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## Attitude and Myths Related to Stalking among Early and Middle Age Adults

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## Abstract

Stalking is described as a persistent pattern of behaviour that consists of undesirable contact and persistent monitoring. For example, stalkers may wait outside the victim's home or make uninvited appearances in the victim's personal space. Whether people understand stalking as an everyday brief behaviour or a bizarre phenomenon that needs intervention on their part makes a big distinction in the lives of stalking victims. Since humans tend to behave as per their attitudes, it makes it practically more important to assess myths and attitudes of people related to stalking. Therefore, this study was conducted to assess and compare the attitude and myths related to stalking between early and middle age adults. The study was conducted on 67 young adults (Female = 33; Male = 34) and 67 middle-aged adults (Female = 33; Male = 34) who reside in Delhi and National Capital Region (NCR). Mean age of the two groups was 24.56 for young adults (18-30 years) and 46.79 for middle adults (40-55 years). Sample was drawn using convenient sampling. A 19 items stalking-related attitude questionnaire (SRAQ) was used to measure an individual's attitudes toward stalking statements and a 21-items stalking myths scale (SMS) was used to measure the participants' endorsement of myths related to stalking. Data were analysed using mean, standard deviation (SD), and t- test. Results showed that middle-aged adults endorse more stalking-related attitudes and myths than early-age adults. Significant gender difference was also found related to the endorsement of stalking-related attitudes and myths as male participants endorsed more stalking related attitude and myths than female participants. This finding provides evidence of the extent to which attitudes and myths related to stalking are present among different age groups of society in today's times.

**Keywords:** Stalking, Attitude, Myths, early and Middle Age Adult

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## Introduction

A persistent pattern of behaviour, such as excessive surveillance and unwanted contact, is referred to as stalking (Mullen, & Pathe, 1994). For instance, stalkers may wait outside the victim's home or turn up abruptly and invade the victim's personal space. Unwanted communications such as repeated phone calls, letters, emails, notes, graffiti, and postal deliveries are frequently used by stalkers to harass their victims. U.S. Department of Justice Office for Victims of Crime (OVC) defined stalking as "Repeatedly harassing or threatening behaviour by an individual, such as following a person, appearing at a person's home or place of business, making harassing phone calls, leaving written messages or objects, or vandalizing a person's property". Similarly, Meloy and Gothards' (1995, p.258) defined stalking as "The wilful, malicious, and repeated following and harassing of another person that threatens his or her safety".

In the context of Indian culture, acts that align with stalking behaviour are often described using vague terms such as "peechha karna" (to follow someone), "chhedkhani" (harassment), "chhed-chhad karna" (intrusion), or even "nazar rakhna" (to keep an eye on someone). Stalking did not have a defined concept within Indian culture until the prominent Matoo case shed light on the issue. The case involved Priyadharshini Matoo, a law student who was discovered deceased in her parents' South Delhi apartment on January 23, 1996. Matoo had previously lodged a police complaint against a Delhi University law student who had been stalking her for a year leading up to her death. Although the stalker was charged with rape and murder, a lower court acquitted him due to insufficient evidence. However, the High Court later sentenced him to death in 2006.

With the objective of addressing the menace of stalking, the National Commission for Women (NCW) has formulated a draft bill inspired by the Matoo case, aiming to strengthen the Indian Penal Code (IPC). This proposed bill introduces a new section to the IPC, defining stalking as follows: "Any individual who intentionally stalks a woman with the intention of (a) causing severe harm or injury to the woman or a third party, or (b) instilling suspicion or fear of serious harm or injury to the woman or a third party, shall be subject to punishment, including imprisonment, a fine, or both." According to the Sexual Assault Prevention Law drafted by the NCW, the prescribed imprisonment term for a stalker can extend up to seven years (Sarkar, 2005).

To prevent potential abuse of the law, the draft bill further specifies the characteristics of a stalker. According to this definition, a stalker is an individual who has engaged in the following behaviours towards a woman on at least three occasions: following her, approaching her in a persistent manner, lingering in close proximity to her, or observing her as she enters places where she resides, works, or frequents. Additionally, the definition includes actions such as surveillance of the woman or tampering with her belongings. The stalker may also give or send offensive materials to the woman or deliberately place offensive items in locations where she is likely to come across them. Furthermore, the stalker's actions may constitute a violation of Section 509 of the Indian Penal

Code, which encompasses contacting or calling the woman, or engaging in covert actions that could reasonably be expected to cause apprehension or fear in the woman, amounting to intimidation (Sarkar, 2005).

Stalking can be characterized as a recurring pattern of various criminal behaviours employed by an individual to harass or intimidate the target. Despite the target's clear lack of interest or unwillingness, the perpetrator persistently seeks to establish communication or a relationship with the target. Initially, the perpetrator may perceive their actions as a manifestation of love or commitment. However, if they face sudden rejection from the target, their behaviour quickly escalates into severe crimes against the victim, such as rape, acid attacks, sexual assault, murder, and continued stalking. In order to classify a behaviour as stalking, certain elements should be present, including the repetition of acts, an intention to instil fear or apprehension in the victim, and the victim's sense of being threatened. Consequently, defining stalking requires considering the perspective of the target, which can be highly subjective and challenging to create a universally applicable objective definition of stalking.

