Understandings of the relative seriousness of conceptually similar online and offline intrusive behaviours among young adults

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Abstract

There has been a rise in online stalking via social media platforms in part because stalking perpetrators can perform many intrusive behaviours with a degree of anonymity and relative impunity. This chapter examines young adults' understandings of the seriousness of conceptually similar online and offline intrusive behaviours. Focus groups were conducted with 45 university students across 10 groups, using a modified Q-sort task, whereby participants categorised and ranked 20 cue cards that presented 10 online and 10 conceptually similar offline intrusive behaviours. Overall, participants perceived offline intrusive behaviours as more serious than their conceptually similar online counterparts, and five key assumptions shaped their understandings of the relative seriousness of these behaviours: intent, effort, physicality, choice and control, and norms and expectations. Importantly, there were notable gender differences in their understandings, whereby men focused on the explicit content of the intrusive behaviours and women focused on the implicit meaning of these behaviours. Consequently, men were more likely to trivialise both online and offline intrusive behaviours than women. Implications for future research and responses addressing the gendered nature of online stalking are discussed.

Introduction

Internationally, research suggests there has been a rise in online stalking, also referred to as cyberstalking and technology-facilitated stalking, via social media platforms. Arguably, the increasing utility of social media for online stalking is occurring, in part, because of the proliferation and ease of use of these tools, but also because perpetrators can perform many intrusive behaviours with a degree of anonymity and relative impunity. Furthermore, the use of online tools for stalking appears to be associated with the normalisation of a range of intrusive and monitoring behaviours, particularly among younger adult populations (Gillet, 2018; Milivojević et al., 2018). Importantly, both online and offline stalking research suggests that experiences of intrusive behaviour are gendered in a range of ways. For example, many studies report that women are more likely than men to be victims of stalking generally (Fansher & Randa, 2019; Fedina et al., 2020), and online stalking specifically (Dreßing et al., 2014; Fansher & Randa, 2019; Reyns et al., 2012). Additionally, research suggests that women experience greater levels of fear and harm as a result of stalking generally (Logan, 2020; Sheridan & Lyndon, 2012), and online stalking specifically (Pereira & Matos, 2016; Vakhitova et al., 2021), and that the relational context of stalking victimisation is gendered. For example, women are more likely than men to experience fear and harm in the context of intimate partner, sexual, and dating violence for both offline (Logan, 2020; Sheridan & Lyndon, 2012) and online stalking (Vakhitova et al., 2021).

This chapter draws on findings from a study into young adult's understandings of the relative seriousness of conceptually similar online and offline intrusive behaviours. Two research questions are examined. First, how do students categorise and rank the seriousness of conceptually similar online and offline intrusive behaviours? Second, what underlying assumptions shape understandings of the relative seriousness of these behaviours? Consideration is also given to whether men's and women's understandings of intrusive

behaviour differ and, if so, how. The chapter proceeds as follows. In the next section we provide some background and context regarding the extent and nature of online stalking with a particular focus on the role of social media. We further consider prior research into perceptions of online as compared to offline stalking. We then present the method for the present study, followed by the findings; including the key assumptions that shaped participants' understandings of conceptually similar online and offline intrusive behaviours, structured according to five themes: intent, effort, physicality, choice and control, and norms and expectations. We further examine notable gender differences in participants' perceptions of the seriousness of these behaviours. Finally, we discuss the implications of the study for future research and responses to online stalking.

Online stalking by social media: Background and gendered context

In recent years, attention has been drawn to the concerning rise in online stalking via social media platforms, including Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp (Chandler, 2019; Nachiappan, 2021; Warburton, 2020). Early research in the United Kingdom revealed that 62% of online stalking victims were harassed on social networking sites (Maple et al., 2011), and recent research in the United States has further revealed that an increasing percentage of online harassment victims were harassed on social media platforms: 58% of most recent incidents in 2017 compared to 75% in 2020 (Duggan, 2017; Vogels, 2021). Social media platforms are arguably appealing tools for stalking perpetrators because they facilitate contact with a person, contact with members of a person's network, and virtual expressions of affection towards a person via messages and virtual gifts (Chaulk & Jones, 2011; Kaur et al., 2021). Stalking perpetrators can also perform many of these behaviours with a degree of anonymity and as such relative impunity. For example, Facebook users cannot track who views their profile or how often their profile is viewed (Chaulk & Jones, 2011; Facebook,

2021). Although social media platforms have developed more stringent policies on what is and what is not acceptable, as well as new and more accessible ways to report online victimisation (Jiang et al., 2020), people are often critical of these policies. For example, a nationally representative survey in the United States found only 18% of respondents believed social media platforms are doing an 'excellent' or 'good' job at addressing online victimisation (Vogels, 2021).

