

MOBILE PHONE HARASSMENT: AN EXPLORATION OF STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF INTRUSIVE TEXTING BEHAVIOR

Emma Short
*Psychology Department
University of Bedfordshire
England*

Isabella McMurray
*Psychology Department
University of Bedfordshire
England*

Abstract: Limited research has explored the link between mobile phone use and harassment behaviors. This paper details the findings from a preliminary study that examined perceptions of unwanted communication, with one focus group (7 participants) and two vignettes presented to 145 students. The vignette participants were asked to respond to hypothetical questions about continued and unwanted contact being maintained as if they were both a sender and recipient of the contact and if they had actually been harassed. Response options allowed for intended behavior to be measured against generally agreed thresholds of duration and frequency used to identify harassment. Findings indicated that harassment by text is more prevalent than other forms of off-line stalking and, despite recipients reporting being distressed, there was still a higher level of acceptance of this form of harassment than other forms. Furthermore, responses to text harassment were associated with a high frequency of behaviors perceived as not actively discouraging further texts, therefore having the effect of prolonging unwanted contact. These results are discussed in relation to intervention strategies and future research.

Keywords: texting, mobile communication, cyberstalking, harassment.

INTRODUCTION

Mobile phone ownership has increased worldwide in the last decade. In the United Kingdom, 27% of households owned a mobile phone in 1998/1999, rising to 79% in 2004/2005 (National Statistics [UK], 2006). The rapidity of this communication revolution means we are only just beginning to objectively observe the various impacts it has produced on human behavior and relationships.

Typical Mobile Phone Use

Continued technological advances, changing tariffs, and cultural and individual differences have influenced the explosion in the number of the short message service (SMS), or texting, that people send and receive, which has increased with each subsequent year (National Statistics [UK], 2006). The term *text*, or *texting*, used throughout this paper refers to SMS messaging. Some researchers have suggested that texting could have been rejected as a slow, more cumbersome method of communication compared with talking on the phone (e.g., Reid & Reid, 2004). However, it is apparent that the benefits of texting must often be considered to outweigh these drawbacks, with texting now being a primary communication tool for young people. Indeed, 61% of children aged 8 to 11, and 87% aged 12 to 15, sent text messages at least once a week, whilst 94% adults aged under 25 years sent text messages (National Statistics [UK], 2006).

A variety of unique benefits of texting have been considered by other researchers. As a communication option, texting provides the user an instant means of communicating with another person who may be distanced by either location or time (Green, 2002). Madell and Muncer (2007) identified that one benefit of texting, e-mailing, and instant messaging is that any of them can be used asynchronously as well as synchronously, in contrast to face-to-face communication and phone conversations, which can only be synchronous. Texting gives individuals an opportunity to take time to think and consider the response that they want to give, generally without interruption. Madell and Muncer's (2007) study supported previous research that highlighted the perceived value of being able to plan, think about, and edit text communication as providing the sender with increased control, compared to communication in a spontaneous conversation (Kiesler, Zubrow, Moses, & Geller, 1985; Levine, 2000).

Individual differences have been associated with certain mobile phone behaviors. Socially anxious, shy, and introverted people, as well as neurotic individuals, have been reported to be more likely to use texting as the preferred alternative to talking on a mobile phone (Reid & Reid, 2004). In a study investigating individual differences and mobile phone use, younger people have been found to demonstrate significantly higher usage of mobile phones than older participants (Bianchi & Phillips, 2005). Moreover, high levels of extraversion and low levels of self esteem were found to be significant predictors of problem mobile phones use, which the authors suggested may be attributed to behavioral addiction (Bianchi & Phillips, 2005).

Sending and receiving texts also acts as a social and emotional pick-me-up, to remind both parties that someone is thinking of them. This has been found to be particularly salient for couples in a romantic relationship, where texting may provide a medium of being connected to someone when other forms of communication are inappropriate or unavailable (Pettigrew, 2007). The increased accessibility to others that texting provides also has the potential of removing social barriers that may serve a protective function.

Thus, a crucial research question is, when does texting behavior extend beyond a normal and accepted range and start to be experienced as a problem behavior for either the sender or recipient? Does the remote aspect of texting act as a positive feature for shy, socially anxious individuals since they can experience more control over the management of their own output but, conversely, allow them to become less aware of the impact their actions may be having on others? Despite steady coverage by the popular media, there is very little academic

research that has examined the direct link between new technologies and this problem behavior. An emerging debate in this field has started to question whether “cyberstalking” reflects the same profile as proximal stalking.

Stalking and Cyberstalking

Although stalking has been prevalent for more than a century, it has been within the last two decades that it has evolved into a social issue (Mullen, Pathé, & Purcell, 2001). This problem moved beyond the social sphere and onto the political agenda in the 1990s, when new stalking legislation was introduced in the United Kingdom in the form of the Protection from Harassment Act 1997. The act does not offer an exact definition of stalking or harassment, but “prohibits conduct that has a particular effect on the victim” (Petch, 2002, p. 20).

Stalking and harassment are unusual in criminal law since the offending behavior is recognized only when the victims identify themselves as being distressed as a result of the unwanted behavior that they believe is threatening to them. Therefore, the “victim’s” perception of the offending behavior is crucial: The perpetrator or stalker must have been made aware by the victim that his or her behavior is causing distress, but continues to make this unwanted contact with his or her victim.

