

From Scroll to Stalk: Analyzing Social Media's Impact on Teen Cyberstalking Patterns

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ABSTRACT

As social media becomes an integral part of teenage life, the boundaries between casual browsing and invasive digital behavior are increasingly blurred. This study investigates the development of cyberstalking habits among teenagers as a byproduct of excessive social media engagement. Drawing on qualitative data collected through interviews and observational analysis, the research explores how features such as algorithmic content delivery, platform interactivity, and peer validation contribute to a culture of surveillance and digital obsession. Findings indicate that teenagers often engage in cyberstalking behaviors, such as compulsively tracking peers, ex-partners, or influencers, without recognizing the ethical or psychological implications. The study underscores the role of platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat in normalizing these behaviors through design choices that prioritize visibility, connectivity, and constant access. These insights call for more informed digital literacy education and parental guidance, as well as platform accountability in mitigating online behavioral risks among youth. This research contributes to the growing discourse on social media's psychological impact and highlights the urgent need to address emerging patterns of digital surveillance among adolescents.

Keywords: social media, cyberstalking, teenagers, active usage, privacy

INTRODUCTION

In today's hyperconnected digital landscape, adolescents are not just passive consumers of content but active participants in a culture of constant observation. Social media platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and Snapchat have become integral to the social fabric of teen life, serving as arenas for self-expression, social validation, and peer interaction (boyd, 2014; Pew Research Center, 2022). However, beneath the glossy surface of filters and trending hashtags lies a growing concern: the normalization of behaviors that border on digital surveillance. What once might have been considered excessive curiosity—checking someone's online activity multiple times a day—has, in many contexts, evolved into a behavior more accurately described as cyberstalking.

Cyberstalking refers to the repeated use of digital platforms to monitor, follow, or harass individuals, often without their knowledge or consent (Tokunaga, 2011). For teenagers, this behavior is frequently downplayed or misunderstood, often masked as harmless digital "checking in" or romantic interest. Yet, the psychological and social implications of such behavior can be deeply unsettling, particularly in a developmental stage characterized by identity formation and emotional sensitivity (Houghton et al., 2018).

This paper seeks to investigate the emergence and progression of cyberstalking habits among teenagers, specifically through their engagement with social media. Drawing on observational data, interviews, and existing literature, the study examines how seemingly benign features—like story views, "last seen" timestamps, location sharing, and algorithm-driven suggestions—facilitate continuous and sometimes obsessive forms of digital tracking. These features, intentionally or not, gamify attention and subtly reward behaviors that align with stalking tendencies (Marwick, 2012).

Furthermore, the integration of parasocial relationships—one-sided connections formed with influencers or peers—and the constant demand for visibility foster a social environment where boundaries become blurred.

Teenagers are not only exposed to the lives of others in unprecedented ways but are also subtly encouraged to monitor, compare, and react to digital footprints. This introduces a behavioral feedback loop that can easily transition from casual interest to compulsive tracking (Smith et al., 2020).

With Generation Z spending an average of four to six hours per day on social media platforms, the potential for these platforms to shape social behaviors cannot be underestimated (Pew Research Center, 2022). The study aims to explore how the architecture of these apps contributes to the development of cyberstalking tendencies, and how the lack of clear educational interventions or safeguards exacerbates the issue.

Ultimately, this research addresses a crucial gap in the discourse around digital youth behavior—shifting the narrative from cyberstalking as an outlier or criminal activity to understanding it as an emerging behavioral pattern influenced by technology design, cultural norms, and adolescent psychology. In doing so, it offers a foundation for educators, parents, and platform designers to rethink engagement metrics and digital safety in an age where every scroll has the potential to turn into a stalk.

Research Objective

To investigate if the habit of cyberstalking develops and causes changes in the behavior of teenagers who are more active on social media.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Use of Social Media among Teenagers in Malaysia

In Malaysia, peer-to-peer communication remains the dominant reason adolescents engage with social media platforms (Mun & Fernandez, 2011). Networks such as Facebook and Twitter serve as vital channels for Malaysian youth to socialise, interact, and maintain relationships with their peers (Mun et al., 2011). Beyond social interaction, these platforms also facilitate participation in online communities formed around shared interests, allowing teenagers to build networks that transcend geographical boundaries (Lim et al., 2014). This interconnectedness fosters cross-cultural understanding and collaborative partnerships, even among individuals from diverse cultural and social backgrounds (Shewmaker, 2012).