Stalking can have devastating effects on a victim's life even without physical confrontations. The advancement of communication technology has arguably made it easier to harass, intimidate, and terrorize others. When an individual repeatedly threatens, harasses, or contacts another person without their consent using electronic communication technology, it is known as cyber stalking. Cyber stalking combines the immediacy of phone contact with the stalker's shield of anonymity and the depersonalization of the victim, making the harassment even more persistent and terrifying. Various studies have highlighted the prevalence and impact of cyber stalking (Bocji & McFarlane, 2003; Burgess & Baker, 2002; D'Ovidio & Doyle, 2003; Finn, 2004; Finn & Banach, 2000; Lee, 1998; Lloyd-Goldstein, 1998; Meloy, 1998; Petrocelli, 2005; Southworth et al., 2007). Cyber stalking is often used to monitor a victim with whom the stalker desires a relationship, but it can also be employed to harass and seek revenge against an ex-intimate partner. Due to the relative safety and anonymity offered by the online environment, cyber stalking has become a preferred method of harassment and pursuit, particularly targeting women (Alexy et al., 2005; Lee, 1998; Petrocelli, 2005; Sheridan & Grant, 2007).

Government data has revealed that stalking is a widespread issue in India. According to the 2021 Crime in India data released by the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), a case of stalking is reported in India approximately every 57 minutes. This indicates a 14% increase compared to 2017 when there were 22 cases reported each day, or one every 64 minutes. The crime rate, which measures the number of cases per 100,000 women, has also risen from 1.3 in 2017 to 1.4 in 2021. The report specifically highlights the situation in Delhi, where approximately 271 stalking incidents or cases were recorded in 2021, with around 272 stalking victims. The crime rate for stalking in Delhi was approximately 2.8. In terms of metropolitan cities, the stalking rates in 2021 were around 3.5 in Delhi City and 1.2 in the National Capital Region (NCR).

On an international scale, the National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS) reported that an

estimated 13.5 million individuals are stalked within a year. The survey revealed that nearly 1 in 3 women and 1 in 6 men have experienced stalking victimization at some point in their lives. More than half of all stalking victims reported being stalked before the age of 25, and nearly 1 in 4 experienced stalking before the age of 18. Notably, the majority of stalking victims are targeted by individuals they know, with 40% being stalked by a current or former intimate partner and 42% by an acquaintance.

Stalking has been interpreted and explained using several theories from several disciplines. Among the psychological theories, the Attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969; Patton, Nobles, & Fox, 2010) explains how young children respond to threats, abuse, or the absence of a caregiver may eventually show up in romantic relationships (Bowlby, 1969). Toddlers might also exhibit steady attachment, aggravating attachment, apprehensive attachment, or dismissive attachment, according to attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969). According to some experts, a parent-toddler relationship that is maladaptive or dysfunctional can result in a stalker-victim relationship (Kienlen et al., 1997; Meloy 1996; Patton et al., 2010). The evolutionary theory contends that stalking is a behavior that evolved for the benefit of humans and brought about success in mating and other areas (Duntley & Buss, 2012).

Despite the possibility of massive costs, stalking must have had positive results. Stalking must have continued to be an effective strategy for following: making new friends, protecting existing friends from defecting, fending off mate poachers, stealing another person's mate, regaining former friends, sexual predation and exploitation, or protecting the family from sexual exploitation, solve mating problems, helping someone go back into a relationship, finding a partner, or establishing paternity by closely monitoring their partner. Social learning theory (Akers, 1973) explains stalking based on four guiding concepts - differential association, differential reinforcement, modelling, and imitation of friends or people in one's social circle. Differential association refers to spending time with peers who may have criminal tendencies. Researchers speculate that victims may mistakenly think that 6 stalking behaviors or circumstances are acceptable (positive definitions) or that there are rewards (differential reinforcement) (Fox, Nobles & Akers, 2011). The criminological theory and Control Balance Theory state that during stalking incidents, a person tries to impose as much influence as they can over the other and the victim is under the stalker's power. Researchers explain that because since the control feels repressive, stalkers seek out additional control over their victims (Nobles & Fox, 2013).