The Protection from Harassment Act does state that “a person must not pursue a course of conduct- (a) which amounts to harassment of another, and (b) which he knows or ought to know amounts to harassment of the other” (Protection from Harassment Act 1997, Section 1). In parallel, the psychiatric literature has defined stalking as a course of conduct by which one person repeatedly inflicts on another unwanted intrusions to such an extent that the recipient fears for his or her safety (Mullen, Pathé, & Purcell, 2004.). Repetition and persistence are also characteristics of this behavior. In an attempt to define when repeated intrusion becomes problem behavior, an accepted cut-off point for “normal”/“abnormal” contact is suggested by Pathé, Mullen, & Purcell’s (2000) criteria for persistence and repetition (over 4 weeks and/or more than 10 occasions). Due to the subjectivity of the legal definition, this paper will draw on Pathé et al.’s (2000) definition.

Cyberstalking can be defined as “threatening behavior or unwanted advances directed at another using the Internet and other forms of online and computer communications” (National Center for Victims of Crime, 2003). While specific inclusion of mobile phone harassment has been largely overlooked, the advent of smart phones may make this distinction less important, since on-line communication and mobile phone communication are increasingly conducted through the same mobile device.

The nature and diversity of both stalking and cyberstalking mirrors the variety of emotional responses that victims have reported (Mechanic, Uhlmansiek, Weaver, & Resick, 2000). Nevertheless, what is clear is that the victims’ reactions are of a negative nature and include fear, depression, stress, anxiety, lowered self-esteem, and a loss of trust in other people (Mechanic et al., 2000). Although the psychological impact of stalking and cyberstalking is similar, within the United Kingdom, proximal stalking is situated legally within the Protection from Harassment Act 1997, whereas cyberstalking can be considered under the Harassment Act 1997 and, in addition, in the Communications Act 2003. Specifically, Section 127 of the Communications Act relates to the sending of improper messages by means of a public electronic communications network that are grossly offensive,

obscene, indecent, or menacing. That section also defines a separate offense for acts in which public electronic messages cause annoyance, inconvenience, or needless anxiety to another; messages that the sender knows to be false (or causes it to be sent); or for a person who persistently makes use of a public communications system. Furthermore, the Malicious Communications Act 1988, Section 1, makes it an offense to send an indecent, grossly offensive, or threatening letter, electronic communication, or other article to another person with the intention that it should cause them distress or anxiety.

The growing debate on whether cyberstalking is a new phenomenon (Bocij & McFarlane, 2002) or simply another method by which to harass (Meloy, 2007) includes consideration of whether communication via new technologies is more than just an intention to make or maintain contact rather than the behavioral action of texting being a means for an individual to support a compulsion to text or e-mail (Bianchi & Phillips, 2005). Another suggestion is that some cases of cyberstalking are principally extensions of or a prelude to off-line stalking, while others represent a distinct harassment subtype (Sheridan & Grant, 2007).

Incidence and Prevalence

Establishing prevalence rates of cyberstalking is still problematic, due to the diversity of operationalized definitions of cyberstalking and the variety of methods employed in gaining data. Within the UK, harassment accounted for 20% of police-recorded violent crimes in 2005/2006, although a breakdown of types of harassment was not noted (Walker, Kershaw, & Nicholas, 2006).

For the purposes of this paper, previous research into the prevalence of cyberstalking is reviewed. The literature can be divided into two parts according to the samples that were investigated. This paper reflects that division by firstly looking at studies that have observed the prevalence of cyberstalking in samples of self-reported stalking victims. The second approach has observed the prevalence of proximal stalking behaviors (both on-line and off-line) in normative samples.

Sheridan and Grant (2007) collected data from 1,051 self-defined stalking victims, 83% of whom were women, from the UK, USA, and Australia. They found that nearly half of the sample (47.5 %) reported being harassed via the Internet, and 7.2 % of the participants were considered to have been cyberstalked. Individuals who continued to be harassed by their ex-intimates were found to represent the most common stalking type. This reflects findings from proximal stalking data, which has been found to comprise 50% of ex-intimates (Sheridan & Boon, 2002).

As recently as 2000, empirical data on the prevalence of cyberstalking was not available (Ogilvie, 2000), although concerns were raised about the increasing incidence of the phenomena. Since this time a number of studies have drawn data from a general population of Internet or mobile phone users.

Spitzberg & Cupach (2007) conducted a meta-analysis of 175 studies in order to ascertain the prevalence of stalking, as well as descriptive information such as sex differences, origins of stalking, and the type of threat. They found that a quarter of the studies reported some form of victimization that lasted for up to 22 months. Moreover, between 60% and 80% of the victims (depending on the study) were females. In terms of prevalence, between 25% and 50% of all participants across the studies stated that they had been harassed at some time. However the authors suggested that these figures may underestimate electronic

forms of harassment, such as texting or mobile phone behavior. Therefore, the risk of harassment is possibly increased with the additional channel of communication provided by mobile phones. This has implications for the receiver-individual's psychological well being; in addition, social and commercial consequences could exist.

In their study, Finkelhor, Mitchell, and Wolak (2000) found that 6% of 1,501 regular Internet users, aged 10–17, had experienced repeated on-line intrusions that had caused them to feel threatened, worried, or embarrassed. The reported prevalence was similar for boys and girls, and 28% of the group knew their harasser. Similarly, levels of harassment were identified in 10% of 1,504 cases of a survey exploring negative Internet experiences that had been reported to mental health professionals (Mitchell, Becker-Blease, & Finkelhor, 2005).

However, on-line or phone intrusive behavior may not always be experienced as threatening as off-line intrusions. Spitzberg and Hoobler (2002), in the development of a measure of cyberstalking victimization, found that a third of respondents (235 communication undergraduates) had reported some form of cyberharassment, which was judged to be benign. However, 18% reported that they had been “undesirably and obsessively” communicated with.