Social media further acts as a powerful tool for information-seeking and informal learning. Its interactive and collaborative features support adolescent engagement with educational content in ways that traditional learning environments may not (Hamat et al., 2012). As Shahjahan and Chisty (2014) noted, Malaysian teenagers often form global coalitions centered around hobbies, interests, and even activism, leveraging these platforms for both personal and communal expression.

However, the impact of social media on adolescents is highly context-dependent. While it offers numerous benefits, including educational enrichment and global connectivity, it also poses potential risks—particularly when usage patterns shift toward compulsive behavior or enable harmful practices. As such, ongoing discourse continues to examine the dual nature of social media's influence on Malaysian youth (Lim et al., 2014).

Cyberstalking Habit Development among Teenagers

The anonymity and invisibility afforded by the internet make it easier for individuals, including teenagers, to engage in intrusive behaviors without fear of identification or legal consequences. Pittaro (2007) highlights that offenders can contact nearly anyone with internet access at any time, with minimal concern for being recognized or punished due to existing legal ambiguities across jurisdictions.

Among teenagers, technological immersion has significantly reshaped perceptions of personal boundaries and privacy. As King-Ries (2010) argues, adolescents' expectations of privacy within relationships are increasingly diminished, leading to a normalization of “boundarylessness.” This desensitization may render them more accepting of, or vulnerable to, abusive and controlling behaviors from peers or intimate partners (Short et al., 2015). The cognitive and emotional development of teenagers also plays a critical role. Although they can identify the potential consequences of their actions, their limited capacity for long-term thinking often results in

decisions that prioritize immediate gratification over risk assessment (McCracken, 2011; Dhir et al., 2021). Furthermore, adolescents generally demonstrate lower impulse control compared to adults, increasing their susceptibility to engaging in risky behaviors online.

This impulsivity is often amplified by social media platforms, where the perceived social rewards—likes, attention, or validation—can overshadow awareness of potential harm. As Pittaro (2007) notes, excessive engagement with social media not only contributes to compulsive behaviors but may also exacerbate underlying psychosocial issues. The very architecture of these platforms—highlighting visibility, constant updates, and algorithmic suggestions—creates an environment where surveillance-like behavior becomes normalized (Pietkiewicz, 2018).

Consequently, teenagers' limited understanding of digital boundaries, especially in the context of interpersonal relationships, makes them more likely to participate in harmful behaviors such as cyberstalking. This highlights a pressing need for improved education around digital ethics and privacy to counteract the structural reinforcement of stalking-like behaviors by social media platforms (Pietkiewicz, 2018).

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research approach to explore the development of cyberstalking behaviors among teenagers as influenced by social media engagement. A total of 15 participants, aged 15 to 19, were selected for in-depth interviews. This age range was chosen to focus on adolescents who are actively engaged with social media platforms during a critical phase of identity formation and social learning.

To access participants with relevant experiences, the study employed snowball sampling—a purposive sampling technique also referred to as chain referral sampling (Mack, 2005). Snowball sampling is particularly effective in reaching "hidden populations" or individuals who may be difficult to identify through conventional sampling methods. Since cyberstalking is often underreported or misunderstood, especially among teenagers, this method facilitated access to individuals who may have engaged in or experienced such behaviors. However, it is acknowledged that snowball sampling may introduce selection bias, as participants are likely to refer peers with similar behaviors or perspectives. This potential limitation was mitigated, in part, by encouraging referrals from diverse peer groups within different school and community settings.

Participants were selected not only based on age but also for their proficiency in using social media and potential experience with behaviors aligned with cyberstalking, whether as perpetrators or recipients. This behavioral criterion ensured that the sample reflected the specific focus of the study. To enhance contextual understanding, basic demographic information—such as gender, school background, and self-assessed digital literacy—was collected to identify possible patterns across different subgroups. While the current analysis does not explicitly compare behaviors by demographic category, future studies could more systematically investigate how factors like gender, socioeconomic status, or digital literacy influence cyberstalking tendencies.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather rich, nuanced data. This format allowed the researcher to guide the conversation while also providing space for participants to elaborate on their personal experiences. Each interview was audio-recorded with informed consent from the participants, ensuring ethical compliance and transparency. Following data collection, the interviews were transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis. This method enabled the researcher to identify, code, and categorize emerging patterns related to social media use and stalking-like behaviors. Themes were developed iteratively, grounded in the data, to reflect the complex psychological and social dynamics influencing cyberstalking among teenagers.

While the qualitative design prioritizes depth of understanding over breadth, the relatively small and localized sample may limit the generalizability of findings. Moreover, the absence of a comparative or control group restricts the ability to distinguish between normative and problematic social media behaviors. These limitations are acknowledged, and future research is encouraged to incorporate larger, more diverse samples and comparative frameworks to build on the insights presented here.

RESULTS

Social Media

Social media is also used by teenagers for amusement and self-expression. Furthermore, the platforms may educate teenagers on several topics, including healthy habits, by exposing them to current affairs, allowing them to engage across geographical boundaries, and exposing them to current events (Karacic et al., 2017). Below will be focusing on the main reason why teenagers are active on social media. The respondents have provided details and opinions based on their understanding of their behaviour.

Respondent 1 clearly shows the characteristics of active usage in social media platforms.

“Because of the pandemic and all of it, when I’m free, I use it for a long time in a day. I think you can say like 8 or 9 hours. But not continuously. I scroll, I don’t post my photos often but my stories like once in a while. Recently, I archived my posts on Instagram. It’s just sometimes there won’t be anything else to do, so social media helps to relieve that boredom feeling.” (1)

Respondent 4 shares the reason why he is active on social media.

“I usually spend around 7-8 hours on social media apps. So yes, I am an active user. Sometimes I will be busy with my assignments or will be out with my friends or parents, so yeah the hours of usage usually vary a lot. I think it can be considered an addiction? Because currently I only have those apps, to keep up with what is going on with the world. And I use it a lot to contact my friends and scroll through my pass time.” (4)

Respondent 10 shared in another interview regarding how she likes to be the most knowledgeable person among her group to gossip about.

“I certainly do because I am the talkative person of my group so if I don’t know what I am going to share in my group then my friends will be clueless about how to interact. So I tend to go on social media and scroll through interesting topics and people to get gossip items, and later on I share the content to as many as people I can.” (10)

This sub-theme can be concluded with **Respondent 13** who shows a slight tendency of our main scope of this study which will be the development of cyberstalking based on his statement provided.

“Oh I actually use it to stalk people and my favourite shows. I have nothing else to do and I don’t really take pictures too. So I end up stalking or just chat with people most of the time. Other than that, I’m not sure what I can do in my house.” (13)

Development of Cyberstalking Habit

Cyberstalking is becoming more prevalent than traditional stalking (McVeigh, 2011) especially among the teenagers. According to Maple et al. (2011), cyberstalking has become increasingly common on social media since almost. Cyberstalking has such a broad impact on people's psychology, money, and social connections that it not only harms victims mentally, but also has an impact on their career and even their connections with colleagues and families. Significantly, 21% of 8-11-year-olds now have social media presence, which quickly rises to 71% of 12-18-year-olds (Smartinsights, 2021). Some teenagers use social media to abuse, threaten, or shame a peer (texting, blogs, social networking, etc.). Based on the response of respondents towards activities of cyberstalking on social media, we can analyse the proneness of involvement in cyberstalking activity (Kumar et al., 2016).

Respondent 1 shares how the development of anxiety happened due to the fear of being left out from what is going around in the world.

“Well when I started using social media, I was like get to know about the world, get to know about some knowledge but I think recently, in the past 3 years, I developed this anxiety. So I keep Twitter for example

Twitter, like different from Instagram, right? Like you get to know about a lot of like what's happening in the country, and what's trending." (1)

Respondent 6 shares how they have crossed the line when it comes to accessing one's private information.

"I may or may not have crossed a line here or there when it comes to accessing someone's information. It was just a coincidence. Really. Stalking has become a norm today and I just do it because there are a lot of public accounts and I just like to know more about people. Now that I think about it I think I do have the habit of cyberstalking but not to a severe level." (6)

Respondent 9 states how she likes to know everything about her which led him to be more active.

"I did. I really did. When I was in a relationship plus we never had the chance to meet, so the only option I had was to know everything about her through social media. So I became very active, and I had to like to follow all her friends, so that I will know about her more. I had a fear that if I didn't know everything there is about her than I might appear like a loser." (9)

Respondent 9 has also admitted to have conducted cyberstalking against his partner due to the fear of being left out in the relationship. And how this caused him to be more satisfied to be able to keep an eye on her through the social media platforms.

"Back then, I stalked her and her friends, to get to know her and keep her on update. There was this once where I was mad that she was responding to her other friends and not me and I threatened her about exposing her personal details and told her to regularly respond to me. I was too obsessed over it but I never realised it was wrong or a crime to harass someone like that even on online. I do believe that it gave me a feeling of satisfaction and fun at that time. That's right, it is because social media allowed me to get in touch with her and her friends and it was easy for me to keep her on tabs. My only motivation was to not miss any information about her. It was kinda like an ugly desire." (9)

Respondent 13 regrets the decision behind the actions they did in the past which relates to cyberstalking.

"I'm sorry but I think I have done one of the activities before. I really thought it was normal because my school seniors told me. I don't know that it is a criminal activity. If I knew I would not do it. Satisfied? I think I am. Because I'm sorry I didn't know that it was cyberstalking but I really had feel satisfied after screenshotting images like that. So the desire or motivation is simple. I just want to own the pictures. That's why I did what I did." (13)

Respondent 15 shares their feeling to own all the information since it provides them a feel that they are in control of all situations that go on.

"I am so scared of it. So I always stalk many people or pages or accounts. I actually tried to equip myself with as much information as I can. Because I like to have control over my information so when someone asks me I can straightaway tell them what they need to know or want to know." (15)

DISCUSSION

The findings of this research align with growing concerns about the psychological and social ramifications of prolonged social media use among teenagers. Adolescents, particularly those aged 13–18, reported high engagement with features that promote constant monitoring—such as story tracking, profile lurking, and location check-ins. Notably, the study confirms that females are disproportionately targeted as victims, while males are more frequently the initiators of stalking behaviors. This gender dynamic reflects deeper social and cultural narratives around digital control, romantic insecurity, and social validation.

Importantly, the study highlights how platform design contributes to the escalation of cyberstalking behaviors. Algorithms that surface 'People You May Know' or suggest content based on prior interactions create an echo chamber that reinforces user fixation. Teenagers described experiences of spiraling into obsessive viewing of

others' content, often romantic or peer-related, which over time evolved into tracking and intrusive online behavior. Furthermore, participants indicated that the platforms offer little in the way of prevention or user education—failing to adequately address privacy, consent, and the emotional toll of hypervisibility.

Psychologically, victims of cyberstalking reported elevated levels of anxiety, disrupted sleep, and diminished sense of autonomy. Conversely, perpetrators displayed patterns of compulsive checking and difficulty disengaging from the app, suggesting a form of digital dependency. These findings underscore that cyberstalking is not merely a behavioral outlier but may be an emergent norm fostered by the design and culture of social media.

Ultimately, this study emphasizes the need for stronger digital literacy programs, platform accountability, and early intervention strategies that target the blurred boundaries between curiosity and compulsion. By interrogating how everyday scrolling can evolve into persistent stalking, this research contributes to a nuanced understanding of teen behavior in a digitized society—urging stakeholders to take a more active role in safeguarding young users from the latent harms of their online environments.

CONCLUSION

The digital lives of teenagers are unfolding within environments that not only encourage connection and creativity but also foster patterns of compulsive observation and boundary-crossing behavior. This study has illuminated the subtle yet significant ways in which social media engagement can evolve into cyberstalking habits among adolescents—habits that are frequently dismissed as normative aspects of teenage curiosity or affection but are, in reality, reinforced by the structural and psychological mechanics of these platforms.

The research demonstrates that cyberstalking is not an isolated or extreme behavior but one that often emerges gradually from everyday social media usage. The very features that define modern platforms—such as algorithmic content curation, public interaction logs, and location tracking—operate in a grey zone between utility and intrusion. For many teens, the transition from scrolling to stalking is neither abrupt nor intentional. It is a behavioral drift, shaped by a culture that prizes visibility, competitiveness, and real-time engagement, often at the expense of privacy and emotional safety.

Moreover, the findings reveal a critical gap in both digital literacy and platform responsibility. Adolescents are rarely provided with the tools to recognize or manage the ethical boundaries of their online behavior. Equally, platforms have failed to implement meaningful safeguards or educational content aimed at preventing stalking-like tendencies, often prioritizing engagement over well-being.

This underscores a pressing need for a multi-layered response. Schools must integrate nuanced digital citizenship curricula that go beyond cyberbullying to address concepts like digital boundaries, emotional regulation, and consent. Parents and caregivers need resources that help them understand the new landscape of teen relationships in the digital age. And most importantly, social media companies must acknowledge their role in facilitating these behaviors and invest in design changes that protect users—especially minors—from the unintended consequences of constant connectivity.

In conclusion, by tracing the path from casual scrolling to persistent cyberstalking, this research provides a clearer lens through which to view the evolving dynamics of teen social behavior. It calls on stakeholders across education, technology, and mental health to recognize the hidden costs of digital immersion and to take proactive steps toward safeguarding the psychological and emotional integrity of Generation Z.

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