Obtaining private, sensitive, and compromising information about the victim as a result of stalking is one possible way a stalker can exert control over their target. Additionally, stalkers might examine routines and information that they can use to manipulate, taunt, blackmail, or force their targets (Duntley & Buss, 2012; Sheridan & Grant, 2007). Stalking behavior may also be understood using the concepts of control theory when an acquaintance gathers sensitive information to gain an advantage over a person through extortion-like control. Attitudes and misconceptions surrounding stalking often stem from various complex or erroneous beliefs. Some of these include the notion that victims overreact to behaviours

that are supposedly expressions of affection, that stalking can be disturbing but not severe, that victims somehow like or invite the stalking, that victims have somehow provoked or encouraged the stalking by not firmly rejecting advances, or that victims' responses to the behaviour are exaggerated, hysterical, malicious, or overly dramatic (Copson & Marshall, 2002; Yanowitz, 2006). Additionally, there is a belief that the person being stalked misinterprets innocent expressions of interest, that ignoring the stalking will make it go away, that individuals being stalked secretly enjoys the attention, that the person being stalked somehow caused the stalking by leading the stalker on, and that the person being stalked is imagining it (Gary et al., 2015). Furthermore, there are misconceptions that stalkers are always strangers, that stalking does not cause physical harm, that stalking is merely annoying but not harmful, that the stalking will cease if ignored, and that no one cares about stalking (Maia, 2018). It is important to note that common perceptions of stalking are also influenced by how the media portrays such crimes, as highlighted by Spitzberg and Cadiz (2002).

Kamphuis et al. (2005) studied on professionals of European general practitioners and police officers and pinpoint several dysfunctional stalking-related attitudes-people who supported stronger stalking related myths and attitudes were less likely to think the behaviour in question amounted to stalking. A similar study by Weller, Hope and Sheridan (2013) showed that a stranger stalker scenario is highly recommended as constituting a case of stalking.

Studies on perceptions and attitudes of stalking among both stalking victims and the general public reveal significant perceptual and attitude variations between the sexes. When a male stalker is targeting a female victim, the stalking is viewed as being more serious and dangerous (Scott, Rajakaruna, Sheridan, & Sleath, 2014). Due to the frequency, severity, or fear associated with receiving unwanted courtship behaviors, females perceive intrusive behaviours as being more severe than males. Yanowitz (2006) demonstrates that women encounter unwanted attention more frequently than males do, and they may engage in such behaviours out of a sense of caution and unease, which results in more negative judgments of invasive behaviour. Therefore, regardless of prior experiences of being stalked, females appear to perceive a wider range of intrusive behaviours as constituting stalking when compared to males (Chan & Sheridan, 2017).

Stalking is an enormously elusive phenomenon that presents challenges to academic inquiry. Whether people understand stalking as an everyday and brief behaviour or a bizarre phenomenon that needs intervention on their part makes a big distinction to the lives of stalking victims. Researchers have persuaded that one of the main reasons for the downgrading of stalking is that so many individuals have inaccurate, preconceived notions about stalking (Burt, 1980). The loss of awareness, unavailability of adequate facts and empirical research about stalking, and people's attitudes and myths related to stalking hinder the preparation of effective measures and mechanisms to perceive and prevent the opportunities of incidence of this crime at the root level.

Further, it has been stated that as a human become an adult they start making decisions based on situations

or circumstances and logic which is integrated with their dialectical thinking and emotion as they develop principles that depend on contexts.

According to Perry's Scheme theory (1968) of cognitive development, the cognitive processes of individuals in the early adult stage (18-30 years old) undergo a shift in thinking patterns. Initially, they tend to exhibit dualism, which is characterized by a rigid, absolute, and dichotomous way of thinking. They perceive things in terms of absolute right and wrong, black and white categories. As individuals progress in their cognitive development, they move towards multiplicity. This stage involves recognizing that some problems have solutions while others may not have definitive answers yet. They begin to appreciate the complexity of issues and acknowledge the existence of various perspectives and shades of grey. Finally, the cognitive development of early adults advances to relativism. At this stage, individuals understand the importance of considering the specific context in which knowledge is situated. They recognize that knowledge and understanding are relative to other factors such as cultural, social, and personal contexts. They become more comfortable with ambiguity, uncertainty, and multiple viewpoints. Overall, Perry's (1968), Scheme theory explains the cognitive progression from dualistic thinking to multiplicity and eventually to relativism, highlighting the evolving complexity and contextual understanding of knowledge during early adulthood.

Whereas among middle-aged adults (40-55 years old), cognition is primarily based on Cattell's theory of crystallized and fluid intelligence. *Crystallized intelligence* (depends on accumulated knowledge and experience) shows the information, skills, and strategies that middle age adults gathered throughout their lifetime and hold steady as they age in fact, it may even improve. *Fluid intelligence* (depends on basic information-processing skills), on the other hand, shows a decline in cognitive processing speed and the ability to solve problems and divide attention during middle adulthood. Therefore, it would be interesting to explore how cognition in terms of attitudes and myths related to stalking differs among the two age groups because people generally react in a way that is consistent with their attitudes.

While it is important to study a broad range of age groups to fully understand attitudes and myths related to stalking, there are some researcher's observation for focusing on early adults (18-30 years) and middle adults (40-55 years) while neglecting the specific age group of 30-40 years.

Although it is important to study a broad range of age groups to fully understand attitudes and myths related to stalking, there has hardly been any study to justify the researchers focus on early adult (18-30 years) and middle adults (40-55 years). The only potential explanations lay in different cultural and historical backgrounds in which young and middle aged adults are grown up (Sheridan, Gillet & Davies, 2002). The finding of the study by (Sheridan, Gillet & Davies, 2002) suggest that there may be certain meaningful cultural differences in what is more likely to be perceived as stalking among different age groups, but further investigation is necessary to delineate these.

While significant research on stalking and its negative impact on victims exists in developed countries, there is a notable lack of understanding and research on stalking in

India. Despite the Indian Government's efforts to implement progressive legislation, there is still a need to address the lack of awareness and understanding of stalking, particularly within the research field.

It is crucial to identify and challenge common misconceptions surrounding stalking through appropriate awareness and training programs. By addressing these misperceptions, the aim is to promote a better understanding of the nature and seriousness of stalking, its effects on victims, and the importance of early intervention and support. Increasing awareness and knowledge can contribute to more effective prevention strategies, improved victim support services, and a stronger legal framework to combat stalking in India.

### *Aim and Hypothesis*

Therefore, the present study is a pioneering micro-level analysis that aims to assess and compare the attitude and myths related to stalking between early and middle age adults based on the hypothesis that there would be no significant difference between early and middle age adults in attitudes and myths related to stalking. Further previous research has demonstrated that men and women differ in their endorsement of stalking-related attitudes (McKeon et al., 2014) so this study also aims to assess and compare the attitude and myths related to stalking between male and female adults based on the hypothesis that there would be significant gender difference in attitude and myths related to stalking.

## **Method**

### *Participants*

The study was conducted on 134 adults who lived in different areas of Delhi and the National Capital Region (NCR). The participants were divided into two age groups: early adults (18-30 years) and middle-aged adults (40-55 years). There were 67 participants in each group, with an equal number of males and females. The overall sample had a mean age of 35.67 and a standard deviation of 11.86. The mean age for the early adult group was 24.56 ( $SD = 3.24$ ), while for the middle-aged group it was 46.79 ( $SD = 4.70$ ). The sampling method used was convenience sampling, where participants were selected based on their accessibility. Most of the participants were from urban areas in New Delhi and the NCR region. The early adult group comprised undergraduate, post-graduate, and doctoral students from various universities and colleges in the area, while the middle-aged group consisted of individuals working in different public and private sectors, including teaching, clerical positions, management, and various industries such as banking, finance, automobile, retail, hospitality, and healthcare.

### *Power and Effect Size Analysis*

The dimensions of stalking-related attitude and stalking as myths were assessed in two groups, and their power and effect



size were calculated using the freely available G Power software (3.1.9.4). Initially, the effect and power were determined for the gender difference in the variables under investigation. The effect size for the endorsement of stalking-related attitude was found to be 0.43, with a test power of 0.80. Regarding the nuisance attitude, the effect size was calculated as 0.56, accompanied by a power of 0.94. The effect size for blaming the victim attitude was determined to be 0.39, with a power of 0.73. In terms of the stalking myth scale, the effect size was calculated as 0.83, and the power reached 0.99.

Similarly, the effect size and power were also computed for the age difference between early and middle adults in relation to the studied variables. The effect size for the endorsement of stalking-related attitude was 0.73, with a power of 0.99. The effect size for the nuisance attitude was 0.77, also with a power of 0.99. The effect size for blaming the victim attitude was determined as 0.69, again with a power of 0.99. Furthermore, for the stalking as myth dimension, the effect size was calculated as 1.24, with a power of 1.0.

According to Cohen's (1988) criteria, except for the gender difference in stalking as flattering and blaming the victim attitudes, all other effect sizes and power values were considered to be of medium to high magnitude, indicating their acceptability and practical significance in terms of research findings. For the age difference, the effect size and power of all variables were found to be satisfactory, with power values sufficient to reject the null hypothesis formulated for this study.

### *Design and Procedure*

A comparative cross-sectional research design was used to assess and compare the attitude and myths related to stalking among early and middle age adults. Data was accumulated using an internet survey (Google Forms) by sharing a link via social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Instagram, and Facebook to assess the stalking related attitude and stalking myths of two age groups. First and foremost, informed consent was acquired before the questionnaire was administered that asked for their permission to participate in the study voluntarily. If the participants agreed to take part in the study, then they were allowed to answer the questionnaire in the subsequent section.

### *Ethical statement*

The study employed a self-report questionnaire to gather information from early and middle age adults. The questionnaire items were evaluated by senior professors with expertise in psychometrics, and the scales used in the questionnaire were standardized by their respective authors, demonstrating strong psychometric properties. In terms of ethical considerations, the researcher followed the ethical standards set by the American Psychological Association (2010). Participants were provided with informed consent and their confidentiality and privacy were ensured. The researcher obtained consent from all participants, and a comprehensive description of the study, including its objectives and procedures, was provided to them. The participants were recruited through an online survey platform,

where they received detailed information about the study before deciding to participate. At the researchers' institution, ethical considerations are only taken into account when conducting invasive studies that involve procedures such as using blood samples, tissues, injections, or medication. However, according to the University policy, non-invasive studies involving human participants do not require ethical approval.

*Stalking-Related Attitude Questionnaire (SRAQ)* – The SRAQ is a self-report questionnaire developed by Kamphuis et al., in 2005 which has 19 items that assess a person's attitudes against stalking. It comprises three subscales that contain six items for - "stalking is flattering," seven items for - "blaming the victim," and six items for - "stalking is a nuisance." Questions include "Some people want to be 'stalked'; they see it as a compliment" and "Stranger 'stalking' is the only 'real' stalking". On a seven-point Likert scale, from 1 (absolutely untrue) to 7 (absolutely true), the participant's response ranges. To determine a final score, the three subscales are added together, though they can alternatively be reported separately. Total scores range from 19 to 133, while the subscales for "stalking is flattery" (6–42), "blaming the victim" (7–49), and "stalking is a nuisance (6–42)" are each scored separately. High total or subscale scores indicate higher support for attitudes related to stalking.

Gender neutralization was added to the SRAQ utilized in this investigation. The words "People" and "Person" were used in place of "Women" or "Woman," while "the pursuer" was used in place of "Man." "Their," "they," was used in place of "his," or "he." "Ex-partner" was used in place of "ex-boyfriend." The 19-item SRAQ has demonstrated good Cronbach's alpha reliability of .74 for 'stalking is a nuisance', .78 for 'blaming the victim', and .80 for 'stalking is flattery'. SRAQ shows a good internal validity of .93, .86 for the stalking is a nuisance subscale, .81 for the blaming the victim subscale and .81 for the stalking is a flattering subscale.

*Stalking Myths Scale (SMS)* – A 21-item scale called the stalking myths scale (Sinclair, 2006) measures participants' support for common misconceptions regarding stalking. Sample items include "A person who is willing to go to the extremes of stalking must really be in love" and "Being in love is not a reason to stalk someone". On a scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree, participants assess their level of agreement. Higher scores represent more endorsement of stalking myths. The scale has continuously demonstrated high reliability with a complete scale Cronbach's alpha reliability is .64.

### *Analysis of the Results*

The study aimed to examine and compare the attitudes and myths related to stalking between early and middle age adults, considering both male and female participants. The descriptive analysis included calculating the mean, standard deviation (SD), and inferential analysis using t-tests. Table 1 provides the mean, standard deviation, and t-scores for male and female participants on various measures of stalking-related attitudes, such as "Stalking is Flattering," "Nuisance attitude," "Blaming the victim attitude," and "Stalking as myth." Figure 1 presents the mean scores of male and female participants, as well as early and middle age adults.

Tab. 1. Mean, SD and t-score of Male and Female participants on stalking related attitude and stalking myths

Variables	Gender	M	SD	N	df	t-test	Cohen's d
Flattering Attitude(SRA)	Female	19.88	8.22	67	132	2.48*	0.43
	Male	23.16	7.02	67			
Nuisance Attitude (SRA)	Female	19.70	8.04	67	132	3.22**	0.56
	Male	24.02	7.50	67			
Blaming the Victim Attitude (SRA)	Female	26.27	9.47	67	132	2.26*	0.39
	Male	29.63	7.60	67			
Stalking Myths	Female	57.87	16.11	67	132	4.78**	0.83
	Male	70.10	13.38	67			

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , SRA= Stalking related attitude

Tab. 2. Mean, SD and t-score of early and middle age participants on stalking related attitude and stalking myths

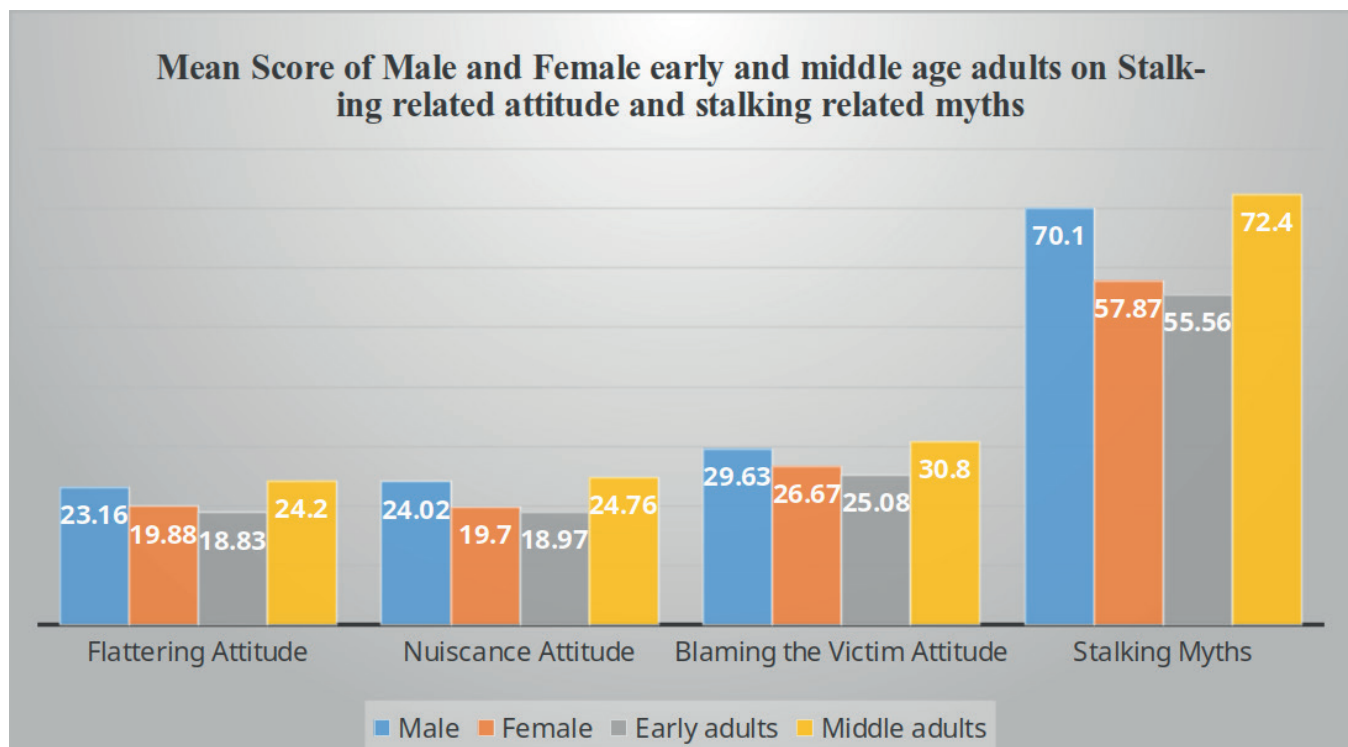
Variables	Age	Mean	SD	n	df	t-test	Cohen's d
Flattering Attitude(SRA)	Early age adults	18.83	7.58	67	132	4.24**	0.73
	Middle age adults	24.20	7.09	67			
Nuisance Attitude (SRA)	Early age adults	18.97	7.73	67	132	4.45**	0.76
	Middle age adults	24.76	7.33	67			
Blaming the Victim Attitude (SRA)	Early age adults	25.08	8.83	67	132	4.01**	0.69
	Middle age adults	30.80	7.65	67			
Stalking Myths	Early age adults	55.56	15.77	67	132	7.16**	1.24
	Middle age adults	72.40	11.04	67			

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , SRA= Stalking related attitude

Table 2 displays the mean, standard deviation, and t-scores specifically for early and middle age adults on the same measures of stalking-related attitudes mentioned earlier, i.e., “Stalking is Flattering,” “Nuisance attitude,” “Blaming the victim attitude,” and “Stalking as myth.” These descriptive and inferential analyses provide insights into the attitudes and myths related to stalking among different groups of participants, allowing for comparisons and interpretations based on mean scores, standard deviations, and t-scores.

Table 1 displays the results indicating that male adults exhibited higher levels of endorsement for stalking-related attitudes, specifically in terms of flattering attitude, nuisance attitude, and blaming the victim attitude, compared to female adults. These differences between male and female adults were found to be statistically significant. Additionally, male adults scored higher than female adults on the measure of stalking as a myth, and this gender difference was also found to be statistically significant. The study’s findings indicate that

Fig. 1. Mean scores of male and female Early and Middle Age Adults on Stalking-Related Attitude and Stalking Myths



Cohen's *d* value reflects moderate to high effect sizes in relation to the nuisance attitude and stalking myths. However, when it comes to the flattering attitude and blaming the victim attitude, a small effect size is observed based on Cohen's *d* criteria. This outcome serves as a potential limitation of the study.

Table 2 presents the results indicating that middle age adults exhibited higher levels of endorsement for stalking-related attitudes, specifically in terms of flattering attitude, nuisance attitude, and blaming the victim attitude, compared to early adults. These differences between middle age and early adults were found to be statistically significant. Furthermore, middle age adults scored higher than early adults on the measure of stalking as a myth, and this difference was also found to be statistically significant. These findings suggest that middle age adults tend to exhibit higher levels of stalking-related attitudes and beliefs, both in terms of specific attitudes and overall myth endorsement, compared to their early adult counterparts. The obtained Cohen's *d* values indicate moderate to high effect sizes across all dimensions of stalking-related attitudes and stalking-related myths. This suggests that the impact of the magnitude on these attitudes and myths is significant and satisfactory, considering the sample size of the study.

