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Revista de Cercetare și Interventie Sociala

ISSN: 1583-3410 (print), ISSN: 1584-5397 (electronic)

GENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES IN SOCIAL MEDIA STALKING PRACTICES: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF DIGITAL NATIVES AND DIGITAL IMMIGRANTS

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Revista de cercetare și intervenție socială, 2026, vol. 94, pp. 26-44

<https://doi.org/10.33788/rcis.94.2>

Published by:
Expert Projects Publishing House



On behalf of:
„Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University,
Department of Sociology and Social Work
and
HoltIS Association

Generational Differences in Social Media Stalking Practices: A Comparative Study of Digital Natives and Digital Immigrants

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Abstract

Digital platforms are multi-layered interactive environments that go beyond simply serving as spaces for communication; they offer the opportunity to observe and monitor other users' lives and engage in social comparison through shared content. The increasing integration of users into these environments has expanded and normalized online surveillance practices. This practice, known as *stalking*, is driven by motivations such as curiosity, information-seeking, and maintaining social connections; users are constantly caught in a cycle of monitoring and being monitored. However, the meaning and legitimacy of online monitoring practices are not the same for all user groups. There are differences in social media usage patterns and perceptions of privacy between digital native and digital immigrant groups. This study focuses on the stalking practices experienced by digital immigrants and digital natives; it aims to conduct a comparative analysis of the differences in how different generations define stalking behavior, their usage strategies, and motivations. To this end, a field study based on semi-structured face-to-face interviews with digital natives and immigrants was conducted. The results of the study revealed that digital immigrants engage in stalking to gather information, while digital natives do so to gain a deeper understanding of a person; while digital immigrants engage in stalking behavior driven by curiosity, digital natives develop comprehensive stalking strategies within the framework of a need for dominance and control in their interpersonal relationships. It was also found that participants associate the monitoring of content shared in digital environments with personal consent, and that stalking is accepted as a daily routine for digital natives.

Keywords: social media; stalking; digital natives; digital immigrants; social media culture.

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Introduction

The integration of digital technologies into everyday life practices has fundamentally transformed the forms of interpersonal interaction and the ways in which social relationships are established, maintained, and observed. In particular, social media platforms have not only provided users with a space to express themselves but have also enabled constant and uninterrupted information flow about other people's lives. Over time, this constant and uninterrupted flow has become one of the new norms of existing in the digital environment and an ordinary part of daily digital life. The visibility, accessibility, and support for content circulation provided by digital platforms have reshaped the meaning and scope of traditional viewing behavior by enabling users to follow others' posts (Antonini *et al.*, 2019; Marwick & boyd, 2014; Nicol, 2006; Trottier, 2012). The structure of digital platforms, which constantly feeds users with content through algorithmic recommendations and aims to keep them within the network, has transformed the practice of observing others from a behavior-based solely on individual curiosity or interest into a form of interaction indirectly encouraged by the platform's infrastructure. In this context, "stalking" has acquired a meaning that is intertwined with visibility, curiosity, social comparison, and information-gathering practices within the network distinct from the traditional notion of covert surveillance or individual monitoring (Tokunaga, 2011; Fox & Warber, 2014). In this regard, stalking is recognized not merely as an individual practice but as a new form of online interaction, a byproduct of digital culture.

On the other hand, it is not accurate to claim that the meaning, legitimacy, and forms of stalking practices are the same for all user groups. In particular, it is known that social media usage habits and forms of online interaction differ between individuals who grew up with digital technologies and those who adopted these technologies later in life (Prensky, 2001; Helsper & Eynon, 2010). In this context, the distinction between digital natives and digital immigrants frequently used in the literature provides an important framework for understanding how stalking practices are perceived and evaluated across generations. This is because digital natives, having grown up immersed in digital technologies, experience social media environments as a natural extension of everyday communication; whereas for digital immigrants, these environments are often viewed as communication spaces that have been learned and adapted to later in life (Prensky, 2001). It is also possible to note that this distinction influences individuals' attitudes toward visibility, privacy, and the practice of monitoring others' online activities on digital platforms. While younger users often view the behavior of examining and following other users' content as a routine act of curiosity and information-seeking, it is observed that among older age groups, this behavior may be perceived as problematic or a violation of privacy (Tokunaga, 2011; Trottier, 2012). Consequently, stalking practices can be experienced and interpreted in different ways depending on the user's generation. Within the scope of this study,

conducted from this perspective, the focus is on the stalking practices experienced by digital immigrants and digital natives on digital platforms; the aim is to examine how different generations define stalking behavior, under what circumstances they evaluate this behavior as normal or problematic, and how they position the act of stalking within their digital platform practices. In line with this objective, the following section first addresses the evolving concepts of surveillance and stalking practices alongside digital culture, as well as the role of these practices in the digital platform experiences of digital immigrants and digital natives; subsequently, the research findings are presented.