Although limited, research examining the gendered nature of online intrusive behaviour suggests that, like offline intrusive behaviour, it is experienced differently by men and women. For example, Smith and Duggan (2013) found that 42% of women who engaged in online dating experienced behaviour that made them feel harassed and uncomfortable compared to 17% of men. Similarly, Anderson et al. (2020) found that 48% of women who had used online dating applications or websites experienced continued contact after indicating a lack of interest compared to 27% of men, and that 11% of women had received a threat of physical harm compared to 6% of men. It has also been argued that the risks associated with dating and intimate partner violence, which are experienced by women more than men, are heightened further by the increased access, monitoring, and control afforded by technological advances (Gillett, 2018; Mason & Magnet, 2012; Woodlock, 2017).

Online stalking victims experience a range of detrimental health, social and financial impacts, that are often comparable to those experienced by offline stalking victims (Dreßing et al., 2014; Fissel & Reyns, 2020; Short et al., 2015). However, research in the United States found that 43% of online stalking victims did not seek help and that 85% did not report their experiences to the police (Fissel, 2018). Furthermore, although Nobles et al. (2014) found that online stalking victims tended to engage in more self-protective measures than offline stalking victims, they were often slower to take these measures. For example, the number of self-protective measures was positively associated with the presence of physical threats in cases of

offline stalking, and fear over time, the presence of physical attacks and being a woman in cases of online stalking. The authors suggested that while many *offline* intrusive behaviours are immediately recognised as problematic, many *online* intrusive behaviours are not recognised as problematic until they "…escalate in seriousness, duration, or other modalities" (Nobles et al., 2014, p. 1008). It appears, therefore, that victims may fail to recognise and/or minimise the seriousness of online intrusive behaviours relative to offline intrusive behaviours, when such behaviours can be just as problematic.

Online and offline stalking are difficult to define because they are pattern-based and incorporate a range of unwanted intrusive behaviours over an extended period, many of which may appear benign when considered separately (Pathé et al., 2004; Sheridan & Davies, 2001). Defining online stalking is further complicated by a lack of agreement regarding whether it should be considered an extension of offline stalking, or a distinct form of stalking (Fraser et al., 2010; Maple et al., 2011; Reyns & Fisher, 2018; see also Chapter 11 this volume), as well as the continual evolution of technology and an expanding repertoire of online intrusive behaviours (Cavezza & McEwan, 2011; Wilson et al., 2020). In broad terms, stalking has been defined as persistent harassment in which one person repeatedly attempts to impose unwanted communication and/or contact on another (Mullen et al., 1999; Mullen et al., 2001), while online stalking "…involves using technology to repeatedly communicate with, harass, or threaten the victim" (Wilson et al., 2020, p. 2).

Subjective appraisals of intrusive behaviour as unwanted and problematic are central to recognising and acknowledging stalking victimisation (Page & Scott, in press), and have led to a body of research that examines the influence of various characteristics on perceptions of stalking (Scott, 2020), including modality (online, offline) and perceiver gender (man, woman). The limited research examining modality has found that individuals generally perceive offline stalking as more serious than online stalking. For example, Alexy et al. (2005)

found that only 30% of participants labelled an online stalking scenario as such. Furthermore, Ramirez (2019) found that participants were more likely to report offline stalking behaviours (69%) than online stalking behaviours (56%). Therefore, perceptions mirror the 'reality' of the behaviour insofar as the behaviour is minimised and not reported.

It is also apparent that perceptions of online and offline stalking differ by perceiver gender. In the context of online stalking, research has found that women are more likely than men to label stalking scenarios as stalking (Becker et al., 2020), as representing illegal behaviour (Ahlgrim & Terrance, 2021), and as containing intrusive behaviour that they would report to the police (Feuer, 2014). Similarly, in the context of offline stalking, research has found that women are more likely than men label stalking scenarios as stalking (Finnegan & Timmons Fritz, 2012; Scott et al., 2015), as causing the victim to experience alarm and fear of violence, and as warranting police intervention and a criminal conviction (Scott et al., 2015). The concept of 'safety work' is relevant when trying to understand these gender differences (Kelly, 2012). Safety work refers to the 'invisible' work girls and women undertake when participating in public spaces (including virtual public spaces such as social media) to avoid sexual harassment and other forms of sexual violence, as well as attributions of blame should such victimisation occur (Vera-Gray & Kelly, 2020). Safety work involves a heightened awareness of the environment, and an array of self-restricting (yet socially mandated) behaviours that pre-empt sexual violence. Consequently, participation in social media calls forth such safety work, and gender differences in perceptions and responses to online stalking may be explained by the heightened awareness to potential threats and greater likelihood of pre-emptive action by women compared to men.

Method

The present study examines young adults' understandings of the seriousness of conceptually similar online and offline intrusive behaviours using focus groups and a modified Q-Sort task. Forty-five students from a university in Western Australia participated in one of 10 focus groups: 30 identified as women and 15 identified as men with an average age of 21.41 years (SD = 5.77 years). Each focus group comprised 4 to 6 participants: five comprising men and women (mixed gender), four comprising women only, and one comprising men only. Each participant received an AU$20 gift card for taking part in the study.