Alexy, Burgess, Baker, and Smoyak (2005) found that 3.7% of students had experienced cyberstalking. This represented 31.5% of a group who had identified themselves as having experienced some form of harassment. Similarities between the subgroup and the group who experienced off-line stalking were identified. Most notably, cyberstalkers were classmates or former intimates of the victim. Cyberstalking victims were also likely to have been intruded upon off-line. However, some differences between the groups were noted: The authors identified that women were significantly more likely to report having been stalked (proximally), but men were more likely to report having been cyberstalked. When compared with proximally stalked victims, cyberstalked students were more likely to not respond to communications and were less likely to call the police.

The research introduced here describes a diverse range of on-line behaviors under the umbrella term of cyberstalking. The current paper focuses on persistent intrusive behavior via mobile phone texting, specifically exploring students' experiences of negative texting behavior. It provides perspectives from both recipients and senders of unwanted text messages.

Research Aims

The goal of this research was to identify the prevalence, experience, and nature of what is viewed as harassment through mobile technologies. To guide the research into the student's experiences of negative texting behavior, four aims have been articulated:

1. To ascertain the incidence and prevalence of text harassment, as compared to norms from proximal or off-line stalking;
2. To gain an understanding of the experiences and impact of text harassment;
3. To identify behaviors and reactions by the harassed individual, including any that might unintentionally prolong such unwanted contact.
4. To identify how senders may view their own continued contact, particularly when it has exceeded the threshold of harassment (e.g., Pathé et al., 2000).

METHOD

This preliminary investigation employed a mixed methods design, incorporating both qualitative and quantitative methods, to gain an insight into mobile phone use and intrusive behaviors. The methods consisted of one focus group and a paper-based survey. Ethical approval was obtained from the Psychology Department Ethics committee at the University of Bedfordshire and all participants were informed of the aims of the study before gaining their consent. No names or contact details were taken to ensure participant anonymity was preserved. Participants were provided with an identification number and informed that they could withdraw their data at any time. Participants were invited to speak to the research team after taking part in the focus group or completing the survey and also directed to appropriate services if they felt that they had been affected by any of the issues raised by the research. Two participants did contact the research team to ask for such advice.

Sample Characteristics

A convenience sample of students volunteered to take part in this study. Seven female psychology undergraduates, aged between 19 and 45 years (mean age 29 years and two months), participated in the focus group. In addition, 145 psychology students from one university (32 males and 113 females), aged between 16 and 50 years (mean age 22 years and 10 months), completed the survey. The gender and age breakdown reflect the overall psychology student population in this location.

Materials, Procedure and Data Analysis

Focus groups

Focus groups have been increasingly used within the social sciences to elicit attitudes, values, and experiences from either vulnerable groups or when discussing sensitive issues (Krueger & Casey, 2000) and are useful at the exploratory stages of the research process. Because this is still a relatively new area of inquiry and included questions that may be sensitive, it was felt that this was the appropriate method to generate a snapshot of students' lived experiences and perceptions of texting behaviors. Undergraduates in lectures were invited to take part in a focus group related to unwanted texting behaviors. Seven female students volunteered to take part. A semi-structured schedule was adhered to, commencing with general questions relating to participants' texting behavior, such as, who the participants sent texts to and what was the style and frequency of the texts they sent. This was followed by questions that addressed negative texting behaviors. Examples of questions asked include, "Have you ever received texts from someone you don't want to text back?" and "When does inappropriate texting start to become a problem?" The findings of these final questions presented particular focus on negative texting behaviors.

The focus group lasted 45 minutes and was audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. The data were then analyzed using thematic analysis. This process involved the two researchers reading through the transcripts together on a line by line basis and then identifying themes in the margin of the transcript. The researchers agreed on the three general themes and worked together to establish the theme names. A benefit of this method is that it is not necessarily linked to a pre-

existing theoretical framework (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which differs from both grounded theory and interpretive phenomenological analysis, but it can still be an inductive approach.

Survey

In addition to the focus group, a survey was conducted to gain insight into how a large group of individuals consider they might act in hypothetical situations. Pre-undergraduates and undergraduates volunteered to complete a survey in their lectures. In each case, all students who attended took part. The survey consisted of four sections. The first section asked respondents to provide demographic details and information regarding the frequency of texts they sent and received on an average day using their mobile and the average daily landline phone usage, and details regarding their use of the Internet as a form of communication. The second section included different vignettes aimed at illuminating how participants might respond to normal texting behaviors within a relationship. These findings are not reported in this paper. The third section of the survey was designed to ascertain how respondents might behave in two similar vignettes based on the break up of a romantic relationship by text message. Romantic relationships were chosen as the topic for the vignettes since the majority of stalkers (based on Pathé et al.'s, 2000, definition of 10 times or over 4 weeks) have been identified as ex-intimates (Sheridan & Boon, 2002). Moreover, this method of breaking up a relationship has been found to be surprisingly common, with more than half of the respondents in one study indicating that they would end a relationship in this way (Short, McMurray, & Jackson, 2007). The final section of the survey included a few questions relating to individuals' actual texting behavior. The survey had been developed over 2 years and this version was the third iteration.

In the first vignette, participants were asked to imagine themselves from the perspective of a person being told unexpectedly that a relationship is over (they will be referred to as the "lefts"; Emmers & Hart, 1996) by a romantic partner after being in a relationship for a few months. The retreating partner has stated that the reason for the break up was that he/she did not consider "you to be the one." Participants were initially asked if they would continue to make contact with their ex-intimate and, if so, the frequency of communication via mobile phone that they would use to make this contact and the justification for behavior.

The second vignette was almost identical, but on this occasion participants were asked to put themselves in the position of the individual who was ending the relationship (they will be referred to as the "leavers"; Emmers & Hart, 1996). Specifically, they were to imagine they had been going out with their partner for a few months and, although there were no major problems, they felt that this partner was not the one for them, and therefore informed their partner that they did not want to see them again. This time, the participants had to state how they would react if their ex-intimate continued to contact them after varying periods of time and frequency. A threshold for unacceptable behavior was calculated based on Pathé et al.'s (2000) framework of harassment.