Literature Review

Stalking: Viewing and Being Viewed

Today, digital platforms serve as spaces of interaction where users can observe others, gather information, and compare themselves to others (Vogel *et al.*, 2014: 207). This observer position of the individual in the digital environment is termed “interpersonal electronic surveillance (IES)” by Tokunaga (2011); it refers to individuals regularly monitoring others’ online activities, locations, and posts. This form of surveillance, also defined as “social media monitoring,” encompasses a broader range of behaviors driven by curiosity or social comparison rather than malicious intent or a desire to cause harm (Oguafor & Nevzat, 2023).

The practice of monitoring others online, referred to in popular culture as stalking, refers to the act of gathering information about others by utilizing the traceability features offered by social networks (Dhir *et al.*, 2021: 1375). It involves monitoring and observing others’ past and present digital footprints. This action is generally perceived as a harmless, silent data-collection process driven by impulses such as curiosity, boredom, social comparison, longing for an ex-partner, or the mere desire to gather information about them (Lyndon *et al.*, 2011; Dhir *et al.*, 2021). This new form of surveillance is one of the normalized actions of online interaction, typically motivated by emotional needs or the desire for information (Güleç & Köker, 2021: 80). The person being monitored does not necessarily have to be a celebrity. The aim is to access information about people who are of interest, admired, envied, or even found annoying. Moreover, there is no need for a prior acquaintance in the physical world for this action. Profiles encountered solely in the digital realm that arouse curiosity can also be part of stalking behavior.

Stalking differs from cyberstalking, which involves criminal elements such as violence or threats. While cyberstalking refers to the use of online platforms with the intent to harm the targeted individual, other practices of following and gathering information, which arise because of the opportunities provided by digital platforms, are limited to monitoring the online profiles of those being followed (Dhir *et al.*, 2021: 1375). In this regard, stalking or surveillance is generally

accepted as a practice individuals routinely engage in to satisfy their curiosity and need for information. Even if individuals engage in these acts driven by negative emotions such as jealousy or hatred, the surveillance does not reach a level that would harm or disturb the monitored person (Conkoğlu & Turancı, 2025: 69). This distinction between stalking and cyberstalking also determines the act's position within digital culture. This behavior, which is not motivated by a desire to cause harm but rather shaped by curiosity and interest, holds a significant place in the use of digital platforms. Tandon and colleagues (2021) define it as social media stalking, noting that users act with the motivation to gather information about others without malicious intent. Marwick (2012), on the other hand, discusses how stalking behaviors have evolved into a form of social surveillance, noting that individuals monitor others' posts and profiles driven by motivations such as seeking information, researching, and gossiping in the online environment. such as seeking information, researching, and gossiping in the online environment.

The widespread use of social media platforms and their scroll-based architecture manifests itself across a broad spectrum, ranging from passive viewing without a specific focus to persistent monitoring centered on a particular profile. The desire to gather information about others creates a cycle of habit over time, leading to more frequent and impulsive use of the platforms (Fox & Moreland, 2015). Consequently, the digital environment transcends its role as merely a communication medium, transforming into a space where surveillance and monitoring are sustained. However, this surveillance practice is not always limited to the innocent curiosity of simply gathering information about others. In more extreme cases, surveillance can evolve into the unauthorized acquisition and disclosure of private data, as well as unwanted forms of communication, extending all the way to cyber harassment.

By enabling individuals to socialize and construct identities, the digital environment has transformed traditional interactions into mediated, multi-layered forms of communication. As the boundaries between virtual and physical life blur, this space generates its own emergent social norms. In this context, stalking transcends mere watching; it involves observing individuals through content they have voluntarily shared or know is publicly accessible. Because this information is intentionally curated for an audience, the act of being monitored becomes an explicit part of the digital experience. Consequently, digital platforms actively enable and normalize surveillance behaviors through their inherent technical affordances. Evans *et al.* (2017: 41-43) highlight three key characteristics driving this process: visibility, persistence, and anonymity. Visibility dictates how easily online information can be accessed, allowing users to effortlessly track digital traces. Persistence facilitates sustained surveillance by ensuring the long-term availability of shared content and historical data. Finally, anonymity empowers users to conduct this monitoring without disclosing their personal identities, thereby eliminating the risk of exposure