The modified Q-sort task (Brown, 1996; McKeown & Thomas, 1988) required participants to categorise and rank 20 cue cards that presented 10 offline and 10 conceptually similar online intrusive behaviours. Participants first categorised the 20 intrusive behaviours according to whether they were perceived as 'not serious', 'potentially serious' or 'definitely serious', and then ranked them from 1 (least serious) to 20 (most serious). The 20 intrusive behaviours were revised versions of the 24 obsessional relational intrusion 'tactics' (12 offline and 12 online) identified by Chaulk and Jones (2011). Each cue card provided a category heading and example behaviours (see Table 1). Importantly, all online intrusive behaviours were enacted via Facebook because it remains the leading global social networking site (Statista, 2021b), with 55% of active Facebook users aged between 18 and 34 years (Statista, 2021a). Therefore, Facebook provides an appropriate context for the examination of student understandings of online intrusive behaviours.

---Table 1 about here---

Informed consent was obtained prior to the study, and debrief statements were provided after. The research was approved by an institutional ethics committee, and followed

guidelines as prescribed by the Australian National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research. The focus groups were video recorded, and the participant discussions were transcribed. Frequency and descriptive analyses were conducted to examine how participants categorised and ranked each intrusive behaviour. Thematic analysis was then conducted, using the process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2013), to explore the underlying assumptions that shaped their understandings of the relative seriousness of these behaviours. Analysis involved thorough familiarisation with the transcripts of participant discussions as they completed the modified Q-sort task. Themes were then identified and refined to capture overarching topics of discussion across the focus groups.

Findings and Discussion

Frequency analyses revealed that all 10 offline intrusive behaviours were more likely to be categorised as 'definitely serious' compared to their conceptually similar online counterparts (see Table 2). Although it is acknowledged that some of these differences were relatively minor (threatening objects: 90% vs. 70%; regulatory harassment: 80% vs. 70%), others were considerable (following: 100% vs. 0%; monitoring: 80% vs. 20%).

--- Table 2 about here ---

Similarly, descriptive analyses revealed that all 10 offline intrusive behaviours were ranked more highly (were perceived as more serious) than their conceptually similar online counterparts (see Figure 1). Furthermore, four of the offline intrusive behaviours were perceived as the most serious (threatening objects, following, regulatory harassment, monitoring) and seven of the online intrusive behaviours were perceived as the least serious (following, unwanted messages, involving in activities, unwanted gifts, intruding uninvited,

exaggerated affection).

--- Figure 1 about here ---

It is apparent, therefore, that participants perceived conceptually similar online and offline intrusive behaviours differently. Thematic analysis generated five themes that shaped participants' understandings of the relative seriousness of these behaviours: intent, effort, physicality, choice and control, and norms and expectations. Importantly, although these themes were shared across the focus groups, there were gender differences in the ways conceptually similar online and offline intrusive behaviours were discussed. These differences cut across the five themes and are presented at the end of this section.

Theme 1: Intent

Intent came up as participants sought to explain why they perceived certain intrusive behaviours as more serious than others. Whether a behaviour was considered serious or not depended on the perceived intent of the perpetrator. If the motivation was harmful, the behaviour was serious. Enacting behaviour on Facebook, however, rendered intent ambiguous, and this ambiguity reduced the seriousness of the behaviour:

A lot of the stuff on Facebook … isn't taken as seriously because you can't tell how someone's feeling when they send you something (Participant 5, Women only group 4)

Participants also believed that on Facebook, there was a lack of intent to cause harm, again reducing the perceived seriousness of the behaviour. There was an assumption that

behaviour enacted via Facebook is more likely to be motivated by boredom, or by a desire to be annoying rather than harmful:

> *It's different. I reckon if they are that bored on the computer they could just be really annoying and tagging you and just trying to annoy you by harassing you. But if you are actually doing it in person, that's pretty serious (Participant 2, Woman, Mixed gender group 1)*

Interest, or curiosity, was another motivation attributed to monitoring behaviours on Facebook, highlighting the distinction between the benign and everyday practice of 'Facebook stalking', and the more serious practice of 'stalking', which involves harmful intent:

> *You have quite a few people on Facebook that stalk … not because they are actually stalking them or anything. Like not with the intention of doing anything to them … they are just you know … checking on them or they are just like interested in what they have to say (Participant 1, Women only group 1)*

These findings are consistent with perception research in the context of offline stalking, whereby people are more likely to perceive behaviour to be stalking if the perpetrator intends to cause fear or harm (Dennison, 2007; Scott et al., 2014). However, the finding that intent was considered ambiguous and difficult to interpret in the context of online stalking is concerning because applied research has found that intent was fundamentally similar for both online and offline stalking perpetrators (Cavezza & McEwan, 2014). Importantly, rather than err on the side of caution, participants assumed that ambiguous intent

equated to harmless intent or a desire to be annoying. This minimisation of risk could have important implications, especially given that it is easier to mask intent online due to the anonymity afforded by the Internet.

