

# Cyberstalking Practices Among Youth in Türkiye: Motivational Drivers, Digital Avenues, and Perceptual Paradigms\*

Türkiye'deki Gençlerin Siber Takip Pratikleri: Motivasyonel Güdüler, Dijital Yöntemler ve Algusal Paradigmalar

Zindan ÇAKICI\*\*<sup>ID</sup>

## Abstract

Cyberstalking is a phenomenon that induces severe psychological disorders, including fear, anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder, in victims. A critical synthesis of the literature identifies a notable deficiency in multidimensional research concerning cyberstalking practices within the Turkish context. This study undertakes a comprehensive examination of cyberstalking practices among Turkish youth, with a specific focus on the dynamics of inter-platform migration. Utilizing a snowball sampling technique, 16 participants aged 18-30, exhibiting diverse socio-demographic profiles, were recruited. During the experimental phase, participants engaged in a systematic and audible monitoring of an individual, with whom they had either recently acquainted or had no prior information about, through digital media channels, replicating their routine cyberstalking practices. Subsequent semi-structured interviews were conducted to elicit detailed insights into participants' cyberstalking practices. The findings reveal Instagram as the primary locus of cyberstalking practices, driven by participants' information acquisition motives. X (Twitter) serves as a means to discern individuals' political affiliations, Facebook as a repository of historical data, and Google facilitates access to individuals' social networks. Notably, LinkedIn elicits the greatest participant unease due to notification mechanisms, while WhatsApp is least utilized owing to data limitations. While participants generally perceive cyberstalking as normative, many resort to various stratagems, including the creation of fictitious accounts, to access restricted profiles. Despite intensive engagement in these practices, the majority eschew self-identification as 'stalkers,' citing perceived excessiveness and intimidation associated with the label.

**Keywords:** Digital Media, Digital Surveillance, Stalking, Cyberstalking, Youth

- \* To ensure compliance with ethical standards throughout the research process, ethical clearance was obtained from the Non-Interventional Research Ethics Board at Üsküdar University, under protocol number 61351342/February 2024-64, granted on 26/02/2024.
- \*\* Assist. Prof., Üsküdar University, Faculty of Communication, Department of New Media and Communication, İstanbul, Türkiye, E-mail: zindan.cakici@uskudar.edu.tr, ORCID: 0000-0002-8916-0582

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## Öz

Siber takip, mağdur bireylerde korku, endişe, depresyon ve travma sonrası stres bozukluğu gibi ciddi psikolojik rahatsızlıklara sebep olan bir olgudur. Literatürde, Türkiye'deki bireylerin siber takip pratiklerini çok boyutlu olarak inceleyen çalışmaların sınırlı olduğu görülmektedir. Bu çalışma, Türkiye'deki gençlerin siber takip pratiklerini kapsamlı bir şekilde incelemeyi ve bu pratik kapsamında dijital mecralar arasında nasıl ve neden geçişler yaptığını ortaya koymayı amaçlamıştır. Araştırma kapsamında, 18-30 yaş aralığında siber takip pratiği gerçekleştiren ve farklı sosyodemografik özelliklere sahip 16 katılımcıya kartopu örnekleme tekniği ile ulaşılmıştır. Deneysel aşamada, katılımcılar yeni tanıştıkları veya hakkında bilgi sahibi olmadıkları bir kişiyi, adım adım ve sesli bir şekilde rutin olarak yaptıkları gibi dijital mecralardan takip etmiştir. İkinci aşamada ise, katılımcıların siber takip pratiklerine dair kapsamlı veriler elde etmek amacıyla yarı-yapılandırılmış görüşmeler gerçekleştirilmiştir. Bulgular, katılımcıların bilgi edinme motivasyonu ile gerçekleştirdikleri siber takip pratiklerinde en fazla Instagram üzerinden doyuma ulaştıklarını ortaya koymuştur. Katılımcıların, X'i (Twitter) kişilerin politik düşüncesini öğrenmek, Facebook'u kişilerin geçmiş bilgilerini edinmek ve Google'ı bir geçiş mecrası olarak kişilerin sosyal ağlarına ulaşmak için kullandıkları görülmüştür. Katılımcıların, siber takipte en fazla tedirgin oldukları mecranın takip edilen kişilere bildirim gitmesi nedeni ile LinkedIn, en az kullandıkları mecranın ise sınırlı veriler sunması nedeni ile WhatsApp olduğu saptanmıştır. Araştırmada, katılımcıların siber takibi "normal ve sıradan" bir pratik olarak algıladığı ortaya çıkmıştır. Fakat katılımcıların genel olarak siber takip için sahte hesap gibi birçok yöntem ile belirli bir zaman ve mekânda kapalı hesaplara erişmeye çalıştıkları görülmüştür. Katılımcıların çoğunluğunun bu yoğun pratiğe rağmen kendilerini "aşırı ve korkutucu" olması sebebi ile "stalker" olarak tanımlamadıkları tespit edilmiştir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Dijital Medya, Dijital Gözetim, İz Sürme, Siber Takip, Gençlik

## Introduction

In contemporary society, social media has fundamentally reconfigured various facets of daily life, political processes, societal perceptions, institutional frameworks, public policies, economic interactions, cultural norms, educational systems, and the flow of information, thereby intricately embedding itself into the dynamics of everyday existence (Avşar, 2022, p. 5; Meriç & Çakıcı, 2024, pp. 2-3; Van Dijk & Poell, 2020, p. 110). As of 2024, it is estimated that approximately 62.3% of the global population actively engages with an array of social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, Instagram, and TikTok (Kemp, 2024, p. 10). These platforms facilitate the accumulation of social capital (Benson et al., 2019), provide access to both national and international scholarly research (Shafiq & Parveen, 2023), enable the exploration of diverse geographical regions (Wang & Park, 2023), and offer learning opportunities beyond the traditional confines of formal education systems (Al-Rahmi et al., 2019). Nevertheless, the pervasive use of social media is not without its drawbacks (Çömlekçi & Başol, 2019, p. 174). Among the adverse consequences are the dissemination of misinformation (Olan et al., 2024), the prevalence of cyberbullying (Hardiyanto et al., 2024), and the onset of sleep disturbances (Yu et al., 2024).