The opportunities digital platforms offer users make surveillance accessible and normalize it, thereby restructuring the nature of social relationships. In this

context, Trottier and Lyon (2012) discuss five characteristics of social media surveillance: (1) An individual's identity is shaped not only by their own posts but also by others' interactions; (2) Horizontal relationships offer non-hierarchical, peer-to-peer monitoring; (3) As social connections become a visible, measurable, and searchable form of content, relationships are transformed into digital data; (4) Platform designs that keep the flow of information constantly updated facilitate individuals' access to information about others; (5) Information shared in one context can be easily repurposed for another purpose or environment. These five characteristics mentioned by researchers are significant in that they reveal how the architecture of digital platforms transforms monitoring from a deliberate act of systematic surveillance into a routine practice of content consumption. Thus, practices such as following, monitoring, and covert surveillance are treated as characteristics of being present in the digital environment. Furthermore, these practices does not carry a hierarchical nature; it operates on a horizontal plane. According to Andrejevic (2005), monitoring others on digital platforms breaks away from hierarchical surveillance, creating an order where individuals are no longer monitored by institutions but by their social circles, such as spouses, relatives, friends, and acquaintances, and where individuals also monitor others. This surveillance/monitoring system points to a social interaction order where everyone is monitored and everyone monitors others. Furthermore, in this digital world where individuals voluntarily share information about themselves and where the value of being monitored enhances the value of visibility, surveillance is also gamified (Hernández-Santaolalla & Hermida, 2020: 388). Users are encouraged to produce content and share personal data; thus, surveillance is evolving into a participation-oriented process (Albrecht, 2008; Oguafor & Nevzat, 2023). In other words, surveillance is shifting from a hierarchical imposition to a subject-centered, consent-based performance in which the user directly manages the sharing of information.

Rooted in a user culture shaped by the digital world's algorithmic flow, these emergent norms legitimize the monitoring of digital footprints. Consequently, stalking, a behavior that might be deemed an obsessive deviation in offline life, is shedding its negative connotations. It has transformed into a culturally accepted practice framed by normative motivations like curiosity, occurring with mutual implicit consent (Tokunaga, 2011). Rather than acting out of obsession, individuals now follow others to stay informed, seek entertainment, pass the time, or sustain existing social ties (Frampton & Fox, 2021; Ünal, 2017; Tokunaga, 2011). Supporting this, Tian (2017) notes that the process of "turning a stranger into an acquaintance" essentially serves to reduce uncertainty by gathering information through digital traces. Additionally, platform interfaces and algorithms actively fuel this dynamic. The platform's strategy to maintain a continuous cycle of monitoring is evident in its features: suggesting new connections based on mutual friends, displaying "do you know this person?" prompts, retaining recent search histories, and recommending similar profiles. Features like Instagram's story

viewer list or LinkedIn's "who viewed my profile" notifications not only trigger the urge to follow others but also make users hyper-aware of being watched themselves. By strategically placing updates from highly followed users at the top of feeds, algorithms are specifically designed to arouse curiosity and encourage continued monitoring. Ultimately, the intersection of inherent human curiosity and intentional platform architecture creates a novel paradigm of following behavior that completely bypasses the need for face-to-face acquaintance.

Stalking Practices across Generations: From Digital Immigrants to Digital Natives

Marc Prensky (2001) classifies individuals into two main categories based on their age and level of technology use: "digital natives" and "digital immigrants." In this framework, digital natives refer to the generation born directly into the digital age and inclined to utilize the opportunities offered by technology. On the other hand, digital immigrants describe individuals who were only introduced to digital technologies in adulthood and who strive to adapt these new systems to their daily lives by learning them later. According to this widely accepted approach in the literature, individuals born before 1980 who encountered the digitalization process in the later stages of their lives are categorized as digital immigrants, while those born after 1980 who interacted with digital screens from a very early age are classified as digital natives.