Theme 2: Effort

The second theme related to effort. If the behaviour was perceived as effortful, it was perceived as serious. This theme was closely associated with intent, in that participants believed that effortful behaviour was more likely to involve harmful intent. Participants viewed online intrusive behaviours as less serious because they are 'easy', non-time-consuming and involve minimal effort, whilst the opposite was true for offline intrusive behaviours:

Facebook's really easy, you just click on the profile and read everything that they've done. It takes two seconds as opposed to taking all of their time to stalk you (Participant 1, Women only group 3)

Participants also discussed how the ease of online monitoring enables perpetrators to target multiple people simultaneously. The ease of online monitoring was contrasted with the comparable effort of offline surveillance, and the tendency for perpetrators to target one person at a time. Furthermore, the targeting of one, as opposed to multiple people was considered more serious:

I think like the effort side as well. Because if it's online then there's not much effort going into that because they could be stalking like twenty people, but to actually then take that a step further and come to wherever you are like offline and like make that

difference between the twenty and just the one (Participant 4, Women only group 1)

A related aspect of effort was the idea of someone 'going out of their way' to engage in intrusive behaviour. Participants believed offline perpetrators were more likely go out of their way than online perpetrators, thus making their behaviour more serious. For example, offline gift-giving was seen as involving greater effort in terms of time and money, and was perceived as more serious than online gift-giving:

I suppose they've gone outta the way to go down to the shop buy the gift pay the money go to their house and drop it off rather than all you have to do online is like click a little button (Participant 3, Men only group)

Parallels can be drawn between these findings and perception research in the context of offline stalking, whereby persistence (a form of effort) is important in determining whether intrusive behaviour is labelled as stalking (Dennison, 2007; Scott et al., 2014). The minimisation of the perceived seriousness of stalking behaviour based on perceived effort is concerning, given that the ease of a stalking behaviour does not make it inherently less serious. Melander (2010) highlighted that the ease and speed of technology may be attractive to perpetrators, and a recent systematic review noted that advances in social media and smart devices are linked to rising cases of online stalking (Kaur et al., 2021). Furthermore, the assumption that online perpetrators are more likely to target multiple people than offline perpetrators contrasts with the finding that online and offline perpetrators are similarly likely to target multiple people (Cavezza & McEwan, 2014).

Theme 3: Physicality

The physical nature of some intrusive behaviours was central to explanations of why they were perceived as more serious than others, and why offline intrusive behaviours were perceived as more concerning than their conceptually similar online counterparts. Participants tended to distinguish the more serious offline intrusive behaviours, which were considered 'physical' and 'real', from the less serious online intrusive behaviours, which were considered separate from the 'real world':

> *There's stuff that happens online and there's stuff that happens in you know real life or real space and time. I guess … like if someone was knocking on your door and phoning you, to me that seems more serious than leaving them messages on Facebook (Participant 4, Man, Mixed gender group 4)*

The physical proximity of offline intrusive behaviours compared to that of online intrusive behaviours was also discussed. Participants viewed online intrusive behaviours as less proximal than offline intrusive behaviours:

> *Via the Internet, it's not physical, it's not, you know, within proximity (Participant 4, Man, Mixed gender group 5)*

The notion of someone knowing where the targeted person lived also resonated with participants, and was highly salient in determining the seriousness of offline intrusive behaviours; particularly in relation to gifts and messages, which implied knowledge of where the targeted person lived:

I reckon Facebook's one thing but in person they know where you live so they're around you, so it's really creepy (Participant 1, Woman, Mixed gender group 2)

Furthermore, participants believed that knowledge of the targeted person's whereabouts increased the risk of physical harm. Therefore, online intrusive behaviours were considered less serious than offline intrusive behaviours because the computer screen acts as a protective barrier that reduces the potential for harm:

I think in person there is more immediate danger to yourself, as opposed to online where ... you have to arrange a meeting and they can't like exactly attack you through the computer screen, well not physically harming you (Participant 1, Women only group 1)

The finding that participants focus on the risk of physical harm when determining the seriousness of intrusive behaviours to the neglect of other harms is concerning given that research has demonstrated that online and offline stalking victims experience a comparable range of detrimental health, social and financial impacts (Dreßing et al., 2014; Fissel & Reyns, 2020; Short et al., 2015). For example, Short et al. found that online stalking victims often experienced disruptions to sleeping and eating, anxiety, stress and fear. Consequently, this apparent focus on physical harm may prevent targeted people from identifying and acknowledging a situation as problematic and taking appropriate protective measures.