Cyberstalking constitutes one of the most deleterious and insidious facets of social media (Kaur et al., 2021, p. 2). Despite being perceived as less harmful than physical stalking due to its non-physical manifestation, cyberstalking can induce severe psychological and emotional consequences

for victims. These consequences include intense fear, anxiety, stress, depression, paranoia, post-traumatic stress disorder, muscle tension, and impaired concentration (Poernamasari et al., 2024, p. 34). Cyberstalking is an online behavior that infringes upon individuals' privacy and inflicts harm not only on the victims but also on their immediate social circles (Spitzberg & Hoobler, 2002, p. 69). Nonetheless, it has been identified that in Türkiye, the younger demographic of social media users terms cyberstalking as “stalking” and frequently does not regard this behavior as a psychological disorder or criminal activity. Instead, they perceive it as a natural and routine action motivated by curiosity and the pursuit of information (Şenses & Aydoğdu-Karaaslan, 2022, p. 1532).

The extant literature indicates a notable paucity of research concerning cyberstalking practices among individuals in Türkiye. Moreover, there is a conspicuous gap in both national and international scholarship regarding the motivations driving young individuals to engage in cyberstalking on social media platforms, the methodologies they employ in this process, and the rationale behind their transitions between different digital mediums. This study endeavors to conduct a comprehensive examination of the cyberstalking practices, termed “stalking” by Turkish youth, to elucidate the motivations underlying these practices and to delineate a detailed map of the transitions between various platforms involved in these practices. In this study, the preliminary phase involves the formulation of a conceptual framework through an exhaustive and critical review of the scholarly literature pertaining to stalking and cyberstalking. This phase also encompasses explication of the underlying theoretical framework. The subsequent phase rigorously outlines the research methodology, including the techniques employed, the universe and sampling procedures, and the ethical considerations, all in relation to the research questions. The following phase involves the systematic presentation and thorough analysis of the empirical findings. The concluding phase delineates the study's contributions to the existing body of knowledge and proposes methodologically sound recommendations for future research endeavors.

### **From Offline to Online: Stalking and Cyberstalking in Academic Discourse**

Stalking, defined as the persistent and unwanted surveillance, communication, or clandestine acquisition of personal information about one individual by another (Ahlgrim & Terrance, 2021, p. 3; Fissel, 2022, p. 162), predominantly transpires within physical domains and frequently precipitates adverse psychological and emotional sequelae for its victims. The inception of concerted scholarly and societal scrutiny directed towards stalking can be traced to the lamentable events of 1989, notably characterized by the tragic demise of American actress Rebecca Schaeffer, who succumbed to fatal gunshot wounds inflicted by a long-standing, fixated admirer at the tender age of 22, alongside the unfortunate fate of several other women who fell prey to analogous stalking-induced fatalities during the same temporal epoch. Consequently, these poignant occurrences galvanized widespread recognition, culminating in the promulgation of pioneering stalking legislation within the United States in 1990, with California notably enshrining persistent stalking as a distinct criminal transgression (Şenses & Aydoğdu-Karaaslan, 2022, pp. 1529-1532). This legislative endeavor was underpinned by the dual mandate of mitigating persistent stalking behaviors and safeguarding the welfare of victims. The epochs of the 1980s and 1990s witnessed an ascendant trajectory in scholarly

inquiry into the psychological sequelae and societal ramifications of the stalking phenomenon (Berry & Bainbridge, 2017, p. 73). Empirical inquiries have elucidated that perpetrators of stalking typically evince deficiencies in empathic capacity and exhibit traits typified by obsession, jealousy, and self-doubt. Conversely, victims of stalking evince a litany of debilitating psychological manifestations, including fear, anxiety, stress, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, somatic tension, and cognitive impairment (Chang, 2020, p. 1189).

In the contemporary era, driven by the relentless tide of technological advancement, deleterious behavioral phenomena like persistent stalking have undergone metamorphosis, assuming novel manifestations (Alismaiel, 2023, p. 6). Cyberstalking, emerging as a digital iteration of persistent stalking, is characterized by the deliberate utilization of information and communication technologies by individuals to systematically surveil, engage with, or illicitly obtain personal information about others in the virtual domain (Mubasher et al., 2023, p. 632). An array of digital tools and methodologies, including email, instant messaging, social media platforms, surveillance mechanisms, and diverse computer applications, are employed in the perpetration of cyberstalking (Ahlgrim & Terrance, 2021, p. 4; Olson et al., 2024, p. 208). It is pertinent to note that cyberstalking victimization transcends gender boundaries, affecting individuals of all sexes (Wilson et al., 2022, pp. 2-3). Despite its non-physical nature, cyberstalking exacts a profound psychological and emotional toll on victims. The resultant afflictions encompass a spectrum of severe maladies, including fear, anxiety, stress, depression, paranoia, post-traumatic stress disorder, muscular tension, and cognitive impairment (Leite et al., 2023, p.2; Poernamasari et al., 2024, p. 34).

Upon a comprehensive review of the international literature, it becomes evident that there exists a robust corpus of scholarly research dedicated to the phenomenon of cyberstalking. Investigations within the international domain predominantly delve into various facets of cyberstalking, encompassing inquiries into its underlying etiology and motivational factors (Olson et al., 2024), exploration of its psychological sequelae (Bussu et al., 2023; Poernamasari et al., 2024), examination of its ethical and legal dimensions (Alismaiel, 2023; Chik, 2018), scrutiny of the distinctive traits exhibited by victims and the myriad of risks they encounter (Olson et al., 2024), analysis of the intricate dynamics inherent in the victim-perpetrator relationship (Ahlgrim & Terrance, 2021; Short et al., 2015), and elucidation of the coping mechanisms deployed by individuals subjected to cyberstalking (Begotti & Maran, 2019).

In the post-2010 era, particularly among the youthful demographic of social media users in Türkiye, a notable trend has emerged wherein cyberstalking, commonly colloquialized as “stalking,” is conceptualized not as a pathological or criminal behavior, but rather as a commonplace and natural phenomenon driven largely by curiosity and the pursuit of information acquisition (Akmeşe & Deniz, 2017, p. 25; Şenses & Aydoğdu-Karaaslan, 2022, p. 1532). Moreover, beyond individual users, corporations have been noted to leverage cyberstalking as a means to enhance recruitment strategies or broaden consumer profiles, seeking access to individuals’ shared content on digital platforms, spanning realms such as travel, lifestyle choices, employment endeavors, and educational pursuits (Uğuz Arsu, 2023, pp. 714-717). Upon meticulous scrutiny of the national scholarly landscape, a notable dearth of comprehensive investigations specifically dedicated to cyberstalking becomes

evident. Existing studies within this realm predominantly scrutinize the definitional nuances of cyberstalking, its societal interpretations, and the potential psychosocial ramifications it may entail (Akmeşe & Deniz, 2017; Saltık, 2018).