Digital natives' integration into network-based environments from an early age has ensured that their relationship with technology is far more internalized, practical, and effective compared to that of digital immigrants. Although a significant portion of digital immigrants may eventually gain proficiency in using digital technology and reach the level of expert users, the fundamental differences between the two generations' ways of interpreting the digital world and their attitudes toward technological practices persist (Kesharwani, 2020: 3). In this context, it is evident that perceptions regarding online monitoring and surveillance practices differ markedly between digital natives and digital immigrants. Digital natives, who were born into the digital world and have built their socialization practices through this medium, do not draw a sharp line between online and physical communication; they experience both domains as organic extensions of one another. In contrast, the prevailing view among digital immigrants is that the online world and social media are detached from real life, artificial, and secondary platforms (Cater, 2025). This generational difference in perception directly reflects in surveillance practices. Indeed, recent studies indicate that the behavior of secretly monitoring others on social media has become a highly prevalent practice, particularly among young people (Doerfler *et al.*, 2025; Frampton & Fox, 2021; Rani *et al.*, 2025); and even suggest that this younger generation views partner monitoring and virtual surveillance as socially normalized compared to other generations (Cater, 2025; Van Ouytsel *et al.*, 2019). The primary rationale cited for this phenomenon is

“FOMO-Fear of Missing Out”; it is emphasized that digital natives’ anxiety about missing out on developments in others’ lives or being excluded from their social circles transforms them into active participants in digital surveillance practices (Pang & Quan, 2024; Tandon *et al.*, 2021). In this context, FOMO serves as a driving force that compels digital natives to constantly monitor their peers’ digital footprints, surveillance their updates, and monitor their online presence. On the other hand, it is observed that such motivations are not experienced in the same way by all user groups; digital immigrants may develop a more distanced and critical approach to these practices (Creighton, 2018; Sembiring, 2025). Therefore, understanding how stalking practices differ across generations enables a more comprehensive assessment of this behavior’s position within digital culture. In this vein, the following section examines how digital natives and digital immigrants experience and interpret stalking practices in a comparative manner.

Methodology

The study aims to examine, in a comparative manner, how digital immigrants and digital natives define stalking behavior, whether there are differences in their usage strategies and motivations, and how they position the act of stalking within digital platform practices. The research questions addressed to achieve this aim are as follows:

- RQ1. How do digital natives and digital immigrants define the behavior of monitoring and stalking others in digital environments, and what meanings do they ascribe to this behavior?
- RQ2. What are the stalking behavior strategies of digital natives and digital immigrants, and is there a difference in their motivations for engaging in this behavior?
- RQ3. How do digital natives and digital immigrants position stalking behavior within the context of privacy and digital social norms?

The Sample

To address the identified objectives and research questions, it was deemed appropriate to conduct a descriptive qualitative field study based on the semi-structured face-to-face interview technique. Within this scope, in accordance with the sampling criteria established for the identified objective, semi-structured face-to-face interviews were conducted with 25 participants comprising digital immigrants and digital natives from diverse profiles. The participant profile included in the study is as follows:

Table 1. Demographic profile of participants

Participant	Gender	Age	Occupation	Daily Usage Time
Digital Immigrants				
K1	Man	64	Businessperson	2 hours
K2	Woman	53	Engineer	3-4 hours
K3	Woman	52	Accountant	2-3 hours
K4	Woman	52	Teacher	1-2 hours
K5	Woman	52	Manager	2 hours
K6	Woman	51	Chef	1-2 hours
K7	Man	50	Architect	1 hour
K8	Woman	49	PhD student	3 hours
K9	Woman	47	Academic	3 hours
Digital Natives				
K10	Woman	42	Archives Officer	7-8 hours
K11	Woman	40	Business Owner	3-4 hours
K12	Woman	40	Company Owner	3-4 hours
K13	Woman	37	Academic	1 hour
K14	Woman	31	Brand Specialist	3 hours
K15	Woman	30	Engineer	3-4 hours
K16	Woman	29	Content Creator	3-5 hours
K17	Woman	29	Chemist	6 hours
K18	Woman	26	Student	3-5 hours
K19	Woman	26	Student	4-5 hours
K20	Woman	24	Social Media Specialist	4 hours
K21	Woman	23	Student	3-4 hours
K22	Man	22	Student	8 hours
K23	Woman	21	Student	4 hours
K24	Man	20	Student	4-5 hours
K25	Woman	19	Student	4 hours

Participant statements were recorded during the interviews; all interviews, which lasted an average of 40-60 minutes, were completed between March 16, 2026, and April 28, 2026. The interviews were concluded once the collected data reached sufficient depth and saturation. Additionally, in accordance with the researcher's ethical responsibilities, participants were informed about the study in

advance, assured that their personal information would be kept confidential, and provided with informed consent forms. Participant names were presented using codes to maintain anonymity, and ethical committee approval was obtained prior to the data collection process.

