

Can Social Media Research Solve the Puzzle of Paranoia?

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This paper summarizes the current research available on gangstalking and calls for coordination between social media, psychology and criminology researchers. Gangstalking is a novel persecutory belief system; victims believe they are harassed by a group of unknown stalkers, perhaps connected with the mafia, CIA or law enforcement. Victims describe themselves as targeted individuals (TIs). Counselors report an increasing number of clients who identify as TIs, while police departments have received numerous calls for help from TIs. Gangstalking is connected to violence; many shooters in mass shooting incidents believed they were being gangstalked and lashed out in self-defense. However, there are very few papers in the psychology and criminology literature about gangstalking. TIs are often dismissed as paranoid. However, paranoia is a puzzle, because there is no coherent psychological theory or workable treatment

for paranoia. TIs post prolifically on social media and also spend excessive time online researching gangstalking. Thus, social media is the main information source about gangstalking and has allowed the concept to spread globally. In addition, social media research using Internet sources is currently exploring gangstalking, providing a deeper understanding of gangstalking and TIs. Thus, social media contributes to the problem of gangstalking, while social media research may illuminate gangstalking, help solve the puzzle of paranoia and contribute to developing improved therapeutic interventions for TIs.

Keywords: gangstalking, targeted individuals, TIs, paranoia, delusional disorder, DD, social media, mass shootings

Social media has promoted and spread the idea of gangstalking. Gangstalking is a novel persecutory belief system in which victims believe they are being harassed by a group of unknown stalkers, perhaps connected with the mafia, CIA, FBI or law enforcement. Victims refer to themselves as targeted individuals (TIs) and report home invasions, overt and covert surveillance, poisoned food, pain inflicted by remote devices and electronic mind control (Testimonies of Coordinated Stalking by Multiple Persons, n.d.). Gangstalking differs from individual stalking because there is no identified perpetrator.

TIs tend to post prolifically on social media and also spend excessive time researching gangstalking online (Beresheim, 2022). Thus social media is the main source of information about gangstalking and has spread the concept globally. Social media may act as a closed echo chamber, intensifying TIs' beliefs that they are actually being gangstalked. The influence of social media can cause TIs to become either isolated and fearful or violent and aggressive (Tait, 2020). Mainstream psychology and criminology research has ignored or dismissed the idea of gangstalking. However, social media research using Internet postings and website sources has illuminated the gangstalking phenomena, providing a deeper understanding of gangstalking and TIs. Thus, social media contributes to the problem of gangstalking, while social media research can illuminate gangstalking and contribute to positive interventions to help TIs.

TIs' belief in gangstalking can be dangerous. Sarteschi (2017) studied four mass shooters who attributed their violence to gangstalking. The shooters used social media to spread gangstalking beliefs and justify violence. Several shooters had reported their gangstalking to the police. However, since most police officers are not aware of the gangstalking phenomena, these reports were dismissed. Sarteschi states the shootings were motivated by an urge to strike back or to bring awareness to the issue of gangstalking. Similarly, most psychological counselors do not understand gangstalking or TI terminology. Counselors may not realize that some TIs can become violent and thus fail to notify law enforcement of possible threats. Often counselors dismiss TIs as paranoid. However, diagnosing TIs as paranoid is not helpful because there is no clear psychological theory of paranoia and no workable treatments except medication.

There are less than 10 academic, peer-reviewed articles about gangstalking. However a recent Google search using the term "gangstalking" produced 632,000 results. These results vary across a spectrum from debunking gangstalking (Pierre, 2020) to neutral, exploratory reports (Whiting, 2021) to first person accounts by TIs (Testimonies of Coordinated Stalking, n.d.). Current social media research using linguistic analysis and multimodal social semiotic discourse analysis of Internet posts is a cutting edge approach that is creating a deeper understanding of gangstalking.

The purpose of this paper is to review the current research about gangstalking in order to increase understanding of the phenomena among criminology and psychology

researchers, social media researchers, law enforcement personnel and psychological counselors. The author believes that research using social media is creating new insights into gangstalking. This research may support a reconceptualization of paranoia as a counterintuitive search for community (Johnston, 2023) and an examination of whether social media provides helpful community supports to TIs. A deeper understanding of gangstalking may enlighten police response to TIs and enable counselors to provide TIs with appropriate psychological help.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Definition

Gangstalking and individual stalking are significantly different. No government reports about gangstalking are available and there is no current report on individual stalking. A 2009 US Department of Justice report about individual stalking (Catalano et al., 2009) was revised in 2012, ten years ago (Catalano, 2012). Individual stalking is defined as “behavior that would cause a reasonable person to feel fear” (Catalano et al., 2009, p.2). However, individual stalking can appear benign, such as sending flowers, thus victims may hesitate to report, causing incidents to be underestimated (Catalano et al., 2009). Without a governmental report, social media is the main source of information about gangstalking. This Anti-Gangstalking Network post defines gangstalking:

Multiple individuals within a community participate in the harassment and stalking of a single individual. Rather than attack a person physically, techniques are used to attack the person psychologically. (What is Gangstalking, 2019, n.p.)

Beauman states, “before the Internet, if you had developed the belief that you’d been targeted in this way, you would have been isolated” (2013, p. 48). However, today TIs can find a hundreds of websites that explain gangstalking in a matter of fact manner and give concrete examples. Similar to someone who looks up a medical illness online and becomes convinced they have that illness, multiple social media sites describing gangstalking and offering support convince TIs that gangstalking exists. More importantly, TIs find a supportive online community who believe them and do not label them as mentally ill or paranoid.

Social Media has Impacted Society

Social media changed many aspects of society, including dating, friendship, finding information and organizing for social justice. A positive impact is that ordinary people can become famous for their talents. Individuals can support themselves as influencers, an occupation that did not exist 10 years ago (Hundt & Nerber, 2023). However, social media also has negative impacts when people post inappropriate content and their posts go viral, resulting in worldwide shaming (Ronson, 2015).

Prior to social media, ordinary people lived unremarkable lives. Social media has created a society in which anyone can become famous or infamous, admired or hated, due to online communications. Because viral posts can spread worldwide and posters can be shamed or threatened by strangers, TIs' beliefs that unknown persons are targeting them could be plausible. Thus, belief in gangstalking is not necessarily delusional.

Social Media Creates Pressure to be Special. Sabatini and Sarracino (2017) concluded that a new stress created by social media is individuals' desire to be noticed and special. Most social media sites encourage people to post interesting content in order to receive "likes" and followers, thus individuals feel stress about curating their posts to appear interesting, happy or successful. In contrast, TIs post frequently about negative issues such as harassment by unknown gangstalkers and strange mind control experiences. A counterintuitive possibility is that TIs are seeking positive validation via negative attention. TIs believe that they receive negative attention from multiple people. Although upsetting, this negative attention could create a positive sense of being important enough to be targeted. Being gangstalked may be better than being ordinary or ignored. Cameron proposed that paranoid beliefs could be a counterintuitive search for community: a "paranoid pseudo-community" (Cameron, 1959, p. 53). This perceptive idea deserves reconsideration.

Social Media Promotes Gangstalking and Spreads Concepts

Social media has normalized the concept of gangstalking. When TIs begin to suspect gangstalking, they can find confirmation online legitimizing gangstalking and providing language to express their suspicions. For example, due to TI reports that directed-energy weapons were targeting them the city council in Richmond, CA declared

the city a “safe zone” protected from space-based weapons (Victims of Space-Based, 2015). Social media reports of this action legitimize gangstalking as a real concept.

TIs may find online information helpful, but also frightening. TIs can find posts explaining directed energy weapons (DEWs) which link to sites that describe voice to skull technology (V2K) which then link to sites about “directed conversation” and “street theater.” From these sites TI will learn that V2K occurs when gangstalkers beam voices into their heads using DEWs, while directed conversation occurs when a TI overhears two strangers talking and realizes they are discussing personal details of the TI’s life. The TI will learn that street theater occurs when people around them in a public space are actually gangstalkers acting out a drama with a personal meaning for the TI. A TI who follows this chain of links and learns about these concepts might become very frightened. If their family and friends dismiss the TIs concerns, the TI may search further on the Internet, find support from other TIs online and become increasingly isolated from their real world community.

The interactions between social media, TIs and gangstalking illustrate Haslam’s concept of looping effects (Haslam, 2016). The more a condition is known and publicized the more likely people are to self-diagnose themselves. Haslam states “people come to recognize themselves and others in new concepts...this recognition brings new kinds of persons into being” (2016, p.4). In turn, diagnoses are normalized and seen as less deviant, new counseling approaches and new diagnosis codes are developed (Haslam, 2016).

Peer Reviewed Research

Mind Control on the Internet. The earliest academic paper related to gangstalking appears to be research by Bell et al. (2006) about “mind control” posts on the Internet. The authors used three different websites: individuals reporting mind control experiences or individuals experiencing cancer or individuals reporting stalking by one person. The authors randomly selected 10 posts from each different website. An independent team of psychiatrists blind rated the posts. In addition, hyperlinks from each web site were analyzed using social network analysis (SNA). The authors found a higher level of psychosis-like symptomology in the posts reporting mind control, while the SNA analysis indicated the mind control site hyperlinks had the highest rate of community formation.

The posts on the mind control site described issues similar to current gangstalking accounts of DEWs and V2K. Thus, Bell et al. may have explored the beginnings of the gangstalking phenomena.

Bell et al. point out that the DSM criteria for delusional disorder (paranoia) specify, “a belief is not considered delusional if it is accepted by the person’s culture” (2006, p.88). Their SNA analysis indicated that individuals posting on the mind control websites had used:

technology to create a complex, dynamic and information-rich community that serves to support and inform similarly affected people within the confines of a world view driven by potentially psychotic symptoms. This is a striking example of a support network completely removed from the traditional medico-legal support networks. (Bell et al., 2006, p. 91)

The authors conclude that their work illustrates two paradoxes. First, the individuals posting about mind control cannot be diagnosed as delusional because they belong to an online community that shares their ideas. Second, if an individual was diagnosed as delusional, joining a supportive online community could cure them. These two paradoxes continue to exist today and may contribute to the lack of psychological research about gangstalking.

Comparing Gangstalking to Individual Stalking. Sheridan and James (2015) explored gangstalking using an Internet survey of 1,040 self-defined stalking victims. In this larger group, 128 respondents reported gangstalking. These 128 respondents were matched with a randomly selected comparison group who reported individual stalking. Significant differences existed between groups: gang-stalked respondents scored higher on both depression and post-traumatic stress (PTSD) scales and also reported the stalking had a greater impact on social and occupational functioning (Sheridan & James, 2015).

Sheridan and James conclude, “all cases of group-stalking studied were likely...delusional in nature” (2015, p. 617) because “many stalking behaviors described were simply impossible” (2015, p.618). They state that if gangstalking were possible, it would require “elaborate and extremely expensive behavior organized for no apparent reason, by those with huge personal wealth or by government agencies” (Sheridan & James, 2015, p. 618). This illustrates a core dilemma that leads psychological researchers to dismiss

gangstalking – why would ordinary people be targeted and who would supply funding? For example, Dr. Pierre, a psychiatrist who debunks gangstalking, dismisses TI reports as “a textbook example of paranoia” (2020, n.p.) and an anti-gangstalking Reddit post bluntly states: “you’re not special, you’re not . . . important, there are absolutely ZERO reasons to stalk you” (Chapman, 2019).

Connections Between Gangstalking and Mass Shootings. Sarteschi (2017) explored the connection between four male mass shooters and gangstalking, using public materials such as the shooters’ social media posts and texts. The shooters all believed they were being gangstalked: one shooter reported a “police officer broke into his room 13 times, stealing his money, touching him while he slept and using an electric gun” (Sarteschi, 2017, p. 3). Sarteschi concludes the shootings were “either a preemptive strike in self-defense and / or to bring awareness to the perceived phenomenon of gangstalking” (2017, p. 8). Because shooters left “manifestos, videos and audio tapes and social media postings” Sarteschi states that “by attempting to tell the world of the existence of gangstalking, they inoculated and / or reinforced their unusual belief system in others” (Sarteschi, 2017, p. 8).

Sarteschi conducted a YouTube search using the term “gangstalking” that produced 669,000 results. Her review of a random sample of these videos reveals that TIs often film and track strangers who are perceived as gangstalkers. Sarteschi states: “For TIs, these videos constitute evidence of their victimization. Ironically, it is they who are seemingly engaged in stalking behavior” (2017, p. 2). Sarteschi describes each of the four mass shooting cases in detail and concludes:

Tens of thousands worldwide believe themselves to be victims of gangstalking, and the author is aware of the violence that is possible by those who hold this belief.

The phenomenon of gangstalking should be of interest to the research community and society at large. Future research is needed to gain a deeper understanding of this unexplored belief system (2017, p. 8)

“Gangstalking Means I am Special.” O’Keeffe et al. (2019) analyzed Dr. John Hall’s book (2009) describing his personal gangstalking experiences. The authors concluded that TIs’ belief in gangstalking was positive: “being targeted confirmed their beliefs along the lines of ‘I have always stood out’ or ‘I have always been special / different’” and therefore TIs may experience “narcissism, superiority, or grandiosity” (O’Keeffe et al., 2019, p. 922).

The authors' observations seem to support the counterintuitive idea that being targeted is better than being ordinary and ignored.

Core Phenomena and Sequelae of Gangstalking. Sheridan et al. (2020) analyzed 50 Internet posts by TIs describing their gangstalking experiences and identified 24 core phenomena and 11 sequelae of gangstalking. Their categorization is the most thorough definition of gangstalking. They highlight the impact of social media: “given that it is the principal source of information for sufferers . . . it may constitute a closed ideology echo chamber” (Sheridan et al., 2020, p. 15). The TI experience is described as: “psychological damage (42%), followed by isolation and loneliness (34%) and a determination to fight back (32%)” (Sheridan et al., 2020, p. 10). The authors found high levels of verbal aggression in TI posts, thus supporting Sarteschi’s findings that TIs’ beliefs in gangstalking may result in violence.

TI Groups as Pathological vs. Supportive. Xuan and MacDonald (2019) presented a poster session describing their research using Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) textual coding of a large database of Facebook group posts. The authors compared TI social media Facebook groups to two control categories. The two control categories were conspiracy theory groups (to control for individual persecution) and political groups (as a general social media control). Xuan and MacDonald tried to determine whether the TI groups contributed to individuals’ psychopathology or “provided nurturing and a sense of belongingness” (2019, n.p.). They found that TI group posts showed some similarities to patients with psychosis, but that the “most abnormal postings” did not become more disturbed over time (Xuan & MacDonald, 2019). While not implicitly stated by the authors, it appears that the TI groups did not increase psychopathology and thus were a possible source of support.

Linguistics and Discourse Analysis of Gangstalking. Lustig et al. (2020) have conducted two recent studies of gangstalking. Their first study used a mixed methods approach combining corpus linguistics and discourse analysis to examine a 225,000-word corpus of posts from the largest gangstalking forum. They initially utilized the 24 categories previously identified by Sheridan and James (2020). After their analysis, they modified these categories to produce nine aggregate keyword categories. The authors’

objective was to characterize how the forum posts “construct, develop and contest the gangstalking belief system” (Lustig et al., 2020, n.p.).

Lustig et al. found that forum posts constructed gangstalking using linguistic terms that indicated it was a “real and valid concept”, which was “presupposed and uncontroversial” (2020, n.p.). This was the dominant discourse on the forum. A conflicting secondary discourse constructed gangstalking as a mental illness. Most posters provided evidence to support their claims of being gangstalked while rejecting the idea that they might be mentally ill. Participants often used keywords such as “crazy” to indicate that the purpose of gangstalking was to portray them as mentally ill, so that their claims about an unknown group of conspirators would be discredited. However, some posters did label other individuals as mentally ill if their posts were “deemed to be too extreme or bizarre” (Lustig et al., 2020, n.p.).

The authors described TIs supporting each other by sharing similar experiences, connecting others to resources and offering encouragement or advice. The most frequent keyword was actually *https*, which TIs used to refer others to helpful websites. The frequency of this keyword indicates “gangstalking as a belief system popularized and shared through networked communication” (Lustig et al., 2020, n.p.).

The authors conclude that many terms used on the forum would likely be unfamiliar to laypeople, police or counselors. They recommend professionals interacting with TIs should learn terms such as V2K (voice to skull technology) in order to fully understand the persecutory belief system of gangstalking. The authors also concluded that this forum’s role is “ambiguous” because although it offers TIs a chance to be “heard and believed” it may also “further reinforce a maladaptive belief system” (Lustig et al., 2020, n.p.).

Social Semiotics of Gangstalking. The second study by Lustig et al. (2021) used a multimodal social semiotic discourse analysis of 50 YouTube videos posted by TIs to document their stalking. The authors describe their study as the first examination of videos produced by people experiencing a persecutory belief system. In the videos TIs presented gangstalking behaviors as “obvious and self-evident” although the videos show seemingly average, benign activities (Lustig et al., 2021, n.p.). The authors analyze how

TIs use point of view camera shots and text overlays, combined with linguistic and visual markers to indicate that small daily actions by others are indications of gangstalking.

Lustig et al. analyze how TIs use the friendly, helpful tone of an instructional video to connect with the viewer. The evidence videos are often structured with an introduction, then a filmed scene showing evidence of gangstalking, followed by a final summary of the gangstalking concepts presented. In contrast to their friendly tone toward viewers, the TIs angrily describe gangstalkers as “perps” and film themselves confronting these perps.

Lustig et al. highlight two contradictions. The first contradiction is between the attitude that gangstalking is so pervasive that TIs are powerless against it – compared to the power that TI feel when they are filming. TIs state that recording gives them power because perps are fearful about gangstalking activities being recorded and exposed. The second contradiction is that the TIs view filming as gathering evidence and capturing hostility against them, but by filming others in public they often incite hostile reactions. Lustig et al. state that often the TI video “elicits the very phenomenon it attempts to document” thus creating “a self-fulfilling prophecy” (2021, n.p.).

Lustig et al. conclude, “the denotative meanings of these scenes are straightforward, but the connotative meanings are contested” and note prior research that “people experiencing persecutory belief systems are more likely to perceive ambiguous social situations as hostile” (2021, n.p.). They also note the difficulties of defining gangstalking as delusional when it is a shared culture among TIs online. The authors advise counselors not to debate TIs about whether gangstalking is real, but instead to provide them with empathy by understanding “delusions as belief systems that are un-resolvable” (Lustig et al., 2021, n.p.).

Non-Peer Reviewed Sources

Thesis and dissertation. The eight studies above appear to be the only peer reviewed research about gangstalking. An unpublished thesis and dissertation also investigate gangstalking. Both authors analyzed social media posts and viewed videos posted by TIs. However, their review methodologies and sample sizes are not clearly stated.

In her MSW thesis Dietrich (2015) describes the beginning of the gangstalking phenomena and compares the movement to other harmful Internet sites, such as pro-

anorexia sites. Dietrich notes that for anorexia there are medical websites that provide clear counter-information, but for gangstalking, opposing websites are difficult to find. The author uses emergent norm theory to explain how TIs find acceptance on gangstalking websites and recommends relational theory as a counseling approach for TIs. Dietrich believes that TIs have some type of psychosis and that community is important:

While it must be terrifying to accept that one has been singled out for persecution by a vast, shadowy conspiracy, the broader context of acceptance in a community offering mutual aid, fellowship and support must nevertheless be welcomed. Where before they were alone, frightened and confused, they are now joined, angry, and a part of a movement. (2015, p. 33)

In his PhD dissertation, Beresheim (2022) explores gangstalking using Lacan's psychological theories. Beresheim describes how the Internet evolved and concludes that as individuals use more social media, public discourse has changed from "neurotic to psychotic" (2022, p. 22). He explores how the recent shift to user-produced content enabled TI gangstalking sites to flourish. He also points out that social media platforms can remain neutral or chose to intervene, using the example of Facebook monitors removing Q-Anon posts. However, Beresheim notes social media platforms have not intervened regarding gangstalking.

Beresheim states "platform capitalism is dependent upon collection and sale of data about user's activities online" (2022, p. 22). He notes that TIs post prolifically online with paradoxical results: TIs post about their wish to be left alone, yet they post on public sites, ignoring the paradox that their posting could actually result in further attention, harassment and surveillance.

Beresheim speculates that TIs are seeking a community online to answer "the unanswerable question of who is tormenting them" (2022, p. 72). He explores Lacan's concepts of "foreclosure" and "the name of the father" summarizing that "foreclosure" means a concept with "no place with-in language, words or ideas" (2022, p. 71). Thus TIs are foreclosing "the state is indifferent to them" (2022, p. 76) by substituting the concept that the state is tormenting them.

Beresheim notes that in our current society many people equate their digital presence with their actual self, but "what is unique about TIs is the lack of self-awareness"

(2022, p.161). He continues “TIs skip a step. Instead of asking, ‘how can I become desirable?’ TIs are plagued by the question of ‘why am I so desirable?’” (2022, p. 161). Beresheim’s ideas seem to echo the counterintuitive possibility mentioned earlier that TIs seek positive validation via negative attention. Receiving negative attention as a gangstalked TI may be better than being ignored.

Writings by TIs. In addition, many TIs have created their own websites or have written books that are first-person accounts or advice manuals (Lewis, 2016; Meadows, 2020; Paladin, 2020). These first-person accounts indicate that male TIs are more likely to advocate violence, while female TIs tend to become socially isolated. A female TI posted: “because of surveillance, coordinated stalking and electronic hacking, I don't go outside alone. I stayed indoors for two years” (Testimonies of Coordinated Stalking, n.d.).

Puzzle of Paranoia

Psychological counselors usually dismiss TIs as paranoid or delusional (Pierre, 2020). However, there is no clear psychological theory explaining paranoia or delusional beliefs. Kraepelin first classified paranoia as a mental disorder in 1907 (Dowbiggin, 2000). In 1970, multiple paranoia diagnoses were merged into a spectrum (Munro, 1997). Later, DSM 3 combined two categories, Paranoia and Paraphrenia, creating the current diagnosis of Delusional Disorder (DD). However, delusions remain poorly understood and DD remains difficult to treat (Johnston, 2023). A key difficulty in understanding paranoia is that delusional beliefs are often encapsulated, walled off from the rest of the personality. For example, a person who identifies as a TI and believes they are gangstalked, may be able to work and have a family life, while keeping their beliefs secret from significant others.

A continuing debate is whether paranoia is caused by medical illness or social / environmental stressors or a combination of multiple factors. Kraepelin (1981) believed mental illness was biologically based while Freud believed mental illness was due to unconscious mental conflicts. Freud proposed “paranoiac delusions function as a defense against a homosexual libidinal impulse” (Trichet, 2011, p. 207). This theory is obviously homophobic, outdated and wrong. Freud later redacted this theory and stated that he was unable to explain paranoia. However, Freud’s paper about paranoia as a defense, contains case reports of childhood abuse (Chatterji, 1964; Trichet, 2011). Thus, if Freud had

explored these cases in detail he might have connected childhood trauma to adult paranoia.

Lacan developed the first multifaceted paranoia theory, including developmental factors, intra-psychic factors and environmental stress. Lacan believed fathers helped children develop reality testing by facilitating emotional separation from the mother as part of normal development (Hill, 1997). If this process failed, “the name of the father foreclosed” resulting in a child with impaired reality testing (Hill, 1997, p. 51). As an adult, this individual might develop delusional beliefs in response to environmental stressors.

Theorists have explored a remarkably common delusion reported by paranoid individuals: the “influencing machine.” This delusion was first described in a book *Illustrations of Madness* (1810) about a man, James Matthews, who was an involuntary patient in a mental hospital. Matthews believed an “Air Loom” machine operated by terrorists controlled him (Lamb, 2014). Victor Tausk (1919) wrote the first psychological study of influencing machines, stating “the apparatus is . . . always a machine and a very complicated one” with “a very obscure construction: large parts of it are completely unimaginable” (Tausk, 1919, 1992, p. 186). Tausk theorized when patients with weak ego boundaries experience stress, they develop the delusion that a machine is causing their symptoms. Thus, Tausk believed environmental stressors contributed to paranoia and delusional patients needed acceptance and community. Sconce (2019) describes how “technical delusions” have continued to evolve and concludes that the Internet is “blurring the boundaries between the self and the outside world, humanity and machine” (2019, p. 66). A current example of influencing machines is demonstrated by TIs’ beliefs that gangstalkers use DEWs to send V2K messages electronically to their brains.

Role of Childhood Abuse. Freud, Tausk and Lacan, to varying degrees, acknowledged that inadequate parenting, child abuse and environmental stress contributed to paranoia. Ewan Cameron (1959) theorized that inadequate parenting is the main cause of adult paranoia. Munro (1997), the current authority on Delusional Disorder, states DD is only caused by medical factors such as head injuries and substance abuse, but interestingly, many of Munro’s medical case examples include childhood trauma. A recent review connects childhood adversity to adult psychosis (Bentall et al.,

2014). In Sarteschi's (2017) research the mass shooters all reported childhood trauma. In a recent case, the 2018 mail bomber suffered severe childhood abuse and adult stressors: business failure, bankruptcy and home foreclosure, before concluding that he was being gangstalked (Graff, 2020).

Role of Social Inequality. Research by Whitson and Galinsky (2008) demonstrated that social stressors can produce delusional thinking. Participants exposed to factors causing stress and lack of control perceived "a variety of illusory patterns, including seeing images in noise, forming illusory correlations in stock market information, perceiving conspiracies" (Whitson & Galinsky, 2008, p. 115). Hornstein's (2009) interviews with people who hear voices found that these individuals felt social stressors such as poverty, racism, and physical or sexual abuse caused their mental illness. Harper (2011) explored delusions and questioned the power imbalance wherein psychiatrists are allowed to decide whether patients are delusional. He concluded that delusions are a constructed concept that allows powerless people to create an illusion of importance. Harper's idea of a community based on illusions of importance echoes Cameron's theory of a paranoid pseudo-community.

Concept of Paranoid Pseudo-community. This review of the research provides a possible explanation for the development of delusions and paranoia. A series of interlocking processes beginning with inadequate parenting and childhood trauma, followed by social stressors such as growing up in poverty with poor resources, schooling and opportunities could lead to impaired attachment and lack of community. In response, people may search for acceptance in an alternative community.

Online, TIs can find a gangstalking pseudo-community that provides support. In addition, this community allows disempowered people to make meaning out of negative experiences and feel powerful. However, a possible drawback of acceptance into this community is the reinforcement of negative delusional beliefs that may result in isolation or violence.

Cameron theorized that paranoia could result from a counterintuitive search for community. Cameron believed that adults abused as children lack social skills to form normal connections. Searching for community, they might imagine a "paranoid pseudo-community" based on the delusion that people care enough to persecute them:

. . . a conviction that he himself is the focus of a community of persons who are united in a conspiracy of some kind against him. It is this supposed functional community of real persons whom the patient can see and hear, and of other persons whom he imagines, that we call the paranoid pseudo-community. It has no existence as a social organization and as soon as he attempts to combat it, or to flee, he is likely to come into conflict with his actual social community. (Cameron, 1959, p. 53)

Cameron notes that either confronting or fleeing the pseudo-community would result in conflict. This definition describes the TIs who videos perps or who lash out with violence. Cameron's insightful concept of paranoid pseudo-community has been ignored, probably due to his involvement in harmful mind-control experiments run by the CIA (Lemov, 2011).

Stuart-Hamilton (1995) redefined paranoid pseudo-community as people who believe the delusions of a person with paranoia. This definition describes the community of TIs who support each other on forums using language that normalizes gangstalking. Bacal (2010) further delineated online groups vs. communities or pseudo-communities. An online group shares "limited characteristics, such as common interest in a topic" but lacks emotional ties. A community shares common concerns as well as emotional ties promoting the "welfare of community members" (Bacal, 2010, n.p.). In true communities people keep in contact with each other, share resources and help solve each other's problems (Bacal, 2010, n.p.).

In contrast, a pseudo-community can appear to be a community, but because there are no emotional ties the interactions remain at a group level. For example, Bacal describes a company where workers feel close emotionally and believe they are a community. However if a worker leaves and co-workers do not maintain close ties, their community is revealed to be a pseudo-community. Bacal concludes: "Ongoing loyalty and concern is a part of real community but not part of a group or a pseudo-community" (2010, n.p.).

Thus while TIs post frequently online and TI forums seem to offer newcomers high levels of support and caring, they may actually be "pseudo-communities" based only on sharing gangstalking experiences. When TIs log off a forum, similar to the worker leaving a job, the online community may be revealed as merely an interest group. Beresheim

(2022) and Lustig et al. (2020) described individuals being harassed in gangstalking forums for wondering if gangstalking is real or for reporting that anti-psychotic medication helped them. This harassment seems to indicate that ongoing loyalty and concern is not present.

Johnston (2023) describes case studies of individuals who were diagnosed with DD and reported delusions connected to social media. The clients had histories of child abuse and social stressors. As adults, the clients felt “important to no one” and led isolated lives (Johnston, 2023, p. 3). Johnston’s analysis of these cases suggested the counterintuitive idea that a negative pseudo-community might be actually be positive. If one cannot receive “likes” on social media, perhaps one would rather be hated than ignored. These case studies suggest that there may be two types of paranoid pseudo-community. First, believing one is significant enough to be stalked creates an illusion of importance and belonging. Second, the validation found online provides an illusion of supportive community. However, believing one is actually threatened by gangstalking or believing that online support is real may cause TIs to reject support from real communities.

Reality is Complicated – Mind Control Programs Exist

Sheridan and James concluded all gangstalking reports were delusional because the reported actions would be very expensive or require large government programs. Thus, TIs who report gangstalking to authorities are usually dismissed as paranoid. However, history reveals the existence of government surveillance programs targeting United States citizens. The Project MK Ultra program experimented with manipulating mental states, using drugs, electroshocks, isolation, abuse and torture (Project MK Ultra, 2021). The Counter Intelligence Program involved government infiltration of groups ranging from civil rights activists to the Ku Klux Klan. Covert, illegal projects were conducted involving surveillance and discreditation of group members (FBI Records, 2021). Currently, “Havana Syndrome” is being investigated. US diplomats have reported being “bombarded by waves of pressure” resulting in headaches, blindness and mobility issues (Entous, 2021, p.18). A possible explanation is Russian agents “aiming microwave-radiation devices at US officials to collect intelligence from their cell phones” thus causing intentional or unintentional personal harm (Entous, 2021, p.19).

It is easy to find information about these programs online and even access the original FBI files and Congressional investigation reports exposing these programs. Gangstalking websites use these resources to validate the reality of gangstalking, thus legitimizing TI's self-identification. Thus, it is important for mental health professionals to be aware of these programs in order to understand TIs' gangstalking beliefs.

DISCUSSION

Social media researchers are taking gangstalking seriously by conducting key research illuminating the paradoxes of TI online behavior. One paradox is TIs' use of social media to post about being "disliked" rather than conventional posts that seek likes. The second paradox is TIs' posting videos confronting gangstalking while ignoring the fact that by filming in public, they are inciting negative reactions. The disconnect between TIs' use of social media and conventional ways of using social media is a fascinating area for further exploration.

Psychology and criminology professionals seem to have abandoned attempts to understand paranoid and delusional behaviors. TIs' complaints are often dismissed as paranoia and the only treatment offered is anti-psychotic medication. Due to the lack of treatment options, paranoia and delusion disorder are particularly stigmatizing diagnoses. Many therapists avoid counseling clients with these diagnoses because their cases are considered hopeless. Therefore, it is crucial that psychology and criminology professionals become educated about gangstalking and recent social media research findings, especially the counterintuitive idea of paranoia as a search for community. Further connections and research between social media researchers and psychology / criminology professionals can create improved counseling techniques for TIs and improve criminology violence prevention techniques. An intersectional approach connecting research in all three fields will illuminate understanding of gangstalking, lead to the development of new counseling approaches and help prevent violence.

The following sections recommend possible actions by professionals to help TIs and promote true, positive communities.

Controversial: Internet Regulation

Social media has allowed the concept of gangstalking to spread worldwide. If the pseudo-community of gangstalking sites were harder to find, maybe gangstalking would seem less legitimate. If we assume that most TIs' gangstalking beliefs are delusional, perhaps online gangstalking sites should be regulated.

There is a current debate about regulating online content to avoid promoting dangerous ideas, following the events of January 6th (Marnin, 2021). However, regulation raises the specter of censorship, for example China's government-controlled Internet banning dissenting sites. Establishing a worldwide, content regulation process would be difficult. Possible alternatives would be increased public education about how to evaluate the validity of Internet information or promotion of trusted websites that offer counter perspectives about gangstalking (similar to medical anti-anorexia websites).

Optimistic: Prevent Childhood Abuse and Promote Community

Traumatized children grow up hurt, neglected and feeling unimportant. A supportive community helps people heal. If hurt people find actual community, they may avoid forming a paranoid pseudo-community. Thus, creating a supportive community is important.

Hearing Voices Network is a self-run group for people who hear voices (Hornstein, 2009). Meetings are open and accepting; people come and go freely and talking is not required. This lack of structure is important because forced participation could replicate past abuse. This type of open and accepting group approach should be expanded, because it allows real connection and community to be established. In an online pseudo-community people are anonymous and can sign off at will; therefore, an in-person group should be comfortable, accepting and not overwhelming. Social service agencies could provide a variety of community groups, welcoming everyone and focusing on either healing from mental illness or on generally positive activities like sports, cooking or small social outings. Acceptance in a supportive community could help TIs to resolve past trauma and build positive connections.

A possible difficulty is obtaining funding for community interventions. The current approach to mental health treatment is based on medical health insurance regulations

that require a diagnosis, thus pathologizing individuals. Insurance and funding may block the effective treatment of providing community.

Increased Education for Professionals

Police officers and psychological counselors need to become educated about TIs and gangstalking. These professionals need to understand the current social media research about gangstalking and the paradoxes of TI behavior. If further research supports the concept of gangstalking as a search for community, this could create alternative perspectives of TIs as traumatized and scared. Professionals with these perspectives could respond with empathy, help or understanding rather than pathologizing or criminalizing TIs. Psychologists can understand that TIs are probably suffering from PTSD due to childhood trauma. Social workers can understand that TIs are probably reacting to social stressors that have increased their trauma. Police can understand that the impact of these combined stressors has prevented TIs from forming social bonds that might prevent violent behavior.

There is a current debate about police defunding, which is usually understood as increasing funding for mental health outreach. If social workers and psychologists could be embedded in police units, TIs reporting gangstalking could have their concerns documented in a police report, while also receiving assistance with social stressors and counseling. Social workers in police units could promote community outreach and build early warning systems to identify TIs who might become aggressive, thus preventing violence. This “wrap-around” approach would be respectful and inclusive; thus, possibly more successful.

Conclusion

This paper summarizes the current knowledge about gangstalking with the hope that researchers across the fields of social media, psychology and criminology can work together in the future. Important information needs to be shared across these three fields in order to help TIs who are suffering from abuse, trauma, isolation and lack of social supports. If therapists can approach TIs with empathy and a different viewpoint, innovative counseling approaches can be developed. If police can interact with TIs differently, violent incidents can be prevented. Social media researchers are poised to

provide key solutions to the puzzle of paranoia through their cutting edge research on the lived experiences of TIs.

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