The scholarly discourse underscores a glaring dearth of empirical investigations pertaining to cyberstalking practices among individuals within the Turkish context, with the extant research corpus appearing notably sparse. Moreover, both national and international academic literature exhibits a notable absence of comprehensive inquiries delving into the intricate motivational frameworks driving the engagement of young individuals in cyberstalking practices across a spectrum of social media platforms, the nuanced digital trajectories navigated throughout these processes, and the determinants guiding transitions between digital environments. This study endeavors to address these significant lacunae by embarking on a meticulous examination of cyberstalking practices among Turkish youth, colloquially referred to as “stalking” and the multifaceted motivational underpinnings thereof. Furthermore, it seeks to delineate the intricacies of inter-platform transitions within the ambit of these cyberstalking practices, thereby providing a nuanced, detailed, and academically rigorous elucidation of the phenomenon. In light of the aforementioned objectives, this inquiry employs the Uses and Gratifications Theory as its central theoretical scaffold, thereby facilitating a highly nuanced and analytically rigorous interrogation of the complex motivational architectures and behavioral mechanisms that underpin cyberstalking practices within the Turkish youth demographic.

The Uses and Gratifications Theory postulates that individuals engage in active selection of media content as a means to fulfill specific cognitive and emotional needs. This paradigm accentuates the purposive nature of media consumption, wherein individuals strategically select media outlets that are congruent with their latent goals and needs (Özdemir, 2022, p. 141; Palmgreen & Rayburn, 1979, pp. 19-24; Yılmaz, 2023, pp. 27-28). Historically, the theory has been predominantly applied to traditional media and television (Katz & Foulkes, 1962, pp. 377-388; Kızılkaya, 2022, p. 233; Yetkiner & Öztürk, 2020, p. 221). However, with the advent of internet-based communication technologies in the 21st century, the relevance of the Uses and Gratifications Theory has experienced a profound resurgence (Gülmez & Yalçıntaş, 2023, p. 3). Current scholarly investigations, which explore the ramifications of digital media tools and the evolving interaction between users and technological platforms, continue to utilize this theoretical framework (Aslan & Yiğiter, 2021, p. 854; Özdemir, 2022, p. 142; Tekbıyık & Ünal, 2023, p. 200). This study systematically investigates the motivational determinants of cyberstalking practices among Turkish youth, the digital navigational strategies employed, and the primary factors driving inter-platform transitions, utilizing the Uses and Gratifications Theory as the analytical framework.

## **Method**

The paramount objective of this inquiry is to systematically interrogate the cyberstalking practices colloquially designated as “stalking” among the youth demographic in Türkiye, with a pronounced emphasis on elucidating the multifaceted motivational constructs that underpin these behavioral practices within the theoretical purview of the Uses and Gratifications Theory. Furthermore, this

research endeavors to meticulously delineate the intricate mechanisms and underlying rationales that govern inter-platform transitions pertinent to these practices, thereby contributing a comprehensive and methodologically rigorous framework to the scholarly discourse surrounding this phenomenon. The research questions steering this investigation are as follows:

1. What motivations drive Turkish youth to engage in cyberstalking practices, and what satisfactions do they derive from these behaviors?
2. With what motivations do Turkish youth utilize various digital platforms in their cyberstalking practices, and what satisfactions do they obtain?
3. What are the fundamental dynamics and reasons behind the inter-platform transitions in cyberstalking practices among Turkish youth?

The methodology, universe, sample, and data collection technique of the research were formulated based on the research questions. This study, employing a mixed-method approach, defined its universe as the youth population in Türkiye. The research sample comprised young people aged 18 to 30 (Aytuna et al., 2024; Çakıcı, 2023), encompassing a range of socio-demographic profiles, residing within the metropolitan area of Istanbul, who engage in cyberstalking practices. To ensure compliance with ethical standards throughout the research process, ethical clearance was obtained from the Non-Interventional Research Ethics Board at Üsküdar University, under protocol number 61351342/February 2024-64, granted on 26/02/2024.

**Table 1.** Participant Code and Demographic Profiles in the Study

Participant Code	City	Age	Gender	Occupational Status	Education Level	Marital Status
P1	Istanbul	19	Male	Student	Associate Degree	Unmarried
P2	Istanbul	26	Female	Employed	Associate Degree	Unmarried
P3	Istanbul	26	Female	Employed	Associate Degree	Unmarried
P4	Istanbul	28	Male	Unemployed	Bachelor's Degree	Unmarried
P5	Istanbul	26	Male	Employed	Bachelor's Degree	Unmarried
P6	Istanbul	22	Male	Employed	Associate Degree	Unmarried
P7	Istanbul	28	Male	Employed	Bachelor's Degree	Unmarried
P8	Istanbul	25	Female	Employed	Bachelor's Degree	Unmarried
P9	Istanbul	29	Female	Employed	Bachelor's Degree	Married
P10	Istanbul	22	Male	Student	Associate Degree	Unmarried
P11	Istanbul	21	Female	Student	Associate Degree	Unmarried
P12	Istanbul	23	Female	Employed	Bachelor's Degree	Unmarried
P13	Istanbul	26	Male	Employed	Bachelor's Degree	Unmarried
P14	Istanbul	22	Female	Student	Bachelor's Degree	Unmarried
P15	Istanbul	18	Female	Unemployed	High School	Unmarried
P16	Istanbul	30	Male	Employed	Associate Degree	Married

In the context of this study, a cohort of 16 participants, evenly split between 8 females and 8 males, representing a range of educational backgrounds and age groups, all within the 18-30 age range and engaged in cyberstalking practices, was selected utilizing the snowball sampling technique, as shown in Table 1. Prior to the interviews, participants were briefed on the research objectives,

methodology, and confidentiality of the discussions, and both verbal and written consent indicating their voluntary participation in the study was obtained. In the initial phase, to delineate the research field by gathering preliminary data, participants were administered an online questionnaire. This questionnaire aimed to collect data on participants' demographic characteristics (Alismaiel, 2023), internet and social media usage patterns (Olayemi, 2022; Şenses & Aydoğdu Karaaslan, 2022), and cyberstalking practices (Ahlgrim & Terrance, 2021; Kim, 2023; Olson et al., 2024; Wilson et al., 2022).

Based on these data, the first and second phases of the research have been meticulously designed. During these phases, face-to-face interviews with participants were conducted, each lasting approximately 50-60 minutes. The findings derived from the online-administered questionnaires indicate that participants predominantly engaged in covert surveillance of individuals with whom they had recently become acquainted and possessed minimal prior knowledge, primarily via digital mediums. In this context, the initial phase of the research involved instructing participants to methodically and audibly document their procedures for digitally surveilling an individual with whom they had recently established contact or about whom they had scant prior information, in a manner consistent with their typical practices. In this experimental phase, informed by the existing literature, the study meticulously investigates the specific social networks employed by participants in their cyberstalking practices, systematically uncovering the rationale, methodologies, and objectives underpinning their use of these networks, as well as the determinants guiding their transition to alternative social networks (Andreas et al., 2024; Almonte et al., 2024; Chan et al., 2020; Davies et al., 2024; Gon, 2021; Sundjaja et al., 2017; Saaty et al., 2022; Vila et al., 2021). During this recorded phase, to uphold the integrity of the research methodology, all visual data related to the digital platforms accessed by participants and the identifying information of the subject under examination were rigorously anonymized and secured, thereby ensuring stringent confidentiality.