Theme 4: Choice and control

Participants suggested that there was greater choice on Facebook, which negated the severity of online intrusive behaviours. Participants discussed how people choose to use

Facebook, and by extension, can choose to stop using it. Extending this logic, they argued that the online intrusive behaviours were less serious than their offline counterparts because it is not possible to simply opt out offline:

> *It's your choice to have it, it's not like you have to, it's not like it's a compulsory thing, it's your choice to be online (Participant 1, Woman, Mixed gender group 3)*

Furthermore, participants discussed how people can choose what information to share on Facebook, and the absence of comparable choices offline:

> *If it's online, it's what you want to share, but if it's offline, it's like whatever you do even if you don't want other people to know about it, whatever you do, they see it (Participant 3, Women only group 1)*

Participants also believed individuals had greater control over how to respond to online intrusive behaviours compared to offline intrusive behaviours. For example, they discussed how users can block and control problematic online intrusive behaviours via the privacy options available on Facebook, and the absence of comparable controls offline. Therefore, offline intrusive behaviours were perceived as more serious than their conceptually similar online counterparts:

> *If they don't want to talk to the person they can block them, they have that option. The victim does have the option to block it out of their lives whereas if they're like in real … they don't really have that option (Participant 4, Women only group)*

This finding is at odds with people's actual behaviour on Facebook, where there is often a mismatch between users' privacy intentions and their actual privacy settings (Madejski et al., 2012; Mondal et al., 2019). Facebook is making ongoing attempts to rectify this issue by, for example, periodically reminding users who can see their posts, and highlighting appropriate privacy settings (Hutchinson, 2018).

Theme 5: Norms and expectations

The final theme concerns the normalisation of Facebook stalking, which renders online intrusive behaviours less serious than their offline counterparts. There was a general assumption that everybody 'stalks' on Facebook:

Most Facebook users would have done something like this in the years that they've been on it (Participant 3, Women only group 4)

The everydayness of certain online intrusive behaviours is reflected in the phrase 'Facebook stalking', which does not carry the same threatening connotations as 'real stalking':

People do make a joke of Facebook though. Like they will say I'm going to Facebook stalk your profile (Participant 3, Women only group 2)

The inevitable risk of Facebook stalking also arose with participants viewing intrusion into other people's lives as the purpose of Facebook. Being monitored on Facebook was considered acceptable and an expected outcome of using Facebook, with users being able to choose and control what they shared, whereas offline surveillance was considered

problematic and cause for concern.

> *You've just gotta assume that people are, that's what Facebook is for. It's for looking into other people's private lives and sharing the details of your own private life (Participant 3, Women only group 4)*

Finally, permission to stalk is perceived as inherent in signing-up to Facebook. Therefore, in contrast to offline targets, online targets have, by default, already permitted these behaviours.

> *You're pretty much giving them permission to look into your life whereas if they're following you around you haven't really given them permission (Participant 4, Women only group 3)*

For over 10 years now, Facebook stalking has been recognised as a normalised and acceptable practice involving the routine monitoring of friends that constitutes many users' everyday activities on Facebook (Frampton & Fox, 2021; Lewis & West, 2009; Young, 2011), and using the term in this way reduces the gravitas that many online intrusive behaviours may deserve (Frede, 2012). For example, Nobles et al. (2012) found that threats increased the likelihood of self-protective measures in the context of offline but not online stalking, where fear and/or physical assault were necessary. Consequently, the normalisation of Facebook stalking may allow online intrusive behaviours to escalate unchecked, with targeted individuals slower to take protective measures.

Gendered understandings of online and offline intrusive behaviours

While the five themes did not differ for men and women, the ways they discussed the relative risks of online and offline intrusive behaviours did. Although manifest in different ways depending on the context, men tended to focus on the explicit content of these behaviours, while women tended to focus on the implicit meaning of the same behaviours. This is highlighted in the following exchange:

Participant 2, Woman: ...but then you have to think

Participant 4, Man: ...it's just a message

Participant 2, Woman: ...about what 'I love you' can mean

(Mixed gender group 5)

On the whole, there was a tendency for men to both trivialise the intrusive behaviours, and to see threat only in the explicit content of these behaviours. For example, unwanted gifts were often taken at face value by men ('Free stuff, no?', Participant 4, Man, Mixed gender group 3), a point not lost on some of their female counterparts ('The boys are like "Ooh, free flowers"', Participant 1, Woman, Mixed gender group 3). When intrusive acts were constructed as threatening by men, it was often with reference to exaggerated examples of unwanted online messages and friend requests:

Participant 2, Man: Well, they'll send you a friend request or something?

