

Cyberstalking victimization: The role of online lifestyles and routine activities

Despite decades of research on the dark side of the web and more than a decade of inquiry specifically on the phenomenon of cyberstalking, researchers have yet to find a theoretical scheme that can sufficiently account for this type of online victimization. The paper at hand reports on an ongoing research project that tests the extent to which the core concepts and analytic framework of a traditional etiology of crime and victimization could be transposed to online (or virtual) settings.

More specifically, our work examines whether a modified version of lifestyle/routine activities theory is able to explain stalking victimization on the World Wide Web. Lifestyle/routine activities theory argues that individuals who lead lifestyles (or have routine activities) that are characterized by four key factors are more susceptible to victimization than individuals who do not lead such lifestyles. These four factors include a lifestyle or routines that: 1) place individuals in close physical proximity to motivated offenders, 2) frequently place individuals in risky or deviant situations that expose them to crime, 3) expose individuals as attractive targets to the offenders, and 4) lack capable guardianship to deter the offendersⁱ. Based on these theoretical constructs the authors will attempt to specify the equivalent operational definitions that can be applied to online environments. Accordingly, it is hypothesized that individuals who engage in risky online lifestyles and routine activities, such as posting personal information and pictures on social networking websites, visiting pornographic websites, participating in open chat rooms, and neglecting to use of intrusion detection systems and virus scanning software, are more likely to become victims of cyberstalking violence than are those individuals who have lower levels of participation in such activities.

In order to test our hypotheses we are implementing an online survey to undergraduate university students. Our sample was selected randomly from the total student population of two mid-sized Greek Universities. The sample frames and corresponding email addresses were provided by the registrars of the two universities. Subsequently, each potential respondent was sent an email message asking them to anonymously complete a web-based questionnaire regarding their online lifestyles and routine activities, and their experiences as far as cyberstalking victimization is concerned. Although the data collection phase of the study is still in progress, preliminary results indicate that the postulations of lifestyle/routine activities theory can account, to some extent, for online victimization experiences. Thus, with our study, we are in the position to confirm that existing etiologies of crime and victimization are indeed adaptable to the World Wide Web.

¹ Hindelang, M. J., Gottfredson, M.R., and Garofalo, J. (1978) *Victims of Personal Crime: An Empirical Foundation For a Theory of Personal Victimization*. Cambridge, Mass: Ballinger Publishing Company; Cohen, L.E. and Felson, M. (1979) "Social Change and Crime Rate Trends: A Routine Activities Approach." *American Sociological Review*, 44: 88-100.