Subsequent to the conclusion of the experimental phase, semi-structured interviews were administered to the participants to provide an in-depth and comprehensive analysis of the cyberstalking practices among the young people within the research sample. These interviews aimed to delve into participants' motivations, experiences, and perceptions regarding cyberstalking in a broader context (Alismaiel, 2023; Fissel, 2022; Leite et al., 2023; Mubasher et al., 2023; Şenses & Aydoğdu Karaaslan, 2022; Uğuz Arsu, 2023). All interview recordings, with participants' explicit consent, were transcribed verbatim. The data, analyzed using the MAXQDA program, underwent descriptive analysis, providing succinct summaries and insightful interpretations for the reader.

Lastly, it should be explicitly stated that the deployment of the AI tool ChatGPT in this study was stringently restricted to the syntactic and grammatical refinement of the manuscript. No artificial intelligence methodologies were utilized in any other aspect of the research process, including data acquisition, analytical procedures, interpretative analyses, or the formulation of conclusions, thus preserving the methodological rigor and scholarly integrity of the research.

## **Findings and Discussion**

Preliminary field data revealed that participants spend a minimum of 3 hours online daily. The primary locations for internet access were the home, followed by workplaces, educational

institutions, vehicles, and cafes. The predominant devices used for internet access were smartphones, followed by laptops, desktop computers, and tablets. Participants mainly utilized the internet for connecting to social networks, listening to music, watching movies, reading news, watching videos, and checking emails. Participants uniformly maintained active accounts on principal social media platforms, including Instagram, X (Twitter), Facebook, LinkedIn, WhatsApp, YouTube, and Google. Additionally, they demonstrated substantial engagement with Ekşi Sözlük, despite the absence of a requirement for account registration. Nevertheless, the empirical data revealed that each of the following platforms—TikTok, WeChat, Tumblr, Snapchat, Telegram, Pinterest, Line, Tinder, and Azar—was utilized by a singular, unique participant within the sample cohort. The platforms most frequently accessed were WhatsApp, Google, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and X (Twitter). Among the 16 participants, 11 perceived cyberstalking practices both positively and negatively, while 5 viewed them solely positively. Participants primarily engaged in covertly following individuals they had recently met through digital platforms. The platforms most commonly employed for this purpose were Instagram, X (Twitter), Facebook, Google, LinkedIn, and WhatsApp. Furthermore, it was noted that 8 out of the 16 participants used fake accounts on Instagram, X (Twitter), and Facebook during these activities. Based on these findings, the research was structured into two phases. In the first phase, participants were instructed to follow a person they had recently met or were not familiar with through digital platforms, replicating their routine behavior step-by-step while providing verbal accounts of their actions. Upon the completion of this experimental phase, semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather comprehensive data on the participants' cyberstalking practices.

### Experimental Phase Findings

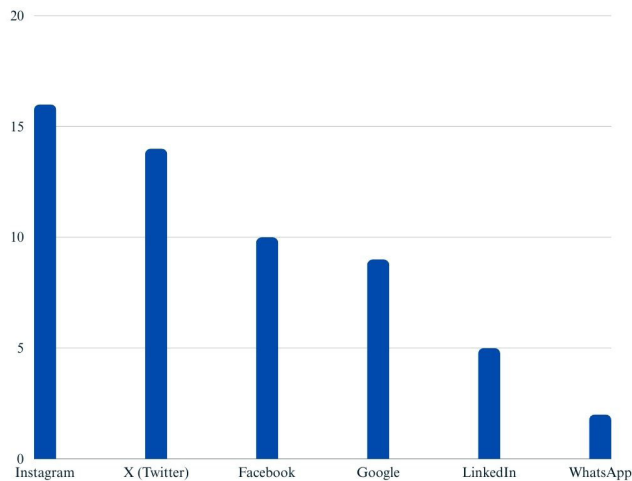
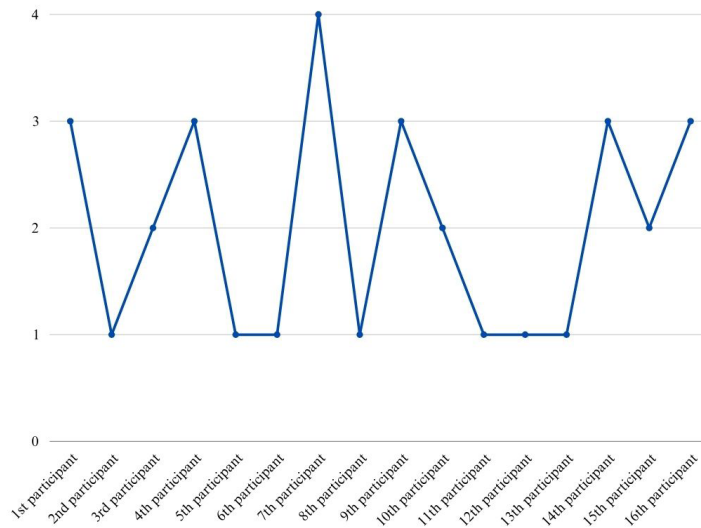


Figure 1. Participants' Cyberstalking Platforms

In the initial phase of the study, participants were instructed to investigate individuals they had recently met or had no prior knowledge of, using digital platforms in their typical manner and verbalizing each step. As shown in Figure 1, the platforms most frequently used in these



cyberstalking practices were Instagram, X (Twitter), Facebook, Google, LinkedIn, and WhatsApp. The study revealed that participants utilized a minimum of 2 and a maximum of 6 platforms to achieve satisfaction in their cyberstalking practices.