During the data analysis process, specific steps were followed to ensure validity and reliability. First, the participants' statements were read by the researchers to identify common codes and themes; subsequently, independent coding was performed, and the coding process was compared and verified by the researchers at regular intervals. This aimed to ensure inter-coder agreement. To ensure internal validity during the analysis process, direct quotations from participant statements were included, confirmations were obtained regarding various statements, and participants were selected to ensure diversity in terms of age, gender, and occupational group. To ensure external validity, direct quotations from participant statements were again utilized, and details regarding the sample selection criteria and participant profiles were provided to facilitate the generalizability of the findings. The process of examining the data, coding, deriving themes from the codes, establishing connections between themes, and interpreting the findings was frequently reviewed at every stage; the data analysis process was explained in detail, and efforts were made to ensure transparency regarding how the results were reached. To ensure internal validity, the data obtained were recorded, adherence to the common interview protocol was maintained, and the data were organized according to the established codes and categories. To ensure external validity, attention was paid to detailing the research process; the study's findings were supported by direct quotes from participants' statements, and efforts were made to reflect the statements of different participants without omission.

Results

The research questions addressed through the semi-structured face-to-face interviews are presented below based on the participants' statements obtained.

Understanding Stalking Behavior: Intergenerational Differences

It is observed that the ways in which digital natives and digital immigrants define stalking behavior diverge in the context of personal motivations; stalking behavior is shaped around two main themes: *"surveilling to gather information"* and *"getting to know/understand/feel the person being stalked"*. In this context, it can be said that digital immigrants position themselves as passive observers in the digital environment, whereas digital natives engage in stalking by devising a personal strategy to get to know the person being followed in depth and to gather in-depth information about them. In this context, it is observed that digital immigrants define stalking behavior as *"monitoring what someone does on social media*

platforms to gather information about them" (K1); *"monitoring someone"* (K2, K3, K5, K9); *"secretly examining the lives of people of interest"* (K10), defining stalking behavior as secretly monitoring a person through digital platforms.

Definitions of what stalking entails also share similar characteristics among digital natives. K15 defines the act of stalking as *"watching, focusing on, or keeping under observation"*; K24 as *"monitoring what someone is doing"*; K11 as *"surveilling someone's digital presence"*; and K12 as *"voyeurism."* However, beyond these definitions, it is evident that the purposes behind engaging in stalking take on a much more layered structure, such as gaining a deep understanding of the person from various perspectives. For example, K20 defines stalking as *"monitoring someone to stay informed or to gain information about them"*; K22 explains the act of stalking as primarily driven by curiosity but aimed at *"getting to know the other person in a deep way"*. According to K17, stalking is viewed not merely as curiosity but as a *"A tool to gather new data that will fill the gaps in my mind regarding the person in front of me"*. Furthermore, participants state that they engage in stalking most frequently during periods when communication has ceased or diminished, with the aim of obtaining concrete information about the other person's life. In this context, K17 states, *"I do it to find out information like where they're going, who they're with, or what they're listening to"*; while K21 notes that they do it *"to stay informed about their ex-partner, to understand their feelings, in other words, to gather information about what the other person is doing"*. Furthermore, it is worth noting that for digital natives, stalking is utilized as a practice of deep interaction, such as getting to know, understanding, and empathizing with the observed individual, and is even employed to learn how to position oneself appropriately within this interaction. K19 describes this trend as follows: *"Stalking helps me understand what kind of person someone is, and I might have learned how I should behave toward them"*. K14 adds: *"For me, stalking someone is equivalent to learning things I didn't know about them or finding out what's going on in their daily life."*

Despite the varying interpretations of stalking behavior, it is important to note that participants agree that stalking is not merely an innocent act driven by curiosity or a desire to gather information; rather, it can evolve from curiosity into a dangerous behavior capable of causing harm to the other party. For example, K21, a digital native, states: *"Stalking can escalate from a truly innocent level to an extreme one where even murder can occur. That's why I think it's a very dangerous thing."* K4, a digital immigrant, describes being stalked through digital platforms or attempts by anonymous individuals to access unwanted information as a highly dangerous act. Precisely on this topic, Fox and Moreland (2015) discuss how practices of watching, monitoring, or stalking, which begin with basic impulses like curiosity, can over time evolve into a destructive obsession that threatens individuals' psychological well-being, violates personal boundaries, and escalates into cyberbullying. From this perspective, it would not be inaccurate to say that digital natives and digital immigrants share a common understanding of what

stalking is and possess significant awareness that it can reach dangerous levels in later stages. When examining the ways in which the behavior is interpreted, it is observed that digital immigrants remain limited to the act of stalking or monitoring for the purpose of gathering information; digital natives, however, ascribe much more layered meanings to stalking, describing it as a practice of understanding the person being observed.