Participant 3, Man: Yeah, they would but then you'd say no, but what about if they're like some super hacker who can, you know, know what you're doing 24/7. You see that's where I'm a bit scared

(Mixed gender group 2)

Women, on the other hand, saw threats in the mundane. It was not the content of intrusive behaviours that was important, but the underlying threat that they represent; this applied equally to online and offline intrusive behaviours. For example, in the extract below, the woman refocuses discussion away from the type of gift received to the message that may be inadvertently conveyed by accepting an unwanted gift, no matter what that gift might be:

> *Participant 1, Man: ...because it depends on the types of gifts you're getting as well*
>
> *Participant 2, Woman: ...cos if they're seeing that you're accepting the gifts, you know, that might just kind of make them want to do it more and more and more and more. They're invading your privacy when doing that so it kinda fits in here, it's like potentially serious but could be definitely serious*
>
> *(Mixed gender group 5)*

Similarly, the seemingly innocuous act of following on Facebook is seen as a potential threat by these women, but not recognised as such by their male counterparts:

> *Participant 3, Man: If it's just that [intrusive behaviour], it's not really serious. I mean*
>
> *Participant 1, Woman: ...but it has the potential, because they are monitoring you*
>
> *Participant 2, Woman: ...that has the potential to be really serious*
>
> *Participant 1, Woman: Yeah, because they can start like stalking you properly*
>
> *(Mixed gender group 3)*

This potential threat is not explicit; for women it is inscribed in the deeper meanings and implications of unwanted behaviours. For example, the potential threat of an online declaration of love is threatening not because of the content of the message, but because of the reciprocal actions that such a declaration requires from the recipient. One's response, or lack thereof, sends a message:

> *The reason why I'm kinda like umm about this one [intrusive behaviour] is because okay, if someone does say that they do love you, okay and you just don't, you don't care, you don't pay attention. Yeah, but I think sometimes people kind of force issues… and they, they could be feeling it and you're not feeling it … and that could be an issue because you're not feeling it but they're feeling it (Participant 2, Woman, Mixed gender group 5)*

These differences between men's and women's understandings of intrusive behaviours, may stem from their experiences of such behaviours. Throughout the focus group discussions, participants drew on their personal experiences of stalking. The vast majority of these anecdotal examples were provided by women:

> *I dunno … depends what they want out of you. Like because I was harassed last year, by a girl who was actually dating the guy I dated like years ago. And she was like pretending to be him and I'm like are you okay? What's going on? And it was just really weird, and then I just blocked her and it all went away, so it was like okay (Participant 4, Women only group 2)*

It is not surprising, therefore, that the language used by women when discussing theoretical scenarios often included expressions of fear and apprehension. For example, the underlying threat involved in everyday behaviours, such as posting a selfie, a food photograph or adding a friend, often invoked fear. The words 'scary' and 'dread' was used throughout many of the focus group discussions, predominantly by women:

> *Participant 3: Yeah, and that was the big thing for me cos I worked at night, so this person used to follow me to 'check' that I was okay, and I mean for me it's experience. I mean ... when I see an unwanted gift it fills me with a feeling of dread umm yeah, so I guess that's why I put that [intrusive behaviour] in there*
> *Participant 4: Yeah, they might think it's nice but it's scary*
> *(Women only group 4)*

These findings are consistent with perception research, which has found that judgements regarding the seriousness of both online and offline stalking differ by perceiver gender (Ahlgrim & Terrance, 2021; Becker et al., 2020; Finnegan & Timmons Fritz, 2012; Feuer, 2014; Scott et al., 2015). The finding that women are more likely to focus on the implicit meaning of intrusive behaviours may also help develop an understanding of why women are more likely than men to experience alarm and fear of violence (see Scott et al., 2015), and contribute to the reason women are more likely than men to report their experiences to the police (see Feuer, 2014; Finnegan & Timmons Fritz, 2012). Since women generally experience intimate partner violence, sexual violence and public harassment at higher rates than men, and often with severe harms (Mellgren et al., 2018; World Health Organisation, 2013), it is also possible that women have more at stake in being able to identify and avoid intrusive behaviours. This may form a further explanation as to why

women, in this study at least, have developed a capacity to read implicit meanings and possible motivations for these behaviours. Indeed, it reflects the sort of heightened awareness, vigilance and pre-emptive behaviours that constitute women's safety work in other public environments (Kelly, 2012; Vera-Gray & Kelly, 2020). In any public space, virtual or physical, women are effectively 'on guard' (Gardner 1995), and there are many habitual strategies women use on a regular basis (both consciously and unconsciously) to monitor risk and alter their own behaviour accordingly (see Kelly, 2012; Very-Gray 2018; Vera-Gray & Kelly 2020). Therefore, it is possible that the attentiveness to the implicit meanings of intrusive stalking behaviours, as well as how to respond to those behaviours (such as whether to return, ignore or accept an unwanted gift), is further reflective of this gendered safety work.

Conclusion

This chapter examined student understandings of the relative seriousness of conceptually similar online and offline intrusive behaviours. Participants were more likely to perceive offline intrusive behaviours as serious than their conceptually similar online counterparts, and five key assumptions shaped their understandings of the relative seriousness of these behaviours. The assumptions related to intent, effort, physicality, choice and control, and norms and expectations. Although these themes did not differ by gender, perceptions of the relative risks of online and offline intrusive behaviours did. Men tended to focus on the explicit content of the intrusive behaviours whereas women tended to focus on the implicit meaning of these behaviours. Understandings of the relative seriousness of online and offline intrusive behaviours were also influenced by participants' personal experiences, with women more likely than men to express fear and apprehension regarding these experiences than men. Therefore, the men who participated in the research were more likely

to trivialise both online and offline intrusive behaviours compared to the women.