**Figure 2.** Ranking of Instagram Usage in Cyberstalking Practices

In the figures provided, the numerals positioned on the far left signify the discrete phase at which participants initiated engagement with the respective social media platform, delineating the specific juncture in the sequential progression of their cyberstalking practices. The findings reveal that all participants engage in cyberstalking practices using Instagram. As illustrated in Figure 2, seven participants designated Instagram as their primary platform, three as their secondary platform, five as their tertiary platform, and one as their quaternary platform. The predominant reason for transitioning to Instagram is its widespread popularity and strong appeal among the younger demographic. Moreover, the platform's capacity to provide extensive insights into the daily lives of the individuals being observed significantly influences this transition. Participants reported that a high incidence of mutual friends and the ability to organically acquire information about the individual were crucial factors for switching to Instagram. One participant explained this as follows:

Now I am looking at the followers and followings of the person I am stalking. When I examine the people they follow, I don't see anyone we both follow. Having mutual friends is very important. If we have a mutual friend, I can call that mutual friend to get information about the person I am stalking. Thus, I can transition from online to an organic connection. (P5, Male, 26)

It was observed that the visual satisfaction provided by Instagram significantly influenced the participants' decision to adopt this platform for their cyberstalking practices. One participant explained this as follows:

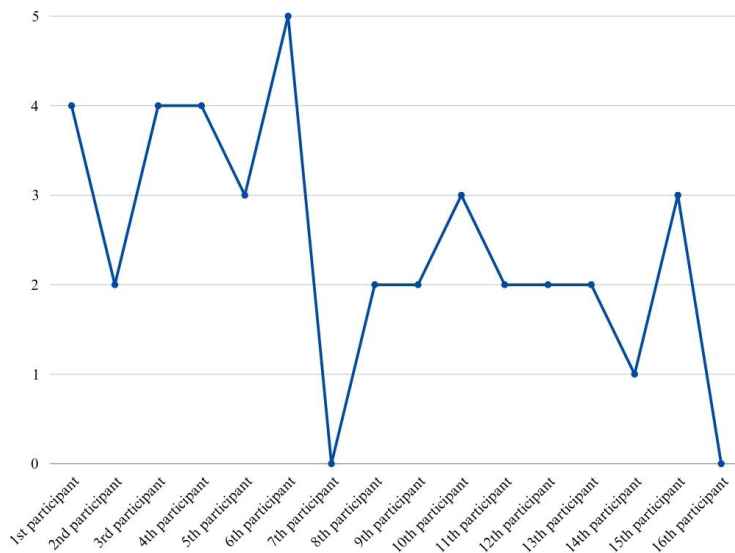
If I want to analyze someone visually, I examine their profile on Instagram. Instagram provides a vast amount of visual information about a person's life. I can comprehend how an

individual presents themselves on social media through Instagram. Instagram is essentially people's passport. (P8, Female, 25)

The transition to Instagram was also facilitated by the platform's amenability to the use of fake accounts. It was noted that participants could access individuals' Instagram accounts not only through fake profiles but also via specific applications. One participant explained this as follows:

Initially, I will stalk them on Instagram. Currently, their account appears to be private. If the account is private, there are applications available for this purpose. Now I can stalk their Instagram through the app. I can view all their posts now. I can also see their stories. The person is unaware that I am stalking them through the app at this moment. (P11, Female, 21)

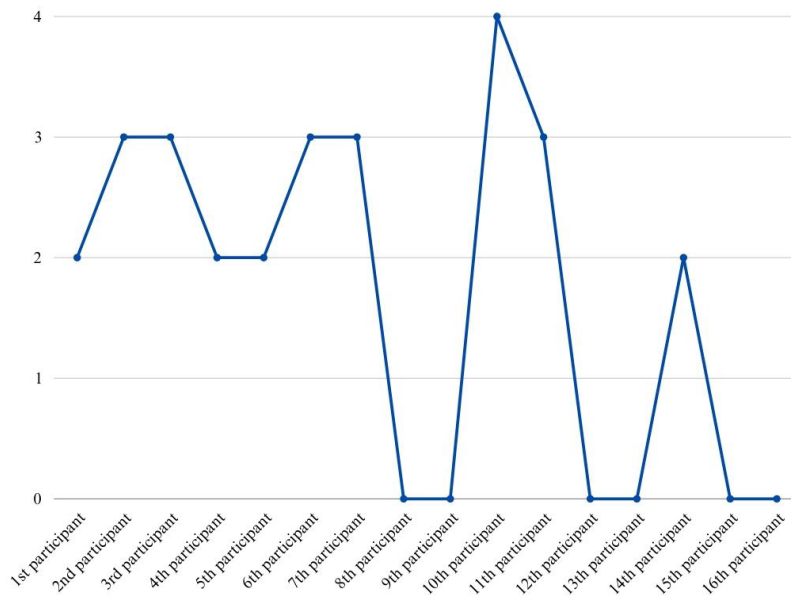
Upon gaining access to the Instagram account of the individual being stalked, participants typically examined the profile content, number of posts, reactions to posts, tagged content, highlighted stories, daily stories, biography section, and follower-following details. Participants indicated that the sequence of these activities might vary according to their motivations and the nature of their relationship with the individual being followed. During the experimental phase, it was observed that participants obtained information about the "images, demographic data, reactions to content, locations visited, residential neighborhood, educational background, music and culinary preferences, friendship networks, social status, family relationships, romantic life, social circle, follower and following details, existing organic connections with the individual, favorite sports team, alcohol and tobacco use, attitude towards animals, and events attended" of the individuals they stalked through these sections.



**Figure 3.** Ranking of X (Twitter) Usage in Cyberstalking Practices

The study identifies that 14 participants employ X (Twitter) in their cyberstalking practices. As illustrated in Figure 3, one participant designates X (Twitter) as their primary platform, six as their secondary platform, three as their tertiary platform, three as their quaternary platform, and

one as their quinary platform. The motivations driving the transition to X (Twitter) involve a keen interest in discerning the cognitive perspectives, political affiliations, and daily emotional states of the individuals being stalked. Upon gaining access to the X (Twitter) profiles of their subjects, participants typically scrutinize the profile content, biography section, and follower-following lists, although the sequence of examination may vary. During the experimental phase, participants extracted information from these sections, encompassing the subjects' preferred poets and poems, artistic inclinations, employment details, residential neighborhoods, sports interests, foreign language proficiencies, preferred news channels and journalists, political affiliations, favorite songs and lyrics, and mutual connections inferred from the follower-following lists. Overall, the data indicate that participants primarily utilize Instagram to acquire information about an individual's physical appearance and social life, whereas X (Twitter) is predominantly used to obtain insights into the individual's cognitive, political, and literary realms.