Stalking Motivation and Usage Strategies

When examining participants' motivations for stalking someone and their stalking strategies in the digital environment, it is possible to say that the primary motivation for digital immigrants is curiosity: *"If I like someone or am curious about them, I stalk them. What are they like, what do they do, what kind of life do they lead, what have they written, what's their style, and what kind of identity emerges from that"* (K5), *"I look at the pages of people whose lives I'm curious about."* (K9), *"I look at accounts I'm curious about but don't want to follow."* (K4), *"I stalk people I'm interested in or curious about."* (K8), *"I think examining the life of someone you're curious about is stalking. I also look at the profile of someone I'm curious about."* (K10), *"I look at the profile of a friend or relative I haven't seen in a long time because I'm curious about their situation"* (K7).

For digital natives, however, it is understood that the act of stalking is not limited to merely satisfying curiosity about the other person but also carries the motivation to establish a *"sense of dominance and control"* over the individual through digital platforms. For example, K20 expresses the sense of control gained through gathering information about the person they're stalking with these words: *"If that person isn't in your life, you can't exert control over them at that moment... but when I check their account, I feel like I'm part of their world."* Similar emphases appear in the statements of other participants. In this context, digital immigrants describe engaging in stalking to maintain control over the stalked individual and establish a sense of dominance in the following ways: *"I do it to find out where they're going, who they're with, what they're listening to."* (K17); *"I stalk to see if there's a chance we might run into each other again"* (K23); *"to find a clue about the other person's feelings"* (K11).

All these statements reveal that, for digital natives, obtaining data about the person being stalked functions as a psychological defense mechanism aimed at reducing uncertainty. Indeed, the literature also emphasizes that stalking behavior is used to cope with jealousy, curiosity, and uncertainty within relationships (Cater, 2025; Litt & Rodriguez, 2022; Dhir *et al.*, 2021). In this context, it is understood that digital natives have made stalking practices a strategic component of both their professional and romantic relationships. This is because participants describe stalking behavior using concepts such as *"a self-protection method"*, *"creating a safe space"*, *"security protocol"*, *"preparation"*, and *"compatibility test"* (K25, K22, K21, K15, K16), clearly demonstrates that this generation uses the digital

environment as a preliminary assessment space even before entering into a social relationship. Within this framework, some of the prominent participant statements can be listed as follows: *“Actually, I stalk someone before meeting them. Because I do it primarily to get to know them so we can understand each other better when we meet face-to-face. I try to look at the other person’s background first. I do it to see what kind of music they like and whether our minds align on the same things”* (K22); *“I see stalking as a sort of self-protection method. Whether it’s friendship or a romantic relationship, I find it necessary to gather preliminary information about the person before starting a relationship or becoming friends, to establish a safe foundation before engaging with them”* (K21); *“For me, stalking is about establishing a kind of security protocol. Especially if I’m going to do business with someone I don’t know or if I’m in a new environment, I check that person’s digital history. Seeing whether the skills or experiences a person claims in their resume align with their digital footprint is a verification process that has developed through my journalistic instincts”* (K16); *“When I meet someone new, I always check their profile. Because a person’s photo, clothing, and even the pose they strike offer clues about their character and the kind of life they lead. This is an important source of ideas for me. I also look them up to find out in advance about someone who’s joining the team at work and let my teammates know what kind of person they are via LinkedIn, etc.”* (K15).

In addition to this, it’s possible to say that the two generations differ in terms of stalking strategies. In this context, it is observed that digital immigrants do not utilize the technical capabilities of digital platforms to develop a stalking strategy; they simply view the content shared by the person in question when they come across it or by directly accessing that person’s account. In fact, K1 emphasizes that they do not require any strategy for stalking by asking, *“Is there even a tactic to stalking?”*. K8 and K5 mention that their stalking actions are limited to the posts that appear on the homepages of the people they follow; K6, on the other hand, states that they engage in the behavior at a basic level by saying, *“I usually go to a person’s page after seeing their Instagram Stories”*. In this context, it is observed that digital immigrants limit their stalking behavior to superficial practices, rather than engaging in in-depth monitoring of the individuals they are curious about.