These vignettes were aimed at identifying whether people might continue to make contact when, in fact, it could be classed as harassing behavior. Moreover, we hoped to detect any behaviors on the part of the harassed individual that were unintentionally encouraging or prolonging unwanted contact. Hypothetical vignettes are often used in survey research so that researchers can gather respondents' beliefs on how they would intend to behave if they were involved in a similar situation, yet with the benefit of being less obtrusive than asking individuals to recount their actual behavior (Eifler, 2007). However, the validity of this

method could be brought into question since intended behavior may not necessarily reflect an actual behavior. Eifler (2007) referred to Abelson's script theory (1976), and hypothesized that by applying Abelson's rules, behavioral intentions and actual behavior are more likely to converge if the vignettes are presented in simple language, that is, structured in a way similar to every day experiences.

The final section of the survey included questions relating to actual rather than hypothetical behavior. Firstly participants were asked, "Have you ever found yourself in a similar situation in real life?" (receiving unwanted texts from an ex-boyfriend or girlfriend). Then they were asked "Did this cause you any worry," "irritation," or "fear." Participants were given the options to answer "yes" or "no" to each of these questions. Additionally, there were questions to ascertain the duration and frequency of contact. These question items were designed so that Pathé et al.'s (2000) threshold for harassment could be identified. The frequency counts of how people would respond throughout the survey were entered into SPSS version 16 and the frequencies of the responses were generated.

RESULTS

In the first instance, in order to gain a picture of the survey participants' mobile phone behaviors, several demographic data were tabulated: the frequency of texts sent and received per day, as well as the mobile phone calls made and received per day. As can be seen in Table 1, the younger age group (aged between 16–19 years) in most cases sent and received more texts than the older age group. However, young females sent and received more texts than younger males. Overall there was an average of 9.5 texts sent per day per user, and that was the favored method of communication, as compared to mobile phone calls, instant messaging, e-mails, and landline phone calls.

Focus Group Findings

The transcribed focus group data were analyzed and three themes were identified: the infatuated harasser, the impact on their lives, and the importance of keeping records. These findings are discussed below. In order preserve anonymity the names of the participants have been replaced with the letter 'F' for female followed by an identifying number.

Table 1. Average Daily Frequency of Different Types of Mobile Communication for the Survey Group.

	Males <i>n</i> = 32		Females <i>n</i> = 113		All participants
	Age 16–19	Age 20–50	Age 16–19	Age 20–50	All ages
Texts sent per day	7.3	9.7	13.6	7.6	9.5
Texts received per day	12.8	7.7	14.1	6.4	10.2
Mobile phone calls made per day	3.7	4.4	4.4	3.8	4.1
Mobile phone calls received per day	11.6	5.5	5.2	4.6	6.7

Focus groups, like other qualitative methods, do not aim to generalize to a larger population but rather to provide an insight into the lived experiences of the participants. Every member of the focus group stated that she had sent and received negative texts, typically in arguments with current intimates. The regularity of this form of communication suggests that it was perceived as cultural norm. Each member of the group also indicated that she had received unwanted texts. On further investigation, four of the seven members of the focus group reported experiencing texting harassment as defined by Pathé et al. (2000).

The Infatuated Harasser

The first theme identified by the researchers was the type of harasser that the women had encountered. In the case of proximal harassment, the harassers were usually found to be an infatuated individual or an ex-intimate (Sheridan & Boon, 2002). The four women in this study experienced harassment via text messages by an infatuated harasser and had not had a previous intimate relationship with their harassers. The experience of being pursued by an individual who is intent on establishing an unwelcome level of intimacy can distress and frighten. Indeed the pursuer may cause alarm by being “oblivious to their victim’s feelings and in practice often reinterpret(ing) the most blunt of rejections as a positive response” (Mullen, Pathé, & Purcell, 2000, p. 11). However, each woman had a different story to tell. For example, one woman had known her harasser through her sister’s romantic relationship with his twin brother. This participant described how the aggressive behavior of her sister’s boyfriend had led to her sister requiring the involvement of the police and the ending of the relationship. Nevertheless, although this family tie had been severed, the infatuated man continued to harass the participant, stating to her that it was more than just a small issue.

F1: *“It is more than problem; He just doesn’t stop!...He even came to my house. I felt quite scared, actually.”*

Another member of the focus group described her experience of being harassed by text messages from a man who worked in her building.

F3: *“I had this guy who got my number from work. He actually went through the phone book and got my number and started texting me and I didn’t even know who he was, sort of thing. I was just being polite answering him at first, you know like....”*

F1: *“Yeah, you would.”*

F3: *“And then I went to Australia and he got hold of my sister’s number.”*

This participant described how her harasser became so infatuated with her that he started to text her sister; he also sent letters to her home. The infatuation in the incidents of participants F1 and F3 started as harassment by texting on a mobile phone and then progressed onto proximal stalking. In addition, both cases included attempts by the harasser to have discussions about them with their female siblings.

A third woman in the group reported that her experiences were “nothing like that, thank God!” She had started to become friends with a man but, when she realized that he had quite a manipulative character, she asked him to stop contacting her. However he continued to do so.

F4: *"...but he didn't take the hint even when I didn't reply to his texts. He used to ring about 10 times a day just trying to just try to get me to call or text."*

Again, what started as texting transformed into other forms of harassment. In this case, the man started to leave messages on the participant's blog. Other members of the focus group felt that this was a quite common occurrence, evidenced by the prevalence in just this small group.