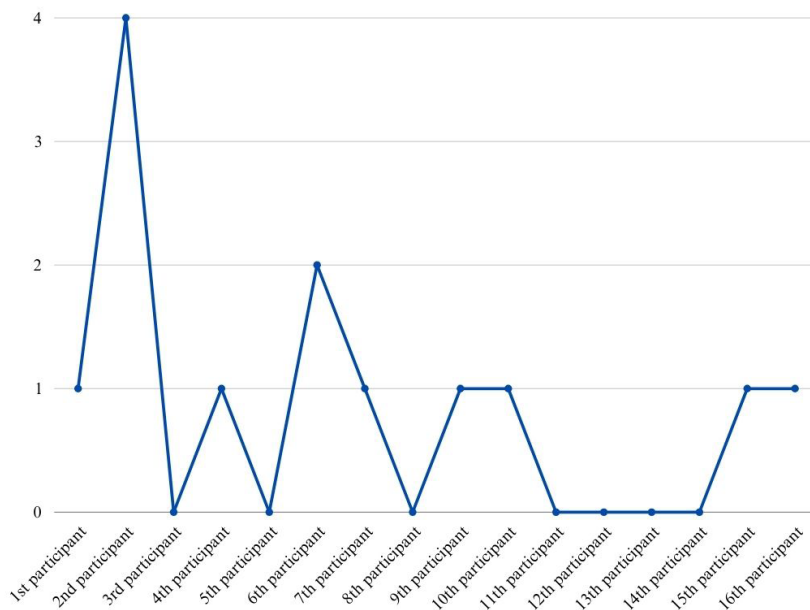


**Figure 4.** Ranking of Facebook Usage in Cyberstalking Practices

The findings reveal that 10 participants engage in cyberstalking practices on Facebook. As illustrated in Figure 4, four participants utilize Facebook as their secondary platform, five as their tertiary platform, and one as their quaternary platform. The study elucidates that Facebook is the third most preferred platform for cyberstalking practices, subsequent to Instagram and X (Twitter). However, it has never been designated as the primary platform for these practices. This phenomenon can be attributed to the fact that participants predominantly locate the desired content on Instagram and X (Twitter), thereby diminishing the necessity of Facebook. Furthermore, participants indicated a decline in Facebook's popularity due to the increasing prevalence of middle-aged and older users, resulting in a lower prioritization of Facebook for cyberstalking purposes. One participant explained this as follows:

Generally, I do not frequent Facebook because I can procure ample information about the individuals I stalk from Instagram and X (Twitter). For instance, if the person I am seeking information about were over 40 years old, I would conduct a thorough search on Facebook; however, since younger individuals do not utilize Facebook extensively, I prefer to stalk them on Instagram and X (Twitter). Investigating a young person on Facebook is somewhat a waste of time. (P5, Male, 26)

During the experimental phase, it was observed that none of the participants were connected as friends with the individuals they stalked on Facebook, thus limiting the scope of accessible information. The experimental phase disclosed that participants could retrieve data pertaining to “family and kinship relations, high school graduation photos, places visited, political affiliations, favorite foods, and personal relationships” from the Facebook profiles of the individuals they stalked. The data acquired from Facebook were generally analogous to the information obtained from Instagram and X (Twitter). However, it was noted that participants could access older information about the individuals they stalked on Facebook, distinguishing it from the other platforms.



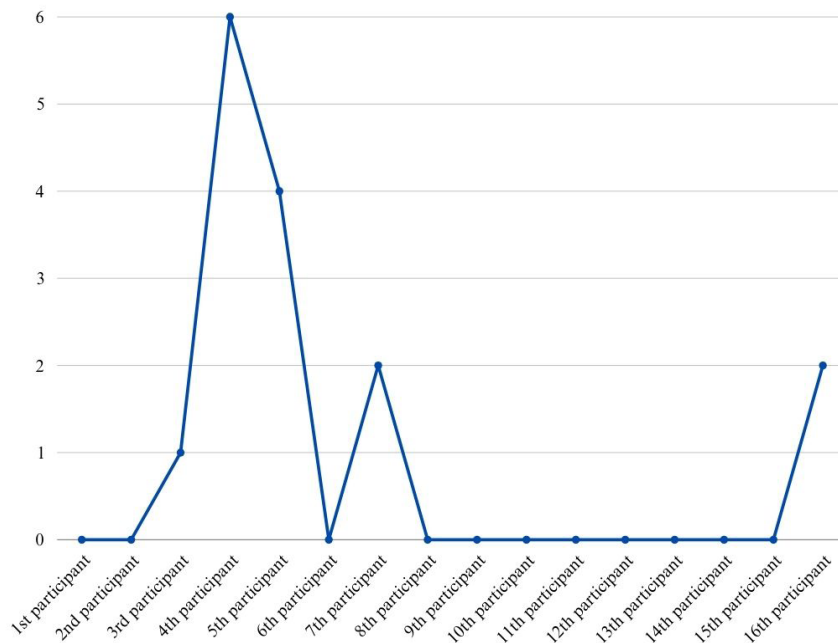
**Figure 5.** Ranking of Google Usage in Cyberstalking Practices

The findings of this study reveal that 9 participants engage Google in their cyberstalking practices. As demonstrated in Figure 5, seven participants utilize Google as their primary platform, one as a secondary platform, and one as a quaternary platform. Seven participants reported that they initially resort to Google because it provides a comprehensive overview of the individual under investigation and aggregates all pertinent social networks. One participant indicated a transition to Google for data collection when they were unable to access the individual’s profile on Instagram, whereas another participant resorted to

Google at a subsequent stage. This latter participant specified that their initial use of Google is contingent upon the individual's public recognition. This participant explained this as follows:

If the person I am stalking is engaged in a profession that ensures their presence on Google, I initially search for them there. Since the individual I am stalking is neither a prominent writer nor a journalist, I do not resort to Google at the initial stage. (P2, Female, 26)

The analysis further reveals that participants predominantly confine their examination on Google to the first page of search results and image tabs. Only one of the nine participants extended their search to include the first page, news, images, and videos. Participants generally collected data from social networks that appeared on Google's first page before transitioning to those platforms, thereby establishing Google as a conduit to other digital media. Moreover, it was observed that participants occasionally accessed platforms such as Ekşi Sözlük, Foursquare, ResearchGate, and 1000kitap.com as a consequence of Google's search algorithms. However, they clarified that these platforms are not part of their regular cyberstalking routines.



