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***“I knew the stranger that I’ve never spoken to was paying attention to me.”***  
A Content Analysis of the Variation in Surveillant Behaviours on Social Media.

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**BPS Cyberpsychology Conference**

# Context

## Overall PhD Aim:

- Develop a measure to differentiate between online surveillant behaviours (creeping, cyberstalking etc) along a continuum, so that variations and behavioural patterns can subsequently be investigated.



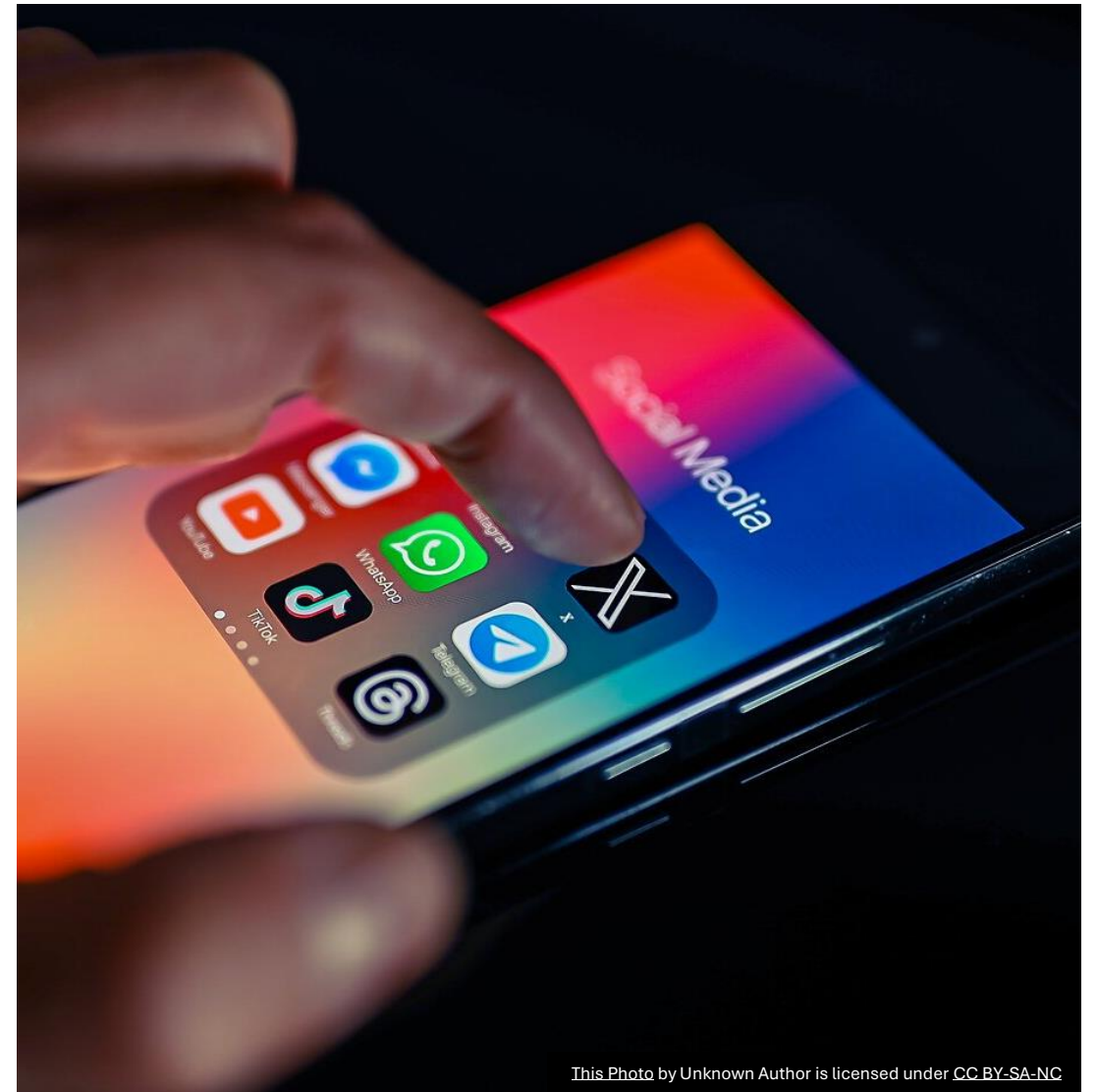
# Background & Research Aims

## *What is Online Surveillance?*

- Observant actions paired with stalking mentalities (Lyon, 2017).
- Evident on Social Media platforms – “surveillant culture”
- “Creeping, Lurking, Online Monitoring, Electronic Surveillance, Information Seeking, Cyberstalking” (Kaur et al., 2021; March et al., 2022; Marcum & Higgins, 2019)
- Literature is currently full of inconsistent and overlapping conceptualizations of surveillant type behaviours (Frampton & Fox, 2021).

## **Current Study Aims:**

- Explore variations and differentiate between online surveillant behaviours on social media platforms.
- Consider the motivations and intentions that will help to define each behaviour.



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# Methodology

## Design

- Qualitative study using an inductive approach within a realist framework.
- Aim to develop depth of understanding/insight into **descriptions** of behaviours using **Focus Groups**

## Participants

- 23 participants
- Out of this sample, participants were female  $n = 16$ , male  $n = 6$  and non-binary  $n = 1$ .
- Age range of 18-50 years, ( $M_{age} = 30$ ).
- All social media users, average of 4 hours+ per day.

# Methodology: Materials & Procedure

Semi-structured questions were developed iteratively to capture the viewpoints of participants from different perspectives within the scenario:

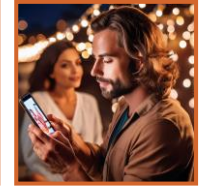
For example...

*“Looking from the perspective of the perpetrator (NAME in scenario); How would you describe their behaviour(s)?”*



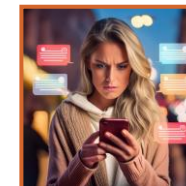
**Scenario 1:**  
Passive Pursuer

**Scenario 2:**  
Passive Interest  
Pursuer



**Scenario 3:**  
Information Seeker

**Scenario 4:** Active  
Distruster



**Scenario 5:**  
Relationship  
Former/Distruster

**Scenario 6:**  
Friendship Initiator



# Data Analysis

- Data was analysed using **inductive content analysis**;
  - Open coding was used to organise the data, highlighting various texts, identifying initial emerging codes.
  - Categories were then freely generated through interpretation of the coding process.



Figure 1. Word cloud of open codes generated during content analysis process.

## **Results: *Content Analysis***

- Three main categories emerged from the analysis and each category had further sub-categories.

<b>Categories</b>	<b>Sub-Categories</b>
<b>User Actions</b>	Passive Observations Active Information Seeking Obsessive Interaction
<b>Intentions and Motivations</b>	Emotional State Relational Connection
<b>Perceptual Understanding</b>	Concept of Online Privacy Affordances of Social Media Platforms Demographic Biases



# Results & Discussion: *User Actions*

## Passive Observations

- Socially browse, follow but don't post anything
- Confirms Lyon (2011) "surveillant culture" on social media.

*"Going across different platforms to find out information. So, it's not just like on that like Facebook page or Instagram or anything but it's like it's like actively searching like on the wider web for that person."*

## Obsessive Interaction

- Direct contact with a target, where an individual would make themselves known to the target
- Intrusive behaviours to accelerate their obsession with a target.

*"Like low level, like trying to find out information about people's lives and like trying to be part of their lives, like trying the following like that narrative."*

## Active Information Seeking

- Monitoring an individual or target across multiple platforms and gathering information
- Distinction between passive and active is based on frequency; how often increases intensity.

*"Liking, noticing and commenting on every single post... that person is always the first person to like it, the first person to comment, and so it's almost like they're taking possession of your posts."*

# Results: *Intentions & Motivations*

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## Emotional State

Participants suggested a variety of **emotional drivers** for explaining user actions.

E.g., Passive user actions were driven by curiosity or boredom (Jonison, 2008).

***“Sounds like she uses it to like to connect with the people that she knows, then also I don’t know boredom. Because she’s you know scrolling as a stress relief, so she’s just kind of browsing to chill out.” Line 43 FG6.***



## Relational Connection

Connection tended to be associated with individuals motive for some form of **relationship**, whether that be maintain, form or an actual illusion of being in a relationship.

This drive for connection influences the intensity of user actions and the degree to which the obsession with a target develops further.

***“He’s also under the belief that he has a relationship with that person, and he basically invests a lot of time into just being aware of every single step that this person is doing.” Line 231 FG1.***



# Results & Discussion: *Perceptual Understanding*

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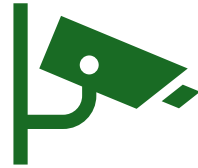


## Online Privacy

Privacy online is **fluid**

Exposure of private information is normalised on social media.

*“People's private life is no longer private anymore, as it's sort of like it's all untrue. You can almost get used to being able to see right into the depths of people's private, kind of, life.” Line 631, FG2.*



## Affordances of Social Media Platforms

**Accessibility of information** on SM provides a means of surveillance.

**Metrics** of social media (like, comment, share) all contribute to the construction of each user actions, allowing obsessions to develop without any consequences (Chui, 2014).

*“With social media... we have access to each other nearly 24 hours a day at the drop of a hat and can easily just look at their pictures and socials.” Line 550 FG1.*



## Demographic Biases

Different **genders** exhibit different user actions.

Certain behaviours are acceptable based on **age**

The role of the target's **status** and reputation; Those with large social following should expect certain actions.

*“Because of the world we live in, we are owed a view into famous people's lives.” Line 205 FG6.*

# Conclusion

## What:

- Types of surveillant user actions on Social Media along a continuum.
- Distinction between what is normalized and potentially problematic online surveillant behaviours.

## How:

- Social Media platforms facilitate these user actions e.g., metrics.

## Why:

- The distinction along the continuum is based on both the intensity, such as how often someone displays the behaviour.
- Understanding of what is driving individuals to conduct such behaviours (degree of motives)

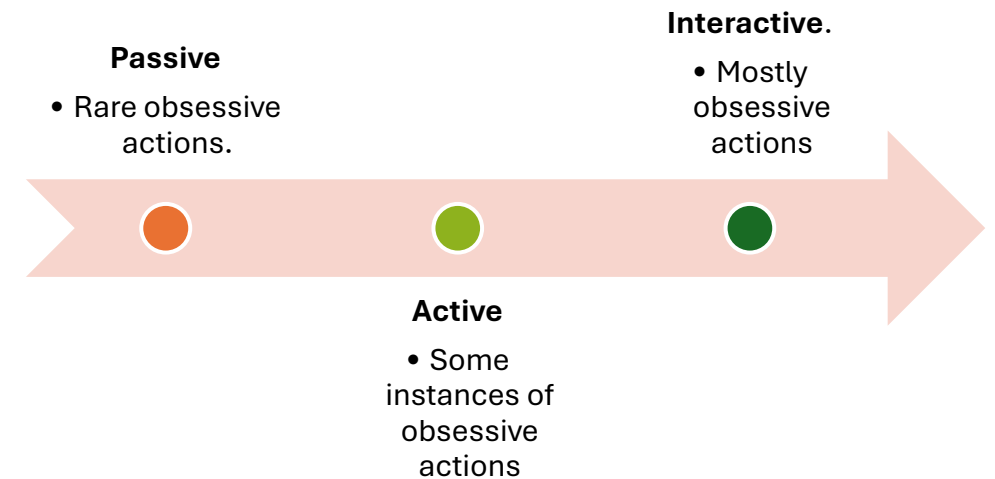


Figure 2. Continuum of user actions, displaying obsession developing across each subcategory

# Reflection & Moving Forward...

## **Limitations:**

- Scenarios limited the ability to accurately represent the social reality of online surveillant behaviours.
- Future research will need to consider the consistency between fabrication and actual online surveillant experiences.
- E.g., Utilise an expert panel to evaluate accuracy of scenarios.

## **Contribution to PhD:**

- Conceptualised user actions to generate items as part of behaviour-based subscale.
- Generation of motivations subscale to strengthen the validity of the constructs being measured.

Thank you for  
listening 😊

- Any questions?
- Feel free to read about this study in the [BPS Cyberpsychology Bulletin](#).



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## "I knew the stranger that I've never spoken to was paying attention to me"

Alice Thompson and Vanessa Parson explore the variation and differences in surveillant behaviours on social media.

08 March 2024



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