F4: *"He wrote on that [blog] saying he was still interested in what was going on in my life and stuff like that."*

F2: *"I think this modern technology is just being misused. It is quite common; you are always hearing about this sort of thing."*

F3: *"And look how many it has happened to out of us. There is just a few of us here."*

The final woman who had been harassed stated that she had been harassed via e-mail from a fellow student. Although she had met him socially on one occasion, she did not share any classes with him. Nevertheless, he had started to send her joke e-mails. But the number of e-mails he was sending made her feel uncomfortable. All of these examples demonstrate the diversity, but also the similarity, of harassment that appeared to be viewed as almost the norm in this small sample of undergraduates.

Impact on the Lives of the Women and Their Families

Participants described how they tried to make sense of this behavior, and appraised it on a continuum somewhere between an irritation and a violation. All of the women who had been harassed reported that they were fearful and felt powerless to know what action to take in both stopping the harassers' behavior and in supporting their own emotional needs. They questioned what their options would be and felt that reporting it to the police was not necessarily the best option, stating that they felt their complaint would not be viewed as legitimate by the police.

F7: *"I didn't know who to go to. It felt silly because he hadn't done anything that bad. But I spoke to my dad and he was really angry and he said he was going to sort him out. I told him [the harasser] this and he just stopped."*

Phoning the police was considered as a last resort. This has parallels with proximal stalking, where individuals often go to the police only when threats of or actual violence occurs. Therefore, in order to regain some form of self-empowerment, to stop the negative behavior of the harasser, or just to avoid the harasser, often the victim of harassment makes changes to her/his own life rather than have expectations that any action will be taken that may have an impact on the harasser's conduct, as the following comment exemplifies:

F1: *"Well, I have changed my number now. It used to be if I saw him in the road, I would cross over, and he would start to text or call me and then never stop."*

The Importance of Keeping Records

For the most part, the dialogues in the focus group centered on each woman describing her individual experiences; there were only limited interactions in the group as a whole. However,

one area where other members of the group did ask questions and offer advice was in relation to the importance of keeping records, as the following quotes demonstrate.

F2: *“Did you keep a record of any of this? You should keep a record. This is serious!”*

F5: *“Write down what you already remember, and then whenever you see him and anything happens, then just jot it down.”*

F3: *“So my sister was really good. She kept every single text that he sent, every letter, everything. And then they went to the police, and they [the police] went 'round, and he actually got arrested because he was doing it to loads of different people. So you should keep a record of it and then they can do something about it.”*

These findings suggest that it was a common assumption that records should be kept to verify valid evidence in case the situation escalated. These records would be essential in involving external agencies.

Survey Findings

Vignette One: Perspective of the Person Who Has Been “Left”

As described in the first vignette, participants were asked to imagine themselves from the perspective of a person being “left” unexpectedly by a romantic partner after being in a relationship for a few months. A total of 94% of the sample stated that if they were told by their ex-intimate not to contact them again, they would cease making contact with them. The remaining 6% of the sample reported that they would continue to contact their ex-intimates, even if they had been told it was unwelcome. More telling, these 6% of participants stated they would continue this communication for more than a few weeks, which according to Pathé et al. (2000) constitutes harassment.

The next question in the vignette asked the participant to consider if their ex-intimate had said contact was unwelcome but still continued to allow communication. That is, the ex-intimate initially stated that contact was unwelcome, but did respond intermittently. Sixteen percent of the sample responded that they would continue to contact their ex-intimate for a few weeks or months, and a total of 39% of the sample noted that they would continue this contact for a few days or more. Therefore, these data suggest a 10% increase in the number of people maintaining contact when receiving intermittent responses from an ex-intimate over those who do not receive any responding communication. The questions did not state what the content of the communication might be. It may be of interest to investigate the effects of different content on prolonging contact at a later date.

The final question in this vignette aimed at finding out the reasons why these individuals would persist in communicating with their ex-intimate if their correspondence was unwanted. Respondents of the survey stated several reasons why they would continue to contact their ex-intimate. Half the participants chose the response option of “wanted to be friends,” 24% felt that they “want closure or more information about why the break up has happened,” 23% “couldn’t resist the urge,” and 3% felt that they belonged with their ex-intimate. The 6% of participants who suggested that they would continue to contact their ex-intimates even after they had been told that their communication was unwanted reported response patterns similar to the entire sample of why they wished to continue contact.

Vignette Two: Perspective of Person Who Has Ended the Relationship

In the second vignette, participants were given a scenario regarding the end of the romantic relationship as well. However, on this occasion, they were asked to put themselves in the position of the individual who was leaving the relationship.

Firstly, participants were asked how they would respond if their ex-intimate continued to contact them a few days after the dissolution of the relationship. Eleven percent of the sample stated that they would ignore the communication completely. Half of the sample (52%) indicated that they would accept the contact, but would reply making it clear that the relationship was over. A further 22% suggested that they would answer any questions that their ex-intimate asked them but would not initiate contact. Finally, 15% of the sample would answer communication they received from their ex and would also occasionally make contact.

Participants were then asked how they would respond if their ex-intimate continued to communicate with them a few weeks after the initial break up, the point at which continued communication can be described as harassment (Pathé et al., 2000). A total of 12% would completely ignore the communication. Whereas 24% stated that they would accept the contact but respond only to make it clear that the relationship was over, this was nearly half the number of participants would have responded in this manner in the initial few days. However, 28% of the sample reported that they would answer any questions but not initiate contact, and now 36% said they would answer communication and contact their ex-intimate occasionally. Table 2 provides the respondents hypothetical reactions to contact, over time.

In order to ascertain if there might be any change in behavior between a few weeks and a few months, participants was asked the same questions, but how they would respond after a few months. The results showed that there was a rise from 12% to 23% of the sample who would ignore the contact from an ex-intimate. As can be seen in Table 2, the number of individuals who answered the contact by making it explicit that the relationship was over was now 20%, less than half of what it had been immediately after the breakup. Furthermore, 19% stated that after a few months they would answer questions but would not initiate contact. Of the individuals who would answer the communication and also make contact occasionally with their ex doubled from the number of respondents who would do so within a few days of the breakup.

The final question of the second vignette asked participants how repeated contact might make them feel. A total of 69% of this sample answered that it would upset them, or cause them to feel uncomfortable or distressed. This finding would suggest that some people who

Table 2. Leavers' Responses to Continued Communication.

How leavers would respond to repeated communication from an ex-intimate	After a few days	After a few weeks	After a few months
Ignore communication completely	11%	12%	23%
Accept contact and inform the ex that it was over	52%	24%	20%
Answer questions but not initiate contact	22%	28%	19%
Answer communication and also sometimes initiate contact	15%	36%	38%
Total	100%	100%	100%

indicate that they would be distressed by continued contact would actually still be responding and initiating contact. This adds a further level of complexity within texting behaviors.

Analysis of the final questions relating to actual behavior showed that just over half (52%) of those participants that completed the survey had experienced similar behavior in real life (see Table 3). Examining the duration and frequency of this contact, 35.4% of people met Pathé et al.'s (2000) criteria for harassment. Analysis of the levels of distress that these individuals faced showed that 44% responded that this behavior made them feel worried, 75% felt irritated, and 21% responded yes to feeling fear.

DISCUSSION

The current paper presents the results of a preliminary study exploring pre-undergraduates and undergraduates' perceptions of texting behavior. The distinctive feature of the research design offers insights into the perspectives from both recipients and senders of hypothetical unwanted and/or harassing texts.

The final questions relating to the prevalence of actual experienced text harassment was found to be consistent with previous findings (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007), with 35.4% of our sample stating that they had experienced this behavior. As detailed in the results section of this paper, this behavior had caused three quarters (75%) of this group to be irritated, 44% having felt worried, and 21% having experienced fear as a result. What is striking from the findings of this investigation was the perceived normality of text harassment behavior, both by victims as well as by those imagining their behavior. Stalking was not viewed as a serious offense in this form, despite the distress that it caused to the victims, or expected from potential victims.

The acceptance of intrusive texts may be in part explained by the sheer weight of texting traffic, suggesting that the receipt of text messages is a very commonplace event for the majority of this sample. The preference for texting as a mode of exchange above other forms of electronic communication and the high volume of use in the current research is consistent with findings from previous research, which specifically documents high levels of texting activity in young adults (Bianchi & Phillips, 2005).

Established research consistently reports that a third of all stalkers in the off-line stalking population have the kind of pathology that is associated with delusional or sadistic harassers (Sheridan & Boon, 2002). The remaining groups were found to comprise mostly infatuated acquaintances or ex-intimates, the former of who often are not cognizant of the impact of their behavior on the object of their attention. This lack of awareness has often been attributed in part to poor social skills on behalf of the pursuer. Furthermore, the very nature of

Table 3. Actual Experiences of Receiving Intrusive Texts After Ending a Relationship.

Have you ever found yourself in a similar situation in real life?*	After a few days	Up to 4 weeks	After 4 weeks	After a few months
Duration	4%	28%	12%	56%
Frequency	< 10 Times 23%	> 10 Times 15%	15-20 Times 7%	>20 Times 53%

*These data are based on the 52% of survey respondents who answered yes to the fourth section of the survey regarding actual experience with harassing behavior.

remote communication may compound the situation, due to the absence of recognized social cues that are overt in face-to-face interactions. Moreover, although there are some mutually understood social rules of mobile phone behaviors in specific contexts and between established groups (Reid & Reid, 2004), general social etiquette in mobile phone behavior is still nascent and not based on shared understandings of what is appropriate behavior. It is appreciated by the authors that shared meanings and understanding of what is appropriate behavior will be enormously diverse and influenced by historical and cultural contexts. This is certainly an avenue for future research. Preventative strategies that raise awareness about the acceptability of one's own behavior, as well as recognition of what might encourage unwelcome behavior, may be one effective intervention.

Impact of Text Harassment

The focus group's discussion revealed the negative psychological impact that texting harassment had on the participants, including frustration, fear, and powerlessness. In addition, results from the survey showed that 69% of the respondents would expect continued unwanted communication to make them feel upset, uncomfortable, or distressed, which is consistent with previous research (Mechanic et al., 2000). Material generated by the focus group also highlighted incidences of the transmission of impact to other members of the recipients' family, which is a recognized phenomenon in electronic and on-line harassment. Sheridan and Grant (2007) found that although patterns of off-line stalking behaviors were more likely to result in negative changes in work and social routines, electronic stalking was more likely to result in loss of family and friends of the victim as a direct effect of repeated contacts made to them by the victim's harasser.

The survey yielded some complex results in terms of how the recipient might respond if their ex-intimate continued communication over a longer period of time. In the first instance, as time progressed, the ex-partner was more likely to ignore contact. So even though 69% of participants indicated that they would be upset, uncomfortable, or distressed by this contact, half of participants, at least initially, would accept contact but make it clear that it was unwelcome. However, over time they were less likely to reinforce this message and more likely to respond to the communication. This act, then, could suggest to potential harassers that, if they keep up the contact, eventually they will get a response.

The design of this study also intended to record the perceptions of participants when they were the senders of unwanted continued contact. The majority of participants (94%) noted that they if they were asked by their ex-intimate to cease contact, they would do so. The remaining 6% of the sample stated that they would continue communication for as long as a few weeks, constituting harassment behavior, according to Pathé et al. (2000). These individuals attributed their supposed behaviors to either a compulsive urge to continue contact, because they felt that the individual was the "one" for them, or wanting to remain friends. Whatever the degree of contact or persistence, both the 6% who would continue communication and the 94% who would cease communication provided similar justifications for their behavior.

This research suggests that there is potential for harassing behavior in all groups. Individuals seem to be aware when they are being harassed but provide some what rational justifications when they are the ones that continue hypothetical intrusive contact. Predicting actual behavior from intention continues to be a debate within the discipline of psychology in

general and the accuracy of whether this behavior can be predicted in a texting context is uncertain. However, there does appear to be some parallels between previous empirical studies and our exploratory investigation.

Limitations of this Study

The current study indicated that 52% of students have experienced unwanted texts from someone they had ended a relationship with, 68% of which met Pathé et al.'s (2000) criteria for harassment. This meant that 35.4% of the whole sample had experienced intrusive texts, 44% were worried by this behavior, and 21% had a feeling of fear. In an attempt to understand the phenomenon of problem text communication in more depth, this research detailed some of the experiences that seven students have had of intrusive text messages and details of hypothetical accounts from the perspectives of both the harasser and the harassed. However, the authors recognize the limitations of this study.

In terms of sampling techniques, it is appreciated that a larger random sample would be required to undertake statistical tests, explore effect sizes, and make generalizations to a larger population. Furthermore, the authors acknowledge that there may have been a social desirability effect that influenced responses to the question referring to continuing contact, had the respondent perceived this behavior to be inappropriate. Attempting to control for social desirability needs to be considered in designing future investigations. The cost of using mobile phones has also become more affordable in recent years; cost implications could also be a factor in whether intrusive texts occur.

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The results of this study have implications for both future academic research and applied interventions that could support all individuals involved in harassment of this kind. Such research or interventions could be useful to the communication service providers and police as well.

In terms of academic research, the design of this study by way of the vignettes has been a useful methodological tool in eliciting the frank accounts of individuals' supposed negative texting behaviors. Work that is currently being conducted by the authors involves amended vignettes in order to capture in more detail a jealous emotional response, which has been found to be a predictor that typifies the stalker in ex-intimate relationships (Mullen et al., 2000). These studies are currently exploring these aspects in a wider population, alongside the role that individual differences play in continued intrusions on others through mobile communication. These investigations will explain actual as well as intended behavior with the hope that results would provide an insight into the antecedents of this type of harassment and contribute to the debate on whether cyberstalking is a new phenomenon or just another means of harassment.

The authors appreciate that, in the first instance, breaking up a relationship via a text message produces a polarization of beliefs about the acceptability of this behavior. In a previous small-scale study, the authors found that over half of the sample would use texting as a method to end a relationship (Short et al., 2007), whilst others indicated that they considered this a major breach of

social etiquette. This polarization in beliefs may increase the likelihood of misunderstanding such a communication and the distress it may cause, and therefore requires further study.

The findings of this study can provide a foundation from which to build solutions for the problem behavior of text harassment. As a general rule of thumb, individuals who are experiencing harassment should always make it clear that the communication is unwanted and, in no circumstances, should the receiver respond to subsequent attempts for contact. Further communication of any kind may give the caller the perception that it is acceptable to continue the contact.

A variety of support networks are available for support victims (see, e.g., The Network for Surviving Stalking¹). However, support for borderline stalkers is less readily available; indeed the authors are not aware of any specific education or advice currently in the UK. Once a harasser's problem behavior is identified, and determined to be related to a behavioral addiction, lack of social skills, or an infatuation toward the victim, and then appropriate psychological and educational interventions to discourage borderline intrusive behavior can be put in place.

Actual texting harassment has serious implications for providers of mobile phone services, particularly under the 1999 Management of Health and Safety regulations in the UK (Rick & Briner, 2000). A recommendation arising from these findings is that a well-resourced risk assessment of incidences of psychological harm for those who are unable to cease intrusive behavior, as well as those who are experiencing the intrusion, should be undertaken. Furthermore, the authors of this paper suggest that communication service providers could work in a closer association with the police to create a more consistent response to this problem. For example, the current situation in the United Kingdom sends out conflicting advice. Victims are advised to keep any evidence of unwanted communication (perpetrators can be charged after two or more incidents of unwelcome and intrusive behavior; Protection from Harassment Act, 1997). At the same time, however, victims are also advised to change their mobile phone number, which often results in the loss of the records of communication. It may be of benefit to identify a more appropriate guide in association with CSP (communication service provider) so that evidence is preserved without undue inconvenience to the victim.

ENDNOTE

1. This organization can be located on-line at www.nss.org.uk

REFERENCES

- Abelson, R. P. (1976). Script processing in attitude formation and decision making. In J. S. Carroll & J. W. Payne (Eds.), *Cognition and social behavior* (pp. 33–46). Hillsdale, NJ, USA: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Alexy, E. M., Burgess, A. W., Baker, T., & Smoyak, S. (2005). Perceptions of cyberstalking among college students. *Brief Treatment and Crisis Intervention, 5*, 279–289.
- Bianchi, A., & Phillips, J. G. (2005). Psychological predictors of problem mobile phone use. *CyberPsychology and Behavior, 8*, 39–51.
- Bocij, P., & McFarlane, L. (2002). Online harassment: Towards a definition of cyberstalking. *Prison Service Journal, 139*, 31–38.

- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3*, 77–101.
- Communications Act 2003, Chapter 21 [UK]. (2003). Retrieved September 7, 2009, from the Office of Public Sector Information site at http://www.opsi.gov.uk/acts/acts2003/ukpga_20030021_en_13
- Eifler, S. (2007). Evaluating the validity of self-reported deviant behavior using vignette analyses. *Quality and Quantity, 41*, 303–318.
- Emmers, T. M., & Hart, R. D. (1996). Romantic relationship disengagement and coping rituals. *Communication Research Reports, 13*, 8–18.
- Finkelhor, D., Mitchell, K. J., & Wolak, J. (2000). *Online victimization: A report on the nation's youth*. National Center for Missing and Exploited Children report (No. 6-00-020). Alexandria, VA, USA: National Center for Missing & Exploited Children
- Green, N. (2002). On the move: Technology, mobility, and the mediation of social time and space. *The Information Society, 18*, 281–292.
- Kiesler, S., Zubrow, D., Moses, A. M., & Geller, V. (1985). Affect in computer-mediated communication: An experiment in synchronous terminal-to-terminal discussion. *Human-Computer Interaction, 1*, 77–104.
- Krueger, R. A., & Casey, M. A. (2000). *Focus groups: A practical guide for applied research* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA, USA: Sage.
- Levine, D. (2000). Virtual attraction: What rocks your boat. *CyberPsychology and Behavior, 13*, 565–573.
- Madell, D., & Muncer, S. (2007). Control over social interactions: An important reason for young people's use of the Internet and mobile phones for communication? *CyberPsychology & Behavior, 10*, 137–140.
- Malicious Communications Act 1988, Chapter 27 [UK]. (1988). Retrieved September 7, 2009, from the Office of Public Sector Information site at http://www.opsi.gov.uk/acts/acts1988/ukpga_19880027_en_1
- Mechanic, M. B., Uhlmansiek, M. H., Weaver, T. L., & Resick, P. A. (2000). The impact of severe stalking experienced by acutely battered women: An examination of violence, psychological symptoms, and strategic responding. *Violence and Victims, 15*, 443–458.
- Meloy, J. R. (2007). Stalking: The state of the science. *Criminal Behavior and Mental Health, 17*, 1–7.
- Mitchell, K. J., Becker-Blease, K. A., & Finkelhor, D. (2005). Inventory of problematic internet experiences encountered in clinical practice. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice, 36*, 498–509.
- Mullen, P. E., Pathé, M., & Purcell, R. (2000). *Stalkers and their victims*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Mullen, P. E., Pathé, M., & Purcell, R. (2001). Stalking: New constructions of human behavior. *The Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry, 35*, 9–16.
- Mullen, P. E., Pathé, M., & Purcell, R. (2004). Stalking: Defining and prosecuting a new category of offending. *International Journal of Law and Psychiatry, 27*, 157–169.
- National Center for Victims of Crime [USA]. (2003). Cyberstalking. Retrieved September 7, 2009, from <http://www.nvc.org/nvc/main.aspx?dbName=DocumentViewer&DocumentID=32458>
- National Statistics [UK]. (2006). Use of ICT at home: 2 in 3 UK homes have digital TV service. Retrieved September 7, 2009, from <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/cci/nugget.asp?id=1710>
- Ogilvie, E. (2000). Cyberstalking. *Trends and Issues in Crime and Criminal Justice, 166*, 1–6.
- Pathé, M. T., Mullen, P. E., & Purcell, R. (2000). Same-gender stalking. *Journal of the American Academy of Psychiatry and the Law, 28*, 191–197.
- Petch, E. (2002). Anti-stalking laws and the Protection from Harassment Act 1997. *The Journal of Forensic Psychiatry, 13*, 19–34.
- Pettigrew, J. L. (2007). *Mobile text messaging and connectedness within close interpersonal relationships*. Unpublished master's thesis, Indiana University, Indianapolis, IN, USA. Retrieved September 7, 2009, from <https://scholarworks.iupui.edu/handle/1805/1088>

- Protection from Harassment Act 1997, Chapter 40 [UK]. (1997). Retrieved September 7, 2009, from the Office of Public Sector Information site at http://www.opsi.gov.uk/acts/acts1997/ukpga_19970040_en_1
- Reid, D., & Reid, F. (2004, February). Insights into the social and psychological effects of SMS text messaging. Paper presented at The Fourth International Network Conference 2004, Plymouth, UK.
- Rick, J., & Briner, R. B. (2000). Psychosocial risk assessment: Problems and prospects. *Occupational Medicine*, *50*, 310–314.
- Sheridan, L., & Boon, J. (2002). Stalker typologies: Implications for law enforcement. In J. C. W. Boon & L. Sheridan (Eds.), *Stalking and psychosexual obsession: Psychological perspectives for prevention, policing and treatment* (pp. 63–82). Chichester, UK: Wiley.
- Sheridan, L., & Grant, T. (2007). Is cyberstalking different? *Psychology, Crime and Law*, *13*, 627–640.
- Short, E., McMurray, I., & Jackson, D. (2007, July). *Diversity in women's texting: Negotiating emotions and relationships*. Poster presented at the Psychology of Women Conference, Windsor, UK.
- Spitzberg, B. H., & Cupach, W. (2007). The state of art of stalking: Taking stock of the emerging literature. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, *12*, 64–86.
- Spitzberg, B. H., & Hoobler, G. (2002). Cyberstalking and the technologies of interpersonal terrorism. *New Media Society*, *4*, 71–92
- Walker, A., Kershaw, C., & Nicholas, S. (2006). Crime in England and Wales 2005/2006, Home Office Statistical Bulletin. Retrieved September 7, 2009, from <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs06/hosb1206.pdf> Retrieved 7th September 2009.

Authors' Note

The authors would like to thank the participants who undertook this study and also Varinia Heidel and Dionne Jackson for their support with data entry and preliminary analysis. The authors have no commercial associations which might create a conflict of interest in connection with the manuscript submitted.

All correspondence should be addressed to
Emma Short
Department of Psychology
University of Bedfordshire
Park Square
Luton
LU1 3JU
United Kingdom
Emma.short@beds.ac.uk

Human Technology: An Interdisciplinary Journal on Humans in ICT Environments
ISSN 1795-6889
www.humantechnology.jyu.fi