**Figure 6.** Ranking of LinkedIn Usage in Cyberstalking Practices

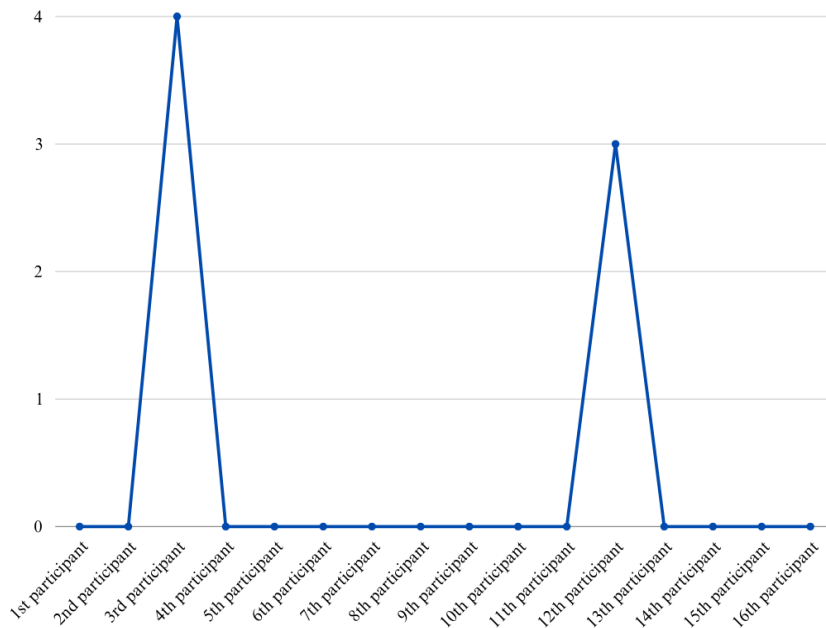
The study elucidated that 5 participants employed LinkedIn in the execution of their cyberstalking practices. As delineated in Figure 6, one participant employed LinkedIn as their primary platform, two participants utilized it as their secondary platform, one participant employed it as their quaternary platform, and one participant utilized it as their sextenary platform. The predominant disinclination towards LinkedIn among participants was attributed to the platform's feature of sending notifications to the individuals whose profiles were viewed. During the experimental phase, it was observed that

the participants engaged in cyberstalking by either using incognito mode or by logging out of their accounts. One participant explained this as follows:

I possess an account on LinkedIn; however, if I log in and engage in stalking, the subject receives a notification. Consequently, I will now log out of my account. Given that I am logged out of my profile, I will not be able to access the entirety of this person's information, yet I can still glean some details. At present, I have accessed their profile. I have discerned which university they attended and their current place of employment. Now, utilizing this information, I will attempt to locate their Instagram account. (P3, Female, 26)

Participants generally indicated that on platforms such as Instagram, there exists a multitude of individuals with analogous names and surnames to those they are investigating. They emphasized the necessity of more granular data, such as educational background and occupational details, to accurately identify the profile of the individual being stalked. It was determined that participants transitioned to LinkedIn to procure these specific data points and subsequently reverted to their primary platform post-acquisition of the requisite information. One participant explained this as follows:

Typically, I examine the individual's professional experience, education, and title on LinkedIn. I acquire this information within 30 seconds and subsequently exit LinkedIn. Armed with this information, I transition to Instagram, Facebook, or X (Twitter). (P5, Male, 26)



**Figure 7.** Ranking of WhatsApp Usage in Cyberstalking Practices

The empirical inquiry discloses a marginal integration of WhatsApp into the cyberstalking practices of only 2 participants. As delineated in Figure 7, one participant utilized WhatsApp as their tertiary platform, while another employed it as their quaternary platform. These individuals

meticulously scrutinized the WhatsApp profiles and statuses of their targets, leveraging access to their phone numbers. The tepid adoption of WhatsApp in cyberstalking practices can be attributed to the scarcity of target phone numbers. Participants assiduously monitored the visual representations and daily activities of their targets via WhatsApp statuses and profile pictures. However, it was observed that participants predominantly resorted to WhatsApp as a *dernier cri*, subsequent to exhaustively exploring platforms such as Instagram, X (Twitter), Google, and Facebook, where more nuanced data could be procured.

### **In-Depth Interview Findings**

In the subsequent phase of this research, semi-structured interviews were systematically conducted to elicit a comprehensive and detailed understanding of the cyberstalking practices manifested by young people within the research sample. Through in-depth interviews, a vast array of findings emerged, encompassing participants' theoretical constructs, methodological approaches, and motivational underpinnings related to cyberstalking, while also revealing detailed insights into the individuals targeted, the temporal and spatial contexts of these practices, and numerous other critical dimensions intrinsic to their cyberstalking practices.

All participants defined cyberstalking as “the surreptitious acquisition of information about an individual of interest.” All participants conceded that their primary motivations for discreetly following someone in the digital realm were the aggregation of information and the surveillance of these individuals. Five participants contended that cyberstalking constitutes a normative and positive behavior. These participants argued that individuals voluntarily disseminate content in public digital spaces, and the acquisition of such information could potentially enhance interpersonal relationships with the subjects of their scrutiny. Conversely, eleven participants characterized cyberstalking as a deleterious behavior, citing factors such as the infringement of privacy, excessive time consumption, the potential to engender prejudices, and the risk of escalating into harassment. Despite these adverse connotations, these participants acknowledged that the practice of cyberstalking fulfills a utilitarian function by satisfying individuals' intrinsic curiosity.

The findings revealed that a mere three participants admitted to engaging in physical surveillance of individuals they were interested in. In stark contrast, thirteen participants unequivocally condemned physical stalking, describing it as “horrific, abnormal, and criminal.” Nevertheless, all participants asserted that clandestine surveillance of individuals on digital platforms is perceived as “normal and mundane” when juxtaposed with physical stalking. One participant explained this as follows:

I have never clandestinely followed anyone in real life. Engaging in such behavior in the physical realm is horrifying and inherently negative. Stalking someone on the street constitutes an egregious violation of their personal boundaries. Conversely, when I stalk someone online, I am not infringing upon their rights. I am merely observing what they have publicly disclosed. (P13, Male, 26)

Participants generally characterized the practice of covertly monitoring individuals on digital platforms as “normal and ordinary,” justifying this behavior on the condition that they were

viewing publicly accessible content. Participants articulated that accessing private accounts through applications or fake accounts constituted a criminal offense. Despite this, data collected from the questionnaire and experimental phases revealed that 8 out of 16 participants employed fake accounts and applications to facilitate cyberstalking practices. Additionally, it was observed that all participants accessed private digital information regarding individuals of interest through incognito browsing modes, virtual private networks (VPNs), or by utilizing the accounts of close acquaintances.

In-depth interviews provided substantial insights into the subjects, timing, and locations associated with participants' cyberstalking practices on digital platforms. The findings indicated that participants predominantly engaged in this practice to monitor former romantic partners, the new romantic partners of their exes, newly acquainted individuals about whom they lacked information, professional rivals, and academic instructors. Participants consistently reported that their primary motivation for engaging in cyberstalking was to satisfy their curiosity by collecting information about these individuals. Conversely, participants indicated a general reluctance to follow family members or relatives with whom they had frequent interactions on digital platforms. While participants did not perceive the act of cyberstalking as criminal, they disclosed a propensity to engage in this behavior predominantly at night, within their homes, and in private settings. It was ascertained that this practice was seldom conducted in public spaces or during daytime hours. One participant explained this as follows:

When questioned in this manner, I feel somewhat like a voyeur (laughs). I typically engage in stalking at night before going to sleep, ensuring that no one is around. I tend to stalk individuals in more isolated settings. (P13, Male, 26)

In-depth interviews unveiled participants' apprehensions during clandestine monitoring of individuals, including former romantic partners, estranged friends, love interests, unfamiliar acquaintances, or professional adversaries, on digital platforms. To circumvent detection, they employed diverse stratagems. Notably, participants commonly utilized covert browser tabs for access to notification-equipped platforms like LinkedIn, abstained from perusing social network stories, employed lateral scrolling on platforms such as X (Twitter), utilized desktop interfaces to forestall inadvertent interactions with content, selected optimal temporal and spatial contexts, utilized pseudonymous or proxy accounts, disabled mobile data before profile perusal, employed virtual private networks (VPNs), and exercised vigilance against inadvertent actions like double-tapping. Participants employing pseudonymous identities reported diminished apprehension regarding inadvertent engagements. One participant explained this as follows:

I harbor no trepidation of exposure as I abstain from stalking activities via my authentic account, deeming such risks unacceptable. Engagement typically occurs via applications or proxy accounts, preempting potential issues. Moreover, I selectively employ these tactics, primarily targeting individuals recently encountered and of particular intrigue. (P11, Female, 21)

In the course of the conducted interviews, it was ascertained that 13 participants engaged in the clandestine surveillance of others on digital platforms at the behest of their proximate social circles. Conversely, 3 participants asserted that their cyberstalking practices were solely personal in



nature and that they had never undertaken such practices upon the request of others. Furthermore, a significant proportion of the participants disclosed that while they independently pursued individuals they found romantically appealing, they engaged in collaborative surveillance of mutual acquaintances with their close social circles. Participants articulated that engaging in cyberstalking practices with their peers was a source of amusement. One participant explained this as follows:

We engage in the act of stalking individuals together for the purpose of gossiping with my friends. It's quite enjoyable. When I am alone, as I previously mentioned, I predominantly stalk individuals I have a romantic interest in. If the individual I am curious about has their Instagram, X (Twitter), or Facebook profiles set to private, I resort to hacking into their Instagram account. I exhibit these psychopathic tendencies. I have done this on previous occasions. (P11, Female, 21)

It was discerned that 9 of the participants refrained from identifying themselves as “stalkers” and perceived the term to be “excessive and intimidating.” One participant explained this as follows:

This question is rather challenging. I would not characterize myself as a stalker. You might question how I can refrain from this label despite my actions. The term ‘stalker’ carries connotations that are somewhat frightening to me. Therefore, I would prefer not to label myself as a stalker. I also avoid informing those around me that I engage in stalking behaviors because they might judge me if I did. (P3, Female, 26)

In contrast, 7 participants explicitly identified themselves as “stalkers.” Nevertheless, only 2 out of the 16 participants indicated that they openly acknowledged to others both their engagement in cyberstalking and their self-identification as “stalkers.”

## **Conclusion**

This study addresses a conspicuous lacuna in the extant national literature by rigorously examining the phenomenon of cyberstalking among individuals aged 18-30 in Istanbul, employing Uses and Gratifications Theory as the primary analytical paradigm. This theoretical framework facilitated an in-depth exploration of the underlying motivational structures, behavioral typologies, and platform-specific methodologies employed by participants during the engagement of cyberstalking practices. The findings delineated that participants conceptualized cyberstalking as a “routine and commonplace” activity, occurring predominantly during nocturnal intervals within private, self-regulated environments. Such behavioral patterns intimated the normalization of cyberstalking within the digital sphere, thereby reflecting an entrenched habitus of media consumption and engagement. Participants heavily targeted former partners, newly acquainted individuals, professional competitors, and academic mentors, a pattern that is congruent with the central assertions of Uses and Gratifications Theory, which posits that media utilization is inherently purposive and goal-directed, driven by the need to satisfy specific informational, emotional, and relational requisites. Moreover, participants employed various risk mitigation strategies—such as circumventing platforms with notification systems and strategically selecting specific temporal and spatial contexts for engagement—thereby highlighting the participants’ agency in managing

the inherent risks of covert digital interactions. These findings substantiate the central tenet of the theory, which emphasizes user autonomy and control over media consumption practices.

Furthermore, the study illuminated participants' pronounced preference for autonomous cyberstalking, particularly in relation to individuals with whom they harbored personal or romantic inclinations. This inclination reflects a deeper pursuit of self-directed gratification, a core construct within Uses and Gratifications Theory, which asserts that users actively engage with media to fulfill subjective, individualized needs. Platform-specific analysis revealed that Instagram served as the predominant source of gratification, due to its visual appeal, extensive data accessibility, and the facilitation of pseudonymous interactions. After fulfilling their informational and relational needs on Instagram, participants transitioned to X (Twitter) to ascertain the political inclinations of their targets, subsequently migrating to Facebook to retrieve additional information or achieve further gratification. This inter-platform migratory behavior, driven by hierarchically structured informational and relational objectives, exemplifies the strategic engagement with digital ecosystems, in alignment with the principles of Uses and Gratifications Theory. The active, selective navigation across platforms reinforces the theoretical applicability of this framework in deciphering the complex dynamics of cyberstalking practices. In conclusion, this study provides critical insights into the intricate interplay between media consumption, user agency, and the pursuit of gratification within the context of cyberstalking, thereby contributing to the broader understanding of digital media usage patterns.

This study sought to rectify notable deficiencies within both the national and international literature on cyberstalking by employing a multi-methodological approach, thus significantly contributing to the field. Nonetheless, considering the serious ramifications associated with cyberstalking, it was evident that further in-depth research was necessary. Therefore, future research should encompass a range of critical areas: demographic analyses to compare cyberstalking practices across distinct age cohorts, examinations of how social media platform algorithms influence these behaviors, and cross-cultural studies to elucidate motivations behind cyberstalking. Additionally, the application of artificial intelligence and machine learning to predict and analyze cyberstalking patterns, along with experimental evaluations of educational interventions aimed at mitigating such behaviors among youth, would yield substantial contributions. Qualitative investigations into the experiences and psychological impacts on cyberstalking victims, coupled with design-oriented research on how various social media interfaces facilitate or impede these behaviors, are imperative. These recommendations are intended to foster a more nuanced understanding of cyberstalking practices and to advance the academic discourse on this critical issue.

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