

# Does medium matter? Public perceptions of physical and cyber harassing behaviours

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## INTRODUCTION

- Between 2009 and 2013, Statistics Canada reported that almost 2 million Canadians experienced stalking, defined as unwanted and repeated attention that caused fear for their personal safety or the safety of someone they knew (Burczycka & Conroy, 2018). Victims of stalking may suffer economical, psychological, social, and physical harm (Lambert et al., 2013).
- Sheridan & Grant (2007) found that the negative effects of cyber stalking for victims were similar to the effects of physical stalking.
- Indecent exposure (aka "flashing") is the act of physically exposing one's genitals to an unconsenting individual. It has been found to cause considerable trauma and distress to victims (Clark et al., 2016).
- Photographic exhibitionism (aka "sending of unsolicited sexual images") occurs when an individual sends unprovoked images of their genitals over social media or text to unconsenting individuals (Hayes & Dragiewicz, 2018). There is little research on this topic.

## CURRENT STUDY

The purpose of this study is to examine public perceptions of the seriousness of different forms of harassing behaviors. Specifically, whether mode of harassment (physical or cyber) and type of harassment (stalking or exposure) influenced how serious participants perceived these harassing behaviours to be.

## METHODS

Participants were recruited from Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) and had to meet three inclusion criteria: a) identify as either male or female, b) between the ages of 18 and 39, and c) reside in North America.

- Participants were randomly assigned to an experimental condition and read a vignette about one of the four different types of harassing behaviors.
- After the vignettes, participants had 4 attention check questions to ensure they understood the vignette content.

- The main dependent variable was perceived seriousness of the harassing behavior which was depicted in the vignette.
- The survey included open-ended, Likert scale, and demographic questions.
- Participants were also asked questions about their experiences with the four harassing behaviors.
- All four experimental vignettes and survey questions were created by the researchers.

		HARASSMENT TYPE	
HARASSMENT MODE	PHYSICAL STALKING (N = 49)	CYBER STALKING (N = 35)	
	PHYSICAL EXPOSURE (N = 38)	CYBER EXPOSURE (N = 53)	

Table 1. Experimental Conditions.

## RESULTS

- Analyses included a 2x2 factorial Analysis of Variance (ANOVA).
- Main effect for mode on perceived seriousness was not significant,  $F(1, 171) = .08, p = .77$ .
- Main effect for type on perceived seriousness was not significant,  $F(1, 171) = .28, p = .60$ .
- Interaction between mode and type was not significant,  $F(1, 171) = 3.79, p = .05$ .
- When split by gender, we found no significant effects for females.
- However, significant interaction effect between mode and type for males,  $F(1, 82) = 4.38, p = .04$ .

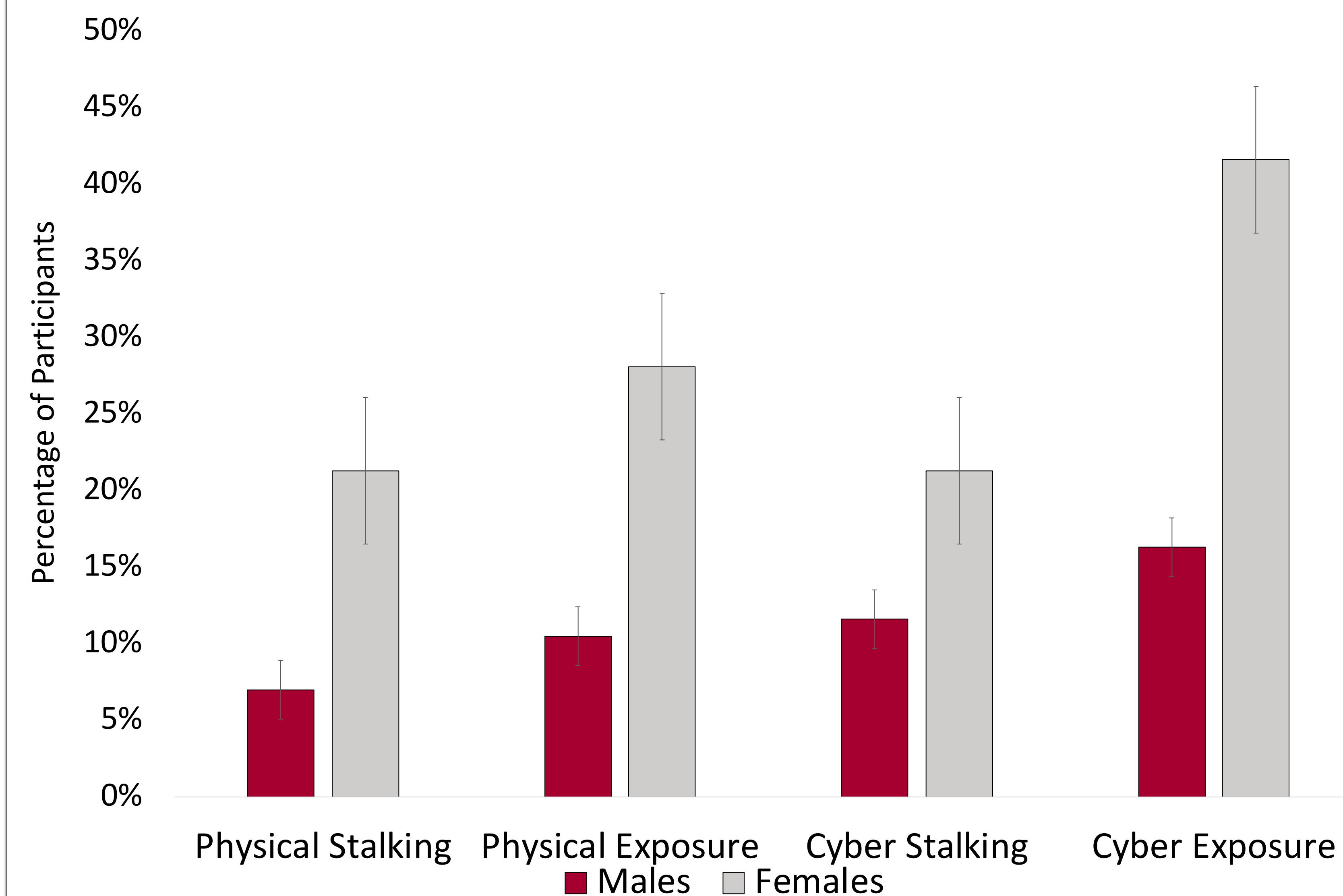


Figure 1. Victimization Rates: Percentage of Males and Females that have reported being the victim of each harassment type.

Gender	SS	Df	MS	F	P	$\eta_p^2$
<b>Males</b>						
Type	.739	1	.739	1.507	.223	.018
Mode	.381	1	.381	.777	.381	.009
Type*Mode (Interaction)	2.147	1	2.147	4.380	.039**	.051
<b>Females</b>						
Type	.095	1	.095	.224	.637	.003
Mode	.095	1	.095	.224	.637	.003
Type*Mode (Interaction)	.161	1	.161	.382	.538	.004

Table 2. ANOVA table for main effects (type and mode) and interaction on perceived seriousness, split by gender.

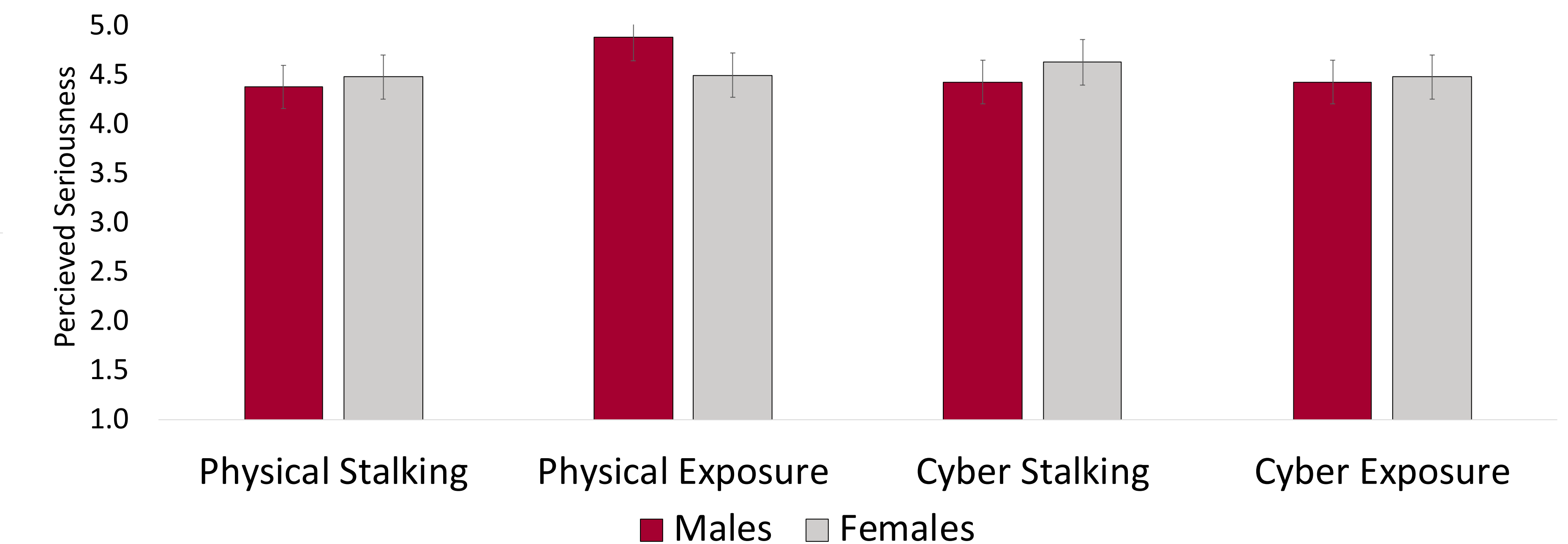


Figure 2. Scores of Perceived Seriousness for Harassing Behaviors by Gender

## DISCUSSION

- Male participants viewed physical exposure to be the most serious form of harassing behavior.
- Female participants viewed all forms of the harassing behaviors to be equally serious.
- Victimization rates for both physical and cyber exposure appear to be higher in female participants than male participants.
- This is concerning given that all four behaviors have been considered equally serious, yet exposure behaviors seem to be more frequent than stalking behaviors.

### Implications

- This could inform law and policy makers in ensuring that there are policies in place for the prevention of certain of harassing behaviors (e.g., exposure).
- In terms of service and treatment providers, it is important that current risk assessment tools begin to acknowledge cyber related risk factors.
- Finally, this research is important for educating the general public regarding the seriousness of these different forms of harassing behaviors.

## LIMITATIONS

- Sample sizes were sufficient for original analyses, but when split by gender, male and female groups were less than 30.
- Quality of data may be lower as a result of recruitment through MTurk.
- Non-peer reviewed materials (vignettes and survey questions).
- Ceiling effects occurred, as all vignettes were perceived as being highly serious.
- The vignettes were limited to intimate partner harassment only.

### Future Research

- Expand experimental material to include to LGBTQ+ groups. Furthermore, research should consider the opinions of gender non-conforming groups.
- More research is needed to understand the public perceptions of photographic exhibitionism and cyber stalking, and how these behaviors impact victims.