Accordingly, digital natives employ tactics such as using fake accounts, monitoring profile histories, and utilizing applications like Google Lens. For instance, participant K20 reports using a fake account to avoid leaving digital footprints and to circumvent algorithmic visibility, such as appearing at the top of story viewer lists. K20 explains that the process goes beyond merely viewing a main profile; it involves monitoring secondary data—including follower lists, reposts, and the appearance of the target’s liked posts on the explore page. Describing oneself as a “discovery person,” this participant actively excavates the depths of a profile instead of passively consuming the feed, meticulously scrutinizing details ranging from the target’s clothing choices to broader lifestyle aspects. K22 and K23 explain that the use of anonymous accounts, common among digital natives,

serves as a protective shield with these words: *"I have a fake account. I also use someone else's number on platforms like WhatsApp. This way, I don't have to worry about accidentally liking or searching for them"* (K22); *"I always use my fake account when stalking someone. I don't want them to see that I've liked one of their photos or any of their posts"* (K23).

K17, on the other hand, mentions that they engage in stalking behavior not just through a single platform but via account synchronization: *"For example, my ex-boyfriend and I used to share a Google Chrome account. Beyond social media, I can gauge his mood from his Google search history or the music he listens to on YouTube. I can tell what he needs, whether he's turned to sports during that period, or if he's planning to go abroad when he buys a plane ticket. I still actively do this."* Similarly, K21 describes their stalking strategies as follows: *"Google Chrome has a feature called Lens... When you upload a photo there, it can show you similar photos. You upload a photo to Google Lens, and suddenly you see a bunch of profiles created from that photo. Then you think, 'Oh, this is a fake account.' I check the others this way first. That way, the person's data comes up. I also go into those pages and look."*

For digital natives, leaving no trace while stalking is of particular importance, and getting caught while stalking is a source of anxiety. In this context, it is observed that participants structure their stalking strategies entirely around remaining invisible and specifically avoid accidentally liking a post or engaging with it. In this regard, it is also possible to say that participants structure their stalking strategies within the context of motivation to remain invisible. For example, K18 specifically avoids liking an old post or story when stalking someone they don't know; K15, on the other hand, blocks the user to prevent the possibility of accidentally liking their post, thereby indicating that they are stalking their content.

Stalking: Consent, Context, Routine

In terms of the scope of a cross-generational comparison of stalking behavior, the study also aimed to examine the views of digital natives and digital immigrants regarding privacy, digital social norms, and visibility within the framework of stalking. When evaluated within this framework, it is observed that participants assessed stalking behavior around three main themes: (1) Consent and publicness, (2) The distinction between physical and digital environments, and (3) Routine practices.

First, it is possible to state that digital natives and immigrants unanimously accept any content shared in the digital environment as data presented to be viewed. For example, K20's *"I see only what you show. I see the photo you want everyone to see and follow your story"* statement and K15's *"if a person creates a public profile or accepts a follow request, that is explicit consent. It now feels like it's my right to access that information. I don't see this as unethical"*, and K3's *"If you're sharing on social media and your profile is public, it means you're accepting*

that everyone will stalk you”, demonstrate that they believe privacy in the digital environment is contingent upon the consent of the person being followed. For the participants, this implies that if a person shares their own photo or video on any platform, the act of stalking loses its private nature, and the shared content can be freely consumed. K10’s *“Anyone can see what I choose to display online. No problem. If people don’t want that, they shouldn’t share anything, or they should not accept or block the people they don’t want seeing it.”* and K7’s *“Stalking is now quite common. The reason it’s common is that people widely share their private lives. So, since people share, it’s normal for there to be stalkers—and some might even share specifically to be stalked”*, and K2’s *“I think if an account is public, anyone can see, look, and examine it. Those who feel uncomfortable can restrict access”*, indicating that participants tend to place the responsibility on the person sharing the content and clarifying the distinction between stalking and covert surveillance.

This distinction also entails drawing a clear line between physical stalking and online stalking. Physical stalking is defined using terms such as *“harassment”* (K21), *“crime”* (K24), *“perversion”* (K23), and *“deviant behavior”* (K8); whereas stalking is normalized as *“permitted space”* (K22), *“curiosity”* (K1), *“harmless”* (K10), *“being informed”* (K17), and *“explicit consent”* (K14). In this regard, it is observed that the distinction between *“remaining an observer”* and *“causing no harm”*, as noted in K21, is linked to the traceability of content shared in digital environments, and that consent to being observed is rationalized through the presence of *“anonymity”* (K15, K21) and *“the absence of physical contact”* (K16, K17). Similarly, other participants’ statements also support K21’s views: *“While physically following that person in real life or going to try to talk to them is intrusive, doing this silently and secretly on social media doesn’t seem very ethical either; however, I don’t think it’s a situation that would bother the other party.”* (K18), *“If stalking is done within limits for the purpose of satisfying curiosity or verifying information, it is the street detective work of the modern age and is normal. However, the moment it turns into harassing others by hiding behind the shield of anonymity, it becomes a crime”* (K16), *“Stalking is actually a type of investigation that doesn’t bother the other party”* (K17).