## Discussion

This study sought to evaluate and compare the attitudes and myths related to stalking between early and middle-age adults as well as between genders. The stalking-related attitude questionnaire (SRAQ) was used to assess the endorsement of stalking-related attitudes, while the stalking myths scale (SMS) was used to assess myths related to stalking. The findings of this preliminary analysis indicate significant difference between early and middle age adults in endorsement of attitude and myths related to stalking and significant gender difference in endorsement of attitude and myths related to stalking was also found in this study.

### *Stalking-Related Attitude of Male and Female Early and Middle Age Adults*

Findings indicated that middle age adults endorse more stalking related attitudes and perceive stalking as flattering, nuisance and blame the victim of being getting stalked than early age adults. No prior studies have examined this direct comparison between early and middle age adult regarding endorsement of stalking-related attitudes. The results of the present study have thus offered a preliminary analysis of this contrast. Possible explanations for this significant difference, in which middle-aged adults endorse more stalking-related attitudes, could be related to their previous knowledge and experiences. Chan and colleagues (2022) in a recent study explained about the predictive roles of emotion dis-regulation and stalking related attitudes on online and offline stalking and intrusive harassment. Findings of the study of (Chan et al., 2022) have significant contribution for stalking risk assessment and prevention efforts. It may be useful in preparation and

development of evidence-based prevention and intervention programs, as well as stalking risk assessment instruments may also be developed for different section of the population in India also.

Research studies have shown that individuals who exhibit higher levels of endorsement of stalking-related attitudes are more likely to have increased tolerance for experiencing stalking and intrusive harassment. Moreover, these individuals may be less inclined to perceive stalking as a harmful or criminal behaviour. The studies by Dunlap et al. (2012) and McKeon et al. (2015) provide evidence for this correlation between attitudes and perceptions of stalking. The findings suggest that individuals who hold beliefs or attitudes that minimize the seriousness of stalking are more likely to tolerate or downplay stalking behaviours when they encounter them. This can have negative implications for recognizing and addressing stalking as a harmful phenomenon. These research findings highlight the importance of addressing and challenging these attitudes and misconceptions surrounding stalking. By promoting accurate knowledge, raising awareness about the detrimental effects of stalking, and fostering a clear understanding of the criminal nature of stalking, it becomes possible to combat the tolerance and normalization of such behaviour.

Further, focus on middle age adult is particularly important here, as most of the people belonging to middle age adult group are parents, protector and guider for society and young generations. If these people's schematic knowledge includes endorsement of stalking related attitudes like perceiving stalking as flattering behaviour i.e. "A person, who dates a lot, would be more likely to be "stalked". Middle-aged adults' conservative and orthodox thinking may be one of the explanations for this considerable difference. It is typically observed that the majority of middle-aged adults cling to conventional myths and superstitions in order to live up to societal expectations.

Stalking related attitudes and stalking myths was highly endorsed by the male adults as compared to female adults and the difference was found significant between male and female adults on staking as flattering, stalking as nuisance, blaming the victim and stalking as myths. Previous studies have not reached a definitive conclusion regarding gender variations in perceptions of stalking (Dennison & Thomson 2009; Lambert et al. 2013; Sheridan et al. 2001; Sheridan & Scott 2010; Yanowitz 2006). While some research confirms that women are more likely than men to recognize instances of stalking (McKeon et al. 2015; Dunlap, Lynch, Jewell, Wasarhaley, & Golding, 2015; Yanowitz 2006) and view stalking as more harmful and pervasive (Lambert et al. 2013), other studies find no discernible gender difference (Sinclair, 2012; Cass, 2011; Sheridan et al. 2001). One potential explanation for these inconsistent findings is that attitudes towards sexism vary among different populations (Spitzberg & Cupach 2004; Miglietta & Acquadro Maran 2017).

In other words, it could be the participants' sexist beliefs, rather than their gender itself, that influence differences in perceptions. Notably, previous research has often discussed gender disparities in stalking perceptions without considering how socio-cultural sexist attitudes might influence these perceptions (Scott et al. 2014; Sinclair 2012). Except the

modernization and progressive outlook of the majority of residents of urban areas like Delhi and the National Capital Region (NCR), their belief and thinking has not changed regarding stalking and intrusive harassment. They did not make any effort to judge the stalking incidences based on its actual occurrence rather they focus on the basis of some pre-existing stalking related attitudes.

Studying the attitudes and beliefs of early and middle adults may help in identifying risk factors that contribute to stalking behaviours. For instance, certain attitudes or beliefs may increase the likelihood of someone engaging in stalking behaviours or becoming a target. On the other hand, identifying protective factors, such as attitudes that promote healthy relationships and respect for boundaries that can help in implementing preventive strategies.

### *Implications*

The measurement of common attitudes and myths regarding stalking will be impacted by the findings of this study. Understanding stalking-related attitudes and myths may help with anti-stalking education campaigns, offender and victim treatment programs, predicting and moderating the development of causal models, generalizing and quantifying the severity of stalker behaviour, and sensitizing law enforcement agencies to consider stalking behaviour as a serious behaviour and precursor of the unfortunate incident. This may also help to clarify matters and get rid of any misunderstandings while bringing stalking issues to light. Additionally, it will be an intention to draw the attention of social scientists, policymakers, legal experts, and health professionals who deal with stalking cases, to prepare suitable mechanisms to reduce the frequency and incidence of stalking.

Individuals in the age group of 18-30 years may certainly exhibit stalking related attitudes and behaviours, but resources for intervention may be better allocated by focusing on early and middle adults. These two groups (early and middle adults) represent critical stages of life when interventions and prevention efforts can have a significant impact. By targeting these groups, researchers can develop tailored interventions that align with the unique needs, concerns, and experiences of individuals in these specific age ranges. The design of a standard questionnaire and the attitudinal scale may both be improved by this study for use in upcoming research. The stalking-related attitudinal assessments appear to tap into globally relevant dysfunctional attitudes as well, which might help focus on teaching efforts.

### *Limitations and Further Suggestions*

This study cites several significant research work limitations and suggests exploratory research. First off, no researchers have compared early and middle-aged adults' endorsement of attitudes and myths related to stalking. These results thus offer a preliminary evaluation of this type of comparison, which restricts the validity of the results. The study's narrow geographic focus and small sample size further restrict the generalizability of its findings. The results of the study indicate

that, according to the Cohen's *d* values in the t-statistics, all dimensions, except for the flattering attitude and blaming the victim attitude, exhibited moderate to high effect sizes. This suggests that the findings have potential for generalizability and demonstrate the effectiveness of the study. However, it is important to note that the study's small sample size may pose a limitation, particularly in terms of gender differences on flattering attitude and blaming the victim attitude where small effect sizes were observed. Conducting further studies with a priori power analysis would enhance the study's effectiveness and reliability. Second, the findings of this investigation were at odds with the theory and earlier research. This might have happened because the original 34-item stalking related attitude questionnaire was replaced with a 19-item version. Future studies, however, would benefit from adopting the 34-item SRAQ to determine whether doing so will produce more reliable results.

Thirdly, the study's design excluded the collection of data on participants' individual experiences with stalking, which would have influenced their results. Further study in this area is necessary because there is disagreement over whether victimization or specialized education or training alters reports of perceptions of stalking (Scott et al., 2014; Weller et al., 2013). An important drawback of this study is the exclusion of the age group between 30 and 40 years, which is a significant limitation. Therefore, conducting further research that includes this age group would yield more meaningful and applicable findings that can be applied to a wider population. Determining whether specialized training or awareness efforts are a worthwhile investment or not requires an understanding of how stalking experiences alter mental representations of the behaviour. Last but not least, self-report questionnaires and scales were employed in this study to examine attitudes and myths related to stalking. As a result, there may always be a chance for a favourable reaction or social desirability. Here, a more implicit measure that yields forced responses and lessens the propensity for impression control will be more helpful in assessing the nature of stalking attitudes and myths.

### *Conclusion*

It can be concluded that early and middle age adults differ in their attitudes and myths related to stalking. Middle age adults endorse more attitudes and myths about stalking than early-age adults. Further, it can also be concluded gender difference related to attitude and myths related to stalking existed between the two groups. Overall, this study provides evidence of the extent to which attitudes and myths related to stalking are present in today's times.

Understanding the attitudes and beliefs held by early and middle adults is crucial for designing effective prevention and intervention programs. These programs may be tailored to challenge and change harmful attitudes and myths surrounding stalking. By targeting specific age groups, interventions can be developed to resonate with their unique perspectives and experiences, increasing their effectiveness in addressing stalking behaviours.



### Author Contributions

All the authors has made substantial contribution in conducting this research and preparing the manuscript.

### Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

### Funding

This is a self-funded study. Authors has not received any funding from the external sources.

### Ethical approval

The study employed a self-report questionnaire to gather information from early and middle age adults. The questionnaire items were evaluated by senior professors with expertise in psychometrics, and the scales used in the questionnaire were standardized by their respective authors, demonstrating strong psychometric properties. In terms of ethical considerations, the researcher followed the ethical standards set by the American Psychological Association (2010). Participants were provided with informed consent and their confidentiality and privacy were ensured. The researcher obtained consent from all participants, and a comprehensive description of the study, including its objectives and procedures, was provided to them. The participants were recruited through an online survey platform, where they received detailed information about the study before deciding to participate. At the researchers' institution, ethical considerations are only taken into account when conducting invasive studies that involve procedures such as using blood samples, tissues, injections, or medication. However, according to the University policy, non-invasive studies involving human participants do not require ethical approval.

### Data availability statement:

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation

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