (IOPC, 2024, Short et al 2022) Therefore, it is necessary to determine what victims perceive to be 'appropriate' police support.

This paper draws mostly on research published since 2010, so the capabilities' afforded by Web.2.0 in online enabled stalking and harassment can be comparable to contemporary cases rather than earlier reporting conduct enabled by the more limited capabilities of Web 1.0. Three core themes emerged. First, victims report psychological obstacles to reporting such as fear and shame (Havers et al, 2024), guilt, and self-blame (Al-Khateeb, et al 2017). Secondly technical challenges, including difficulties in producing sufficient evidence. Igwe (2020) emphasises evidentiary challenges for police and prosecutors, while Al-Khateeb, 2017, highlights lack of evidence and anonymity of suspects as barriers to investigation. Limited technical knowledge and restricted access to technology among police was also cited as impeding the progress of investigations (Taylor-Dunn et al, 2022). Finally, experiences of procedural injustice and perceived institutional barriers feature prominently (Smith and Garland, 2019). Studies have also identified mixed responses from the police and criminal just processes throughout victim's experience, with Taylor-Dunn et al (2022) reporting initial interactions were often positive but later deteriorated when non-specialist officers become involved.

Research suggests that some police officers may adopt a victim-blaming approach when interacting with victims (IOPC, 2024; Millman et al., 2017). Officers can become frustrated with victims who are unwilling to modify their online behaviours or reluctant to use recommended "self-protection strategies." Millman et al. (2017) argue that police attitudes to cyber-harassment and stalking play a key role in shaping both their interactions with victims and the way these offenses are investigated. When victims are aware of, or anticipate, negative attitudes from police officers based on their identity as cyberstalking victims, interactions may become characterised by conflict and misunderstanding, ultimately leading to disengagement from the process (Stevenson et al., 2014).

According to the Social Identity Approach to Health (Haslam et al., 2018), group dynamics can sometimes undermine service engagement, a process referred to as the “social curse” (Kellezi & Reicher, 2012; Stevenson et al., 2014). In social psychological terms, interactions between service providers and service users are more positive when both parties share a common social identity, defined by shared norms, values, and understandings that shape perceptions and behaviours (Haslam et al., 2003). A shared identity fosters trust and mutual cooperation, with individuals expecting support from group members and interpreting that support in the spirit in which it is offered (Haslam et al., 2018). In the event of service “failures,” those who perceive a shared identity with providers are also more forgiving and more likely to evaluate the service positively (Haslam et al., 2003). By contrast, awareness that service providers hold stigmatising attitudes undermines this sense of shared identity, shifting a potentially cooperative intragroup interaction into a tense intergroup encounter (Stevenson et al., 2014).

Recent research on help-seeking in stigmatised contexts, such as foodbank use, has explored how to break the “social curse,” suggesting that appeals to a common humanity and sincere offers of help can encourage engagement (Bowe et al., 2018). Other studies argue that in some cases it may be impossible for two groups to share a common identity—for example, clinicians and mental health service users (McNamara et al., 2017). In such circumstances, the relationship may be better characterised as an intergroup relational identity (Hogg et al., 2012), where cooperation and collaboration are based on the pursuit of mutually desired outcomes.

This latter characterisation of service interaction may be especially applicable in the current context. Research suggests that police officers often hold negative attitudes toward victims of stalking (Millman et al., 2017) and that, more broadly, victims perceive these crimes as not being taken seriously (Fissel, 2023; Short et al., 2014). This reflects a form of stigmatised help-seeking, whereby victims anticipate negative treatment based on their group membership

and interpret their interactions with police through this lens. At the same time, officers who adopt victim-blaming attitudes may respond to victims accordingly. Together, these processes risk creating a self-fulfilling prophecy that results in negative interactions for both parties (Stevenson et al., 2014).

However, these dynamics have not been systematically explored in this context, and the psychological aspects of police support are often overlooked in favour of procedural concerns. Yet, continued victim engagement is essential for achieving favourable outcomes. Responding to Millman et al.'s (2017) call for research into victims' experiences of contact with police, the current study explores victims' perceptions of their interactions with police in cases of cyberstalking. Specifically, it seeks to identify the social psychological factors that facilitate or hinder engagement with investigations. While prior research has documented under-reporting and procedural challenges in cyberstalking cases, few studies have examined how victims' perceptions of police attitudes and stigma shape their willingness to engage with the criminal justice process. The current study therefore aims to address this gap by identifying the psychological and social factors influencing victims' decisions to report cyberstalking and to remain engaged with police investigations.

METHOD

Participants

Participants were recruited using data provided by two Police Forces in England and Wales. The datasets consisted of all cyber-related crimes identified through a key word search (see Appendix i) occurring between April 2014 and May 2016, which were supplied to the research team. A total of 4,749 crimes were identified as cases of cyberstalking and/or cyberharassment. Once the datasets had been received, they underwent a thorough cleaning process before being

permitted to leave police premises. Fields not relevant to the research, such as vehicle details or house numbers, were removed. All cases were then fully anonymised, with names, place names, dates of birth, and any other identifying information deleted. Crimes not considered to fall under the classification of cyberharassment or cyberstalking (e.g., sexual exploitation, hate crime, or coercive control) were also excluded. Finally, a further variable was added for categorisation, with each crime categorised according to Crown Prosecution Service guidelines (CPS, 2016).

The criteria for selection of potential interviewees were that their case was closed, they were over 18 years of age, and they were not identified as vulnerable on the crime record. Based on these criteria, 1,621 victims were identified as eligible to be invited to take part. Women comprised 79.1% of this group, the typical age range was between 21 and 40 years, and the most common relationships to the stalker were ex-partner (51.4%), family member (16.3%), or acquaintance (14.1%). Letters were sent to this group inviting them to participate in the study. Of those invited, 53 individuals (44 female, 9 male) responded and agreed to be interviewed. At the time of interview, participants' ages ranged from 20 to 72 years (M = 38 years 3 months, SD = 12 years 3 months). In this interview sample, 47% (n = 25) of the victim–offender relationships were ex-intimates, 19% (n = 10) were acquaintances, and strangers, family, and other categories each accounted for 11% (n = 6). Examples of relationships within the "other" category included patients, pupils, and former relatives by marriage.

Data collection and procedure

A semi-structured interview schedule was designed to capture participants' experiences of reporting cyberstalking and harassment, as well as the researchers' topics of interest. The schedule was developed through an extensive literature review, informed by pilot interviews, and refined over three iterations. The final version was broader and more structured. Whereas

earlier versions had focused primarily on victims' experiences of cyberharassment and whether or not they reported to the police, Version 3 incorporated trauma-informed principles (Campbell et al., 2010) and addressed not only direct victimisation but also bystander experiences, perceptions of acceptable and unacceptable online behaviour, and the circumstances that drew people into abusive exchanges. It included more detailed questions about the origins and escalation of harassment, its impact on physical and mental health, and how levels of fear changed over time. Reporting was explored in greater depth, including delays, expectations of police response, outcomes, and whether victims would report again. Additional sections asked about support from services and peers, opinions on penalties for offenders, improvements needed in police investigations, and the potential usefulness of an app for collecting digital evidence.

These changes made Version 3 more trauma-informed. Rather than moving directly into questions about police reporting, it began with broader reflections on online behaviour to provide a gentler entry point. It acknowledged the emotional and health consequences of harassment, validated reasons why people might delay reporting, and included questions about sources of support. By inviting participants to suggest improvements and consider future tools, Version 3 also emphasised empowerment and collaboration, reducing the risk of re-traumatisation and giving participants a greater sense of agency. For the purposes of the current paper, we are primarily concerned with participants' discussions of their experiences with the police.

Once the interview protocols had been confirmed, interviews were conducted on police premises in the two force areas and ranged in duration from 15 to 81 minutes (M = 34 minutes, SD = 16 minutes). A member of the police force was available on call if required but was not present during the interviews. Participants received £30 in monetary compensation for their time, and travel costs were reimbursed.

Analytic Procedure

The data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021), a flexible method well-suited to identifying themes that capture participants' experiences of interactions with police when reporting cyberstalking. We adopted a critical realist epistemological framework (Willig, 2012), treating participants' accounts both as representations of reality and as insights into the social psychological processes shaping their interactions with police officers.

Analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2021) six steps: familiarisation with the data, inclusive coding, grouping codes according to similarity to develop themes, checking themes against the dataset, refining themes as necessary, and writing the report. To increase rigour, several members of the research team read coding frameworks independently and contested discrepancies until agreement was achieved. Reflexive memos were used to document analytic decisions and assumptions, facilitating transparency. While formal member-checking with participants was not possible because of ethical guidelines against contacting victims, results were shared with victim advocates and policing practitioners for credibility checking. The research team also had reflective conversations around our proximity to policing, recognising that this could influence the interpretation of data. Three themes were identified and are presented in the following section. Extracts are included to support our analytic claims, and all names are pseudonyms.

RESULTS

Theme 1: The emotional context of reporting: "I didn't think the police would take it seriously"

Participants described a range of psychological and social factors that contributed to delays in reporting their experiences of cyberstalking to the police. These factors were rooted in

perceptions of stigma, anticipated dismissal, and internalised blame. In many cases, reporting occurred only after prolonged harassment and escalating distress, indicating that victims often endured significant harm before seeking police intervention.

Many participants expressed concern that their experiences would not be taken seriously by the police. This perception was shaped both by the online nature of the harassment and by broader societal tendencies to minimise digital or non-physical abuse. Such minimisation (Fissel, 2023) was not only external but also internalised by victims—for example, Elaine reflected that she felt she was not "properly stalked." As further illustrated by Amber, participants believed the police would not regard their experiences as sufficiently serious to warrant involvement:

> *I didn't think the police would take it seriously, "there's a man in my garden with roses and wine, sobbing with love letters… it's beginning to get on my nerves", they wouldn't take it seriously.* (Amber)

Feelings of shame and self-blame were common. Participants worried they would be judged for their actions or seen as in some way responsible for the perpetrator's behaviour. As Anna remarked, "as an adult you make decisions that, you know, direct the way the rest of your life goes. So, you've got to take some responsibility for that." This reflects an internalisation of victim-blaming narratives often associated with cases such as these (Sugiura & Smith, 2020). These accounts also point to an anticipated identity threat—an awareness of the stereotypes attached to those reporting harassment or abuse. Victims feared being negatively judged by police, which likely created a barrier to accessing appropriate support and engaging with the criminal justice process (Stevenson et al., 2014, Havers et al., 2024).

As noted, and as is common in such cases, most perpetrators were known to participants (Dreßling et al., 2014). Multiple complex relationship dynamics and histories were at play, and

participants often expressed concern for the perpetrator, worrying about the impact a complaint might have on their careers, mental health, or family life in the case of former partners. For these participants, the goal was not necessarily to sanction the perpetrator but to work with police to stop the harassment.

> *…at that time I was still willing to save him, through all the madness. I just didn't want him to get in trouble, I didn't want him to go to jail, I didn't want anything like that to happen to him, I just wanted it to stop*. (Imogen)

Ultimately, participants reported the harassment to police only once it had escalated to a potentially dangerous level, in some cases after enduring such behaviours for several years. By that stage, the harassment was omnipresent, spanning multiple platforms and becoming a daily feature of life:

> *I was constantly getting contacted through either social media, trying to add me on my Snapchat or Instagram or I was getting calls on my phone, you know, by other applications, and Facetime. Any time, no matter wherever I went I just felt like somebody knew where I was. They were like, 'We know where you are'. It was like all the time for about two years.* (Danielle)

It is important to note that prior to contacting police, participants reported engaging in a range of self-protective behaviours, such as changing their telephone number, ignoring the perpetrator, or blocking them on social media. These measures were experienced as extremely stressful. As illustrated by Imogen below, police contact was only initiated once the behaviour escalated to a level at which participants, or those close to them, became concerned for their safety:

> *He did get extremely bad towards the end, the last message that I received, that was the only message that I reported to the police, after four year. They got so bad*

towards the end that I didn't know whether I could risk them being, that he wasn't going to do it….. I ignored the messages and then that's when he threatened to set my house on fire with me and my kids in it. I couldn't do anything, he can come and chop me into bits, I'm all right with that, but you're not having my kids, kind of thing, you know. That was the straw that broke the camel's back. (Imogen)

In summary, the decision to contact the police was made in the context of extreme distress. Victims had often endured online harassment for a prolonged period and typically sought police involvement only once the behaviour escalated to a dangerous level. This delay was largely due to concerns that the behaviours were not serious enough to warrant police action (and, to a lesser extent, worries about the potential impact on the perpetrator. Evidence of victims' awareness of negative attitudes toward those reporting such crimes was also clear in the data. Central to these concerns were fears of being seen as overreacting to "normal" behaviour or being blamed for encouraging it. Some participants internalised these perceptions, blaming themselves for their circumstances and dismissing the severity of their experiences. These concerns shaped not only the timing of initial contact with police but also participants' expectations of police response (Stevenson et al., 2014). Whether these expectations were confirmed or challenged emerged in subsequent interactions, as explored in Theme 2. As the next theme illustrates, the police response to victims was central to continued engagement and satisfaction with the process.

Theme 2: "**Stop looking and it won't bother** you" **– How police responses validate or undermine victims' experiences**

Participants described how police responses, both verbal and procedural, shaped their perceptions of being believed, supported, and taken seriously. These responses either validated their distress or reinforced feelings of blame and minimisation. Victims' accounts of their

encounters with police typically centred on specific reactions to the concerns outlined in Theme 1: the extent to which their report was believed and taken seriously, whether officers demonstrated empathy, and the nature of the action taken.

Some participants reported that the advice provided by police reflected a dismissive attitude toward their concerns, particularly when it was not commensurate with the level of threat or fear they perceived. From the victims' perspective, the solutions offered by police often appeared overly simplistic in the face of complex and escalating harassment:

> *…the police officers themselves were all very nice, but they just said, well just stop looking. Stop looking and it won't bother you.* (Isabel)

Advice such as "just stop looking" (Isabel), "just switch your Facebook off" (Bella), or "change [your] phone number" (Jessica) was perceived as flippant and suggested to participants that police did not view their problems as serious enough to warrant action (Bond & Tyrrell, 2021). Such responses reinforced feelings of self-blame and confirmed participants' fears that they were wasting police time:

> *But I think in reality, are the police gonna arrest her? Are they gonna prosecute her? Is anything gonna happen? No. In fairness they've got better things to do and I would prefer them to have better things to do. Do you hear what I'm saying?....Yeah, and this is not serious. I would rather they'd be out catching people who really need catching, you know? Muggers, rapists and all that. I'd rather they concentrated on that.* (Elaine)

As illustrated in the extract above, Elaine felt her experiences warranted contacting the police but subsequently minimised her concerns by suggesting that officers had "better things to do." This was a common response among participants: dismissive advice from police

confirmed expectations that their experiences would not be taken seriously, undermined their fears, and led them to minimise their own distress. As Georgia reflected, "they've not got time to do, spend time on a bit of name-calling as they see it."

Police responses such as these also led some participants to question whether officers' actions were influenced by the victim's background, identity, or relationship to the perpetrator. For example, Fred characterised police inaction as being linked to his sexuality:

> *I'm a gay man, single, and they'd made an allegation against me and I thought of all those kinds, oh they're not bothered, he's a gay man, he's guilty, you know, basically, so we're not bothered. That's how I felt it was coming across.* (Fred)

Rather than focusing on the perpetrator and the harassment experienced, many participants felt that they themselves were being judged. In these moments, they perceived an implicit question as to who the "real" victim was:

> *I looked like a neurotic mother when I were telling them, I were crying, 'Please tell him to stop. Please. Please'. No-one were listening because I understand why, because he were pretending he were a victim as well. 'Oh, she's ringing me up', she's doing no such a thing. It's all come out now that he's a manipulative liar, there's findings in the court.* (April)

As seen above, April indicated that she felt stereotyped as a "neurotic mother," reflecting stigma consciousness (Pinel, 1999)—an expectation of being stereotyped by others. Although she was ultimately vindicated in court, her experiences of not being listened to by police were distressing. Like other participants, April also internalised a victim-blaming response, saying she "understands" why she was treated in this way.

Identity-based dismissal also extended to perceptions of the perpetrator—particularly when they did not fit the stereotype of a "typical" stalker. Just as victims questioned whether aspects of their own identity led police to dismiss their reports, they also wondered whether the identity of the perpetrator shaped police perceptions. This is illustrated in Elaine's account, where she described being accused of "encouraging" her stalker, and perceived this response to be linked to the fact that the perpetrator was female rather than male:

> *But I did feel with the police, it was, like, well, you must have encouraged her in some way….And I did feel, like I say, had she been male and bigger, they would have perhaps taken it a little bit more seriously. I felt as if they were blaming me in a way, as in you must have encouraged her somehow. You must have given her special treatments at work. You must have done this, this or this. And I get where they're coming from, I do. I do understand those [Int. 1: It's very, very awkward, isn't it?] It's hard, 'cause I felt I was trying to defend myself in a way. It's, like, I've done nothing wrong here.* (Elaine)

As with April's experience, Elaine also minimised her distress at being blamed for the perpetrator's actions and expressed an understanding of the police response—again reflecting an internalisation of victim-blaming attitudes. In contrast, participants reported clear psychological benefits when they felt their complaints were taken seriously by police. As illustrated by Anna, officers' acknowledgement that online harassment was extremely distressing and significantly impacted victims' safety and quality of life was a "good thing," as it validated her experiences and concerns:

> *But I think that as long as the police treat it with the seriousness that it deserves, I think that was a good thing for me, because one of my worries was that they would think that I was just creating this situation myself.* (Anna)

Participants appreciated when police reassured them that their decision to report the harassment was appropriate and took time to listen. Advice that included concrete actions and validated the seriousness of the situation was experienced as especially helpful, in contrast to earlier dismissive advice to "stop looking":

> *The police officer who interviewed me was… I cannot speak highly enough of him, he was the one that was like "Freya I think he's probably been abusing you for quite some time, Freya this is really serious, this is my personal email address, you need me – you contact me, if he gets in contact or anything, you contact me" that was a positive experience I had with the police* (Freya)

As articulated by Freya, treating a report with sensitivity can lessen victims' distress and contribute to perceptions of police officers as supportive and empathetic. In this case, the officer's response also demonstrated an understanding of the nature of stalking and the significant delay that can occur between its onset and the victim contacting police ("I think he's probably been abusing you for quite some time").

Alongside showing empathy and sensitivity, taking swift action that victims perceived as commensurate with the seriousness of the threat further validated the gravity of their experiences:

> *I do remember [the police] saying, 'now that we know about this, we have to act', and I think they went straight round to the house where he lived, and told him to stop it….it was wonderful when they said, he can't, he's not allowed to contact you now, and they actually said, if he contacts you then you contact us.* (Kelly)

In summary, police officers' responses to reports of cyberstalking either heightened or reduced victims' distress. Victims expected police to provide both procedural and

psychological support. When responses were empathetic, demonstrated understanding, and involved actions that aligned with victims’ expectations and emphasised the seriousness of the crime, participants reported feeling supported and validated. By contrast, responses that were ineffective, delayed, or unsympathetic reinforced feelings of blame, invalidated victims’ distress, and suggested the crime was not serious enough to warrant police involvement (Fissel & Reyns, 2020). Although participants recognised that police were at times limited in the actions they could take, they nevertheless wanted assurance that their concerns were being taken seriously.

Theme 3: Co-operating with the Police: “I’d have to be really firm all the way along”

Despite the emotional toll described in Theme 2, many participants remained committed to engaging with the investigative process, often taking on the burden of evidence gathering and follow-up themselves. In contrast to the notion of the “unhelpful victim” (Millman et al., 2017), our data indicated that victims believed they were actively assisting police in their enquiries, for example by collecting evidence. However, participants sometimes felt that this assistance was not appreciated by officers. Across accounts, the burden of responsibility appeared to fall on victims rather than police, particularly in relation to gathering evidence. Participants found it especially distressing when evidence they provided was not acted upon, as illustrated by Gemma:

> *I’d printed every single thing off so they had all the text messages and everything else, copies of the emails and the cards and all the other shit, erm, and I stood in the station and she basically dismissed me that basically you cant get to see anyone because nothings actually really happened….So at first I put up with it all, it’s when the phone… all the phone calls and all the other bits started and I’ve got my daughter in the house and then I’d have to be really firm all the way along and keep going back to*

the police but really they could have had him on the last one after the PIN notice and that annoys me. (Gemma)

As Gemma noted above, some participants felt they had sufficient evidence to warrant police action but were told that no crime had been committed. Others, like Gemma, persevered (“I’d have to be really firm all the way along”). As Melissa explained, however, in the midst of a psychologically distressing experience it was difficult to stay “on track” with evidence collection:

while you’re in the middle of it all and it’s all happening you lose track and the police tell you to write everything down and everything but, like I say, you are bombarded with things, you can’t think straight to do anything like that (Melissa)

When engaging with police and the investigative process, participants wanted to be kept informed about progress. This served two key purposes: (1) it reassured victims that police were supportive of them, and (2) it reduced fears or anxieties they may have had about reporting their experiences in the first place. However, this was not the case for many participants—most reported having to follow up with police themselves rather than receiving regular updates. Poor communication could have significant psychological consequences, particularly for victims who feared for their safety or worried about reprisals from perpetrators:

I would have liked to have been kept in touch, I was told that they would update you obviously they’ve not arrested yet, that’s fine, but I would have thought that somebody along the week would have said ‘we can’t find him but we’re still looking’ [Int.2: Just some sort of, some sort of call back] Yeah just anything, because I were going out my mind (Dawn)

This suggests that participants required ongoing reassurance from police that their case was being taken seriously after the initial report. Those who received such reassurance described the positive effect it had on their quality of life. In these instances, police were perceived as supportive and effective. Alice’s account, presented below, contrasts sharply with Dawn’s. Although Alice also experienced delays in the police’s efforts to locate the perpetrator, she was contacted and provided with an update on the progress of the investigation:

> *when I first went and it took two weeks to get in touch with him in the first place, they gave me a courtesy call just to say ‘nothing happened, are you still getting harassed, okay you are, okay ill call them directly’ so that was handled really well, and I left feeling a lot more safer* (Alice)

Similarly, Fiona notes that always knowing who to contact and what steps were being taken gave her the impression of a “very supportive” police force:

> *And at every stage they sort of said, ‘Right, we’ll have to pass it X person and this is their detail, this is their number’ you know? [Int 2: Mm-hmm] And at no stage did they sort of leave me wondering- [Int 1: Excellent] -about ‘Who’s dealing with this? Where am I up to? Where’s it gone?’, you know? Because this other guy, the perpetrator, lived in [name of place] it had to have an element of that force getting involved going and arresting him and I was able to have contact information. You know, ‘Have you been to his house?’ because I was like jelly by this point, you know? [Int 1: I bet] I was in a right mess and it was just a really supportive network of police basically.* (Fiona)

Ultimately, the consequence of delays, inaction, and poor communication was that many participants stopped reporting harassment and disengaged from the process:

And you know it's sort of like, that's what I would have liked from the police, just someone just to say, right you've reported this, it's been a few days now, how are you, have you had anything else. Because I think if I would have got that support the second time round I would have reported it. [Int 1: Yes] But because I personally had this negativity I just thought why bother. You know, just leave it. (Fred)

In summary, contrary to prevailing perceptions of victims as uncooperative (Millman et al., 2017), our participants reported actively engaging in the investigative process, such as logging calls and collecting evidence, yet felt their contributions were undervalued by police and not acted upon. Ongoing engagement after the initial report was viewed as a two-way process between victims and police. When victims continued to report harassment, they expected action to be taken and to be kept informed of investigative progress. When this did not occur, or when interactions with police were perceived as ineffective, participants disengaged from the process.

Limitations of the research

While this study provides valuable insights into victims' experiences of reporting cyberstalking to the police, several limitations should be acknowledged. The sample was limited to adults whose cases had been closed and who were not identified as vulnerable, potentially excluding the experiences of those with ongoing cases or heightened risk factors, groups who may encounter different or more acute barriers to justice. Participants were drawn from two police force areas, which may not be representative of experiences across England and Wales. In addition, participants self-selected into the study from a large eligible group, the majority of whom did not respond to the invitation, introducing the possibility of bias toward those with particularly strong or negative experiences. Finally, although thematic analysis within a critical realist framework enabled depth and nuance, the findings may not be

generalisable to all victims or policing contexts, particularly given variations in cybercrime handling across UK forces.

Conclusions and recommendations

Overall, our findings suggest that police officers' responses to reports of cyberstalking and online harassment, both at the point of reporting and in subsequent interactions, are key to continued victim engagement and cooperation. Initial reporting typically occurred only after a prolonged period of harassment and in the context of significant victim concerns, often focused on whether their complaint would be taken seriously by police. This hesitation appeared to stem from the online nature of the crime. The quality of interactions with officers and the nature of the actions taken either heightened or reduced victims' distress and signalled to them police attitudes toward both the victim and the type of crime being reported. These perceptions were central to some participants' willingness to continue reporting ongoing harassment and to engage fully in the investigative process. Collaborative working from the Police and specialist third-sector organisations is recommended to develop awareness-raising campaigns that publicise the seriousness of cyberstalking, encourage early reporting, and highlight routes to specialist support. Partnerships such as this could help to challenge perceptions that online abuse will not be taken seriously, while ensuring that those who come forward at an early stage are met with a serious coordinated response.

Victims also highlighted that limited police understanding of online crimes constrained the advice they received, with digital safeguarding rarely extending beyond suggestions to withdraw from digital spaces or simply ignore communications from perpetrators.

Improving victim engagement and outcomes in cases of cyberstalking and online harassment requires a shift towards more trauma-informed, victim-centred, and digitally literate policing practices. Taylor-Dunn et al. (2022) outline the importance of establishing specialist teams and

multidisciplinary working. Such units, which combine investigators with independent victim advocates, have been associated with high levels of victim engagement, positive feedback, and success in securing restraining orders. These benefits are also evidenced in the Bridging the Gap report (Suzy Lamplugh Trust, 2022), which, based on stalking victims' experiences, highlights the necessity of involving independent stalking caseworkers alongside specialist training for all police officers and first responders. The value of a collaborative and specialist approach to digital abuse, and the central role of advocacy services, was further emphasised in an evaluation of stalking victims whose cases were managed in this way (Jerath et al., 2022).

Findings also indicated that victims felt advocacy services improved their ability to cope with stalking by providing a single point of contact, emotional and practical support, and greater control over their safety and risk management. Recent policy developments in the UK reinforce this view The new Ministry of Justice guidance on Independent Stalking Advocates (ISAs) which places the stalking advocate role on a par with Independent Domestic Violence Advisors (IDVAs) as well as outlining best practice around multi-agency units working alongside the police. Positioning policing practice around this guidance, and ensuring that ISAs are systematically integrated into cyberstalking cases, advances the route towards victim-centred support.

Initial police contact plays a pivotal role in shaping victims' willingness to continue engaging with investigations. Many victims delay reporting cyberstalking until their distress becomes severe, often because they are unsure whether their concerns will be taken seriously, particularly when the abuse occurs online (Short et al., 2015). It is therefore vital that officers are trained to respond with empathy and without judgment. A supportive and validating first interaction can establish trust and provide the foundation for sustained cooperation throughout the criminal justice process (Taylor-Dunn et al., 2021). This can be better understood using the Social Identity Approach to Health (Haslam et al., 2018; Haslam et al., 2003). When police

were viewed as detracting from, or dismissive, victims’ shared identity with the police is eroded and their search for justice becomes an adversarial intergroup encounter (Kellezi & Reicher, 2012; Stevenson et al., 2014). In contrast, empathic and validating responses facilitate mutual identification and trust. This implies that stigma consciousness and perceived stereotyping serve not just as barriers to reporting, but also to cooperation when victims do disclose (Pinel, 1999; Stevenson et al., 2014).

Given the unique characteristics and harms of cyberstalking, police responses must reflect an understanding of the digital landscape in which this abuse occurs. Online harassment and stalking should not be treated as less serious than offline offences (Woodlock et al., 2020); instead, officers must be equipped to recognise the psychological impact and persistent nature of digital abuse. This includes recognising patterns such as monitoring, intrusive contact, reputational damage, and public exposure. For this to occur, adequate training and risk screening that address digital concerns are paramount (Martellozzo et al., 2022). It has long been recognised that engagement with platforms on which stalking occurs can be problematic; therefore, there is a need to develop ongoing partnerships with internet service providers and their security teams, rather than engaging them only on a case-by-case basis (Storey et al., 2011). These recommendations combined with wider regulatory developments, such as the Online Safety Act and Ofcom’s illegal harms code, place new obligations on platforms to address illegal and harmful content and highlights the need for closer coordination between law enforcement, regulators and industry in responding to cyberstalking.

Calls for trauma-informed, empathetic, victim-centred and digitally literate policing are not new, our findings highlight that such reforms have not been systematically ingrained into practice. Victims’ narratives indicate that ongoing barriers are not simply a product of poor

training, but rather stem from more systemic issues such as organisational cultures that tolerate the de-escalation of digital harm and the imposition by resource constraints of lower priority status to cyber-focused cases. Addressing these systemic and cultural barriers requires a cohesive strategic response within policing, bringing together NPCC leads, with The National Centre for VAWG and Public Protection. This would help align priorities, share expertise and develop a consistent, victim-centred approach to cyberstalking across forces.

Overcoming the barriers highlighted here will require a solution beyond simple training and awareness, and towards an understanding of the role played by institutional culture, performance metrics and inter-agency coordination in finding the best way forward for sustainable reform. Women are disproportionately targeted when it comes to stalking which sits in the larger landscape VAWG, as such these systemic issues must also be positioned within broader framework of systemic misogyny and overlapping inequalities of class, race and other aspects of marginalisation. While a full picture of these issues lies beyond the scope of this study, recognising their influence is essential for developing policing and policy responses that are genuinely equitable and capable of addressing future policy development to improve the victim experience and response to cyberstalking.

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