The perception of stalking as a consensual, harmless act and a natural byproduct of digital platform use also leads to the act being viewed as part of daily life. However, this situation differs in that digital immigrants mostly engage in stalking when they happen to come across it in the flood of their online activities; digital natives, on the other hand, perform the act as a daily routine and view it as part of social media usage. For K17, this practice is described as *“a routine I do every morning and night”*; for K25, *“stalking is now quite ordinary”*. Digital natives’ belief that remaining invisible or sharing content in the online environment is a matter of personal choice appears to eliminate any sense of ethical guilt associated with the action. In this regard, it is understood that participants view observing

or following others in the digital environment not as a violation but as an action equivalent to consuming the content provided.

Discussion

As digital platforms have become an integral part of our daily lives, individuals' practices of monitoring and stalking one another have also transformed. Within the scope of this study, the aim was to comparatively examine how digital immigrants and natives define stalking behavior, whether there are differences in their usage strategies and motivations, and how they position stalking actions within digital platform practices. Upon examining the research findings, it is possible to say that the act of monitoring or stalking, which traditionally carries negative connotations, has evolved into ordinary and often legitimate form of interaction in the digital environment. This situation reveals that while stalking behavior is experienced with varying intensities by both generations, it has become an established element of digital culture.

Although the ways in which stalking behavior is defined and perceived remain the same, it is also observed that, from the perspective of the digital native generation, the behavior is understood not merely as a practice aimed at satisfying curiosity, but as a process of reducing uncertainty, maintaining/managing social relationships, and generating strategic information about the other party. In this context, while stalking is positioned as an action performed to gather information about the person being followed for digital immigrants, it points toward a much broader tendency to understand, recognize, and sense the person for digital natives. The findings indicate that online stalking is a routine and ordinary practice for digital natives, made possible by the digital environment. Moreover, they do not act as passive observers; rather, this act has become an inseparable part of their online existence. This situation supports Tokunaga's (2011) characterization of interpersonal electronic surveillance as a "normalized form of online interaction." On the other hand, it appears that digital immigrants experience stalking in a much more distant and superficial manner. It was observed that participants from this generation associate stalking behavior with concepts such as "monitoring," "voyeurism," and "surveillance," and even if they engage in stalking, they do not internalize it as a routine or ordinary practice.

When participants' stalking strategies and motivations are examined, the distinction becomes even more pronounced. For digital natives, stalking is not merely a tool for gathering information about a person or satisfying curiosity; it also serves the function of establishing a sense of dominance or control over the other party, reducing uncertainty in relationships, and making inferences about the other party before initiating social interactions. In this regard, the findings support the literature's observations regarding the functions of social media surveillance in reducing uncertainty and providing a sense of control (Frampton & Fox, 2018;

Litt & Rodriguez, 2022). It is understood that the motivations for stalking among digital immigrants are limited to a much more superficial curiosity. Participants in this category define stalking behavior as looking at accounts or profiles of interest. This distinction persists within the scope of stalking strategies as well. It has been observed that digital natives actively use advanced digital tools such as fake accounts, metadata associated with the target individual, synchronized digital traces (e.g., shared browser histories), visual search applications (Google Lens), and third-party software enabling the viewing of private profiles as stalking tools. Digital immigrants, on the other hand, do not resort to such applications; they are observed to remain in a passive observer role, content with merely following the content explicitly provided by platforms and other users. Indeed, as Kesharwani (2020) noted, it would not be inaccurate to say that the differences in technology use between the two generations are reflected in their stalking behaviors. Furthermore, the study's findings make it possible to discuss a transitional generation that encompasses characteristics of both groups, moving beyond the traditional binary typology of digital natives and digital immigrants found in the literature. This group of participants, who describe socializing through traditional media and later integrating into digital media, tends to settle for the superficial data provided by the platform's algorithmic feed, similar to digital immigrants, despite actively using digital platforms, and their definitions of stalking also fