

Gangstalking: A Systematic Review of a Shared Internet Delusion

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Table Summary and References

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Background

Gangstalking is a controversial persecutory belief system in which individuals, auto-denominated as "Targeted Individuals" (TIs), believe they are being systematically harassed, monitored, and intimidated by a coordinated group. TIs often describe this harassment as involving surveillance, psychological manipulation, and other intrusive behaviors attributed to large organizations. They often reject psychiatric diagnoses. Though gangstalking is widely discussed in online communities, its scientific understanding remains limited. Exploring the psychological and social aspects of gangstalking is crucial for clinicians and researchers investigating delusion ideation and its relationship with digital communities.

Methods

A systematic literature search was conducted across MEDLINE, Embase, PsycINFO, Web of Science, and Scopus using terms like "gangstalking," "targeted individuals," and "organized harassment." Studies up to 11/10/2024 were included. All retrieved references were exported to a reference manager for duplicate removal. To be included, studies had to (i) explicitly address gangstalking, defined by beliefs of being targeted or harassed by a group, (ii) investigate the nature, experiences, or impacts of gangstalking through empirical research, (iii) include content analyses of online communications, and (iv) be published in peer-reviewed journals in English. Studies focused solely on traditional stalking by a single individual or those based solely on anecdotal evidence were excluded. References from identified articles were reviewed for additional relevant publications. Two independent reviewers screened the full-text articles, with a third available for dispute resolution.

Results

Nine peer-reviewed studies were included. Types of persecution beliefs included surveillance and community stalking (77.8% of studies), social manipulation (66.7%), electronic attacks (33.3%), and property interference (22.2%). Psychological distress was noted in 66.7% of studies, with common symptoms like anxiety, paranoia, and hypervigilance. Social withdrawal and isolation were highlighted in 55.6% of studies, often linked to perceived threats and pervasive distrust. The online presence of gangstalking communities was significant, with findings revealing 500 Reddit threads containing 225,936 words in 48 days, 50 YouTube videos of self-identified TIs, and over 1,000 hours of podcasts.

The studies identified used multiple methods to investigate the phenomenon. Linguistic analyses (33.3%) focused on communication patterns within online forums and video content. Content analyses (33.3%) systematically categorized the experiences reported by victims, while case studies (33.3%) examined narratives involving violence, self-publication, and sociocultural aspects of gangstalking communities.

Discussion and Conclusions

Gangstalking appears to be a novel manifestation of persecutory delusion, characterized by an extensive online presence. The blend of digital and physical harassment reported by TIs highlights how technology influences both the nature and amplification of psychotic symptoms. Online communities may shape experiences, serving as echo chambers that reinforce TIs' belief systems, potentially exacerbating distress and hindering access to medical assistance. Future research should focus on assessing the impact of online forums as barriers to treatment, aiming to deepen understanding and improve support for affected individuals.