Collectively, these findings suggest that offline intrusive behaviours are perceived as more serious, and by extension, worthy of help and protection than online intrusive behaviours. It is important, therefore, for future research to examine the function of online and conceptually similar offline intrusive behaviours from the perspective of stalking perpetrators. Online and offline intrusive behaviours may serve different purposes, with online intrusive behaviours less indicative of a problematic situation and by extension a need for help and protection. Alternatively, online and offline intrusive behaviours may serve the same purpose and individuals targeted by online intrusive behaviours may fail to seek help and take appropriate self-protective measures. There is increasing pressure for social media platforms to take online safety more seriously, however, the effectiveness of more stringent policies and accessible ways of reporting online victimisation will be limited if victims of online intrusive behaviour fail to recognise, acknowledge, and report these behaviours.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge that social media and technological advances often outpace research. Thus, although Facebook continues to play an integral role in young people's lives, it's popularity with younger generations is starting to diminish (Children's Commissioner, 2018). Furthermore, there are additional online intrusive behaviours that are not applicable to Facebook, or do not have offline counterparts, that were not considered in this study. These include ephemeral content, such as content posted on Snapchat, Instagram stories, and Facebook live, as well as integrated geo-location capabilities, greater integration between platforms, and data collection by social media providers. Social media providers have an ethical responsibility to take proactive steps in supporting user safety (Suzor et al., 2019; Kaur et al, 2020). They need to develop and increase awareness of community behaviour standards on their platforms so that users understand that intrusive behaviours are not acceptable (Dhillon & Smith, 2019). Furthermore, policies need to be supported by safety

mechanisms and procedures so that victims can report intrusive behaviours and be responded to in a timely manner, and so that perpetrators can be held accountable for their intrusive behaviour (Dhillon & Smith, 2019). Legal authorities also have a responsibility to recognise the risks posed by online intrusive behaviours and to establish mechanisms to work with social media providers in responding, rather than dismissing online intrusive behaviour as less important than offline behaviour (Chang et al, 2020; Dhillon & Smith, 2019; Holt et al, 2019). Finally, young people need to be educated about what is and what is not appropriate behaviour across both online and offline contexts to promote good behaviour and mutual respect, and to ensure that individuals targeted by intrusive behaviours are able to recognise, acknowledge, and report these unwanted behaviours. As Reyns and Fisher (2018) stated, "…the conceptual divisions between offline and online risk that appear in many studies may be obscuring important connections whose influences span these two domains of victimization." (p. 781).

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Table 1

Cue card categories and example intrusive behaviours

Category	Offline	Online
Unwanted gifts	Leaving unwanted gifts (e.g., flowers, photographs, presents)	Leaving unwanted gifts via Facebook (e.g., flowers, photographs, presents using applications)
Unwanted messages	Leaving unwanted messages (e.g., notes, cards, letters)	Leaving unwanted messages via Facebook (e.g., messages, posting on your wall)
Exaggerated affection	Making exaggerated displays of affection (e.g., saying 'I love you' after limited interaction)	Making exaggerated displays of affection via Facebook (e.g., saying 'I love you' on your wall after limited interaction)
Following	Following you (e.g., following you to or from work, school, home, gym, daily activities)	Following you via Facebook (e.g., joining the same networks and groups as you)
Intruding uninvited	Intruding uninvited into your interactions (e.g., initiates unwanted conversations and intrudes on	Intruding uninvited into your interactions via Facebook (e.g., initiates unwanted conversations on

	your conversations with other people)	Facebook and comments on your photos and posts)
Involving in activities	Involving you in activities in unwanted ways (e.g., sending invitations to events and groups, enrolling you in programs, putting you on mailing lists)	Involving you in activities in unwanted ways via Facebook (e.g., sending you invitations to events and groups, tagging you in posts, adding you to group conversations)
Intruding upon friends etc	Intruding upon your friends, family or co-workers (e.g., trying to befriend your friends, attempting to be invited to the same events and groups as you)	Intruding upon your friends, family or co-workers via Facebook (e.g., trying to add your friends to their friend list, attempting to be invited to the same events and groups as you)
Monitoring	Monitoring you and/or your behaviour (e.g., calling at all hours to check up on your whereabouts, checking up on you by asking mutual friends)	Monitoring you and/or your behaviour via Facebook (e.g., constantly checking your profile for updates, checking up on you via your friend's profiles)
Regulatory harassment	Engaging in regulatory harassment (e.g., making false allegations of harassment against you,	Engaging in regulatory harassment via Facebook (e.g., falsely reporting you to Facebook for

	spreading false rumours about you to your boss/instructor)	harassment, posting false rumours about you on the wall of your boss/instructor)
Threatening objects	Leaving or sending you threatening objects (e.g., posting marked up images and photo-shopped photographs of you)	Leaving or sending you threatening objects via Facebook (e.g., uploading marked up images and photo-shopped photographs of you)

Table 2

Categorisations of conceptually similar online and offline intrusive behaviours

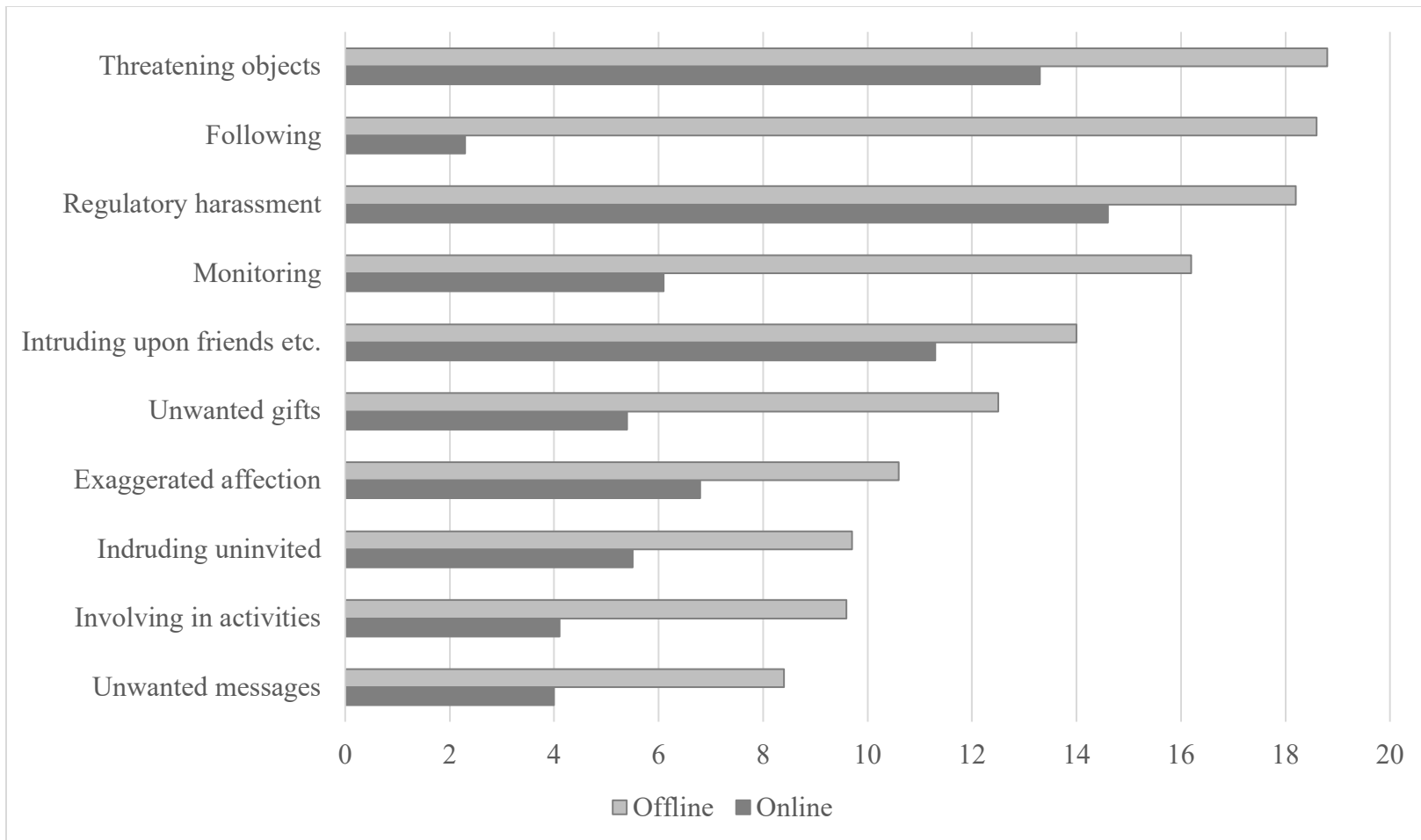|	Offline			Online		
	Definitely serious	Potentially serious	Not serious	Definitely serious	Potentially serious	Not serious
Following	100%	0%	0%	0%	30%	70%
Threatening objects	90%	10%	0%	70%	30%	0%
Regulatory harassment	80%	20%	0%	70%	30%	0%
Monitoring	80%	20%	0%	20%	40%	40%
Intruding upon friends etc.	70%	30%	0%	30%	70%	0%
Unwanted gifts	50%	50%	0%	20%	20%	60%
Involving in activities	30%	60%	10%	10%	30%	60%
Intruding uninvited	30%	40%	30%	10%	30%	60%
Exaggerated affection	20%	80%	0%	0%	90%	10%
Unwanted messages	10%	80%	10%	0%	60%	40%

Fig 1. Mean rankings of conceptually similar online and offline intrusive behaviours (1 least serious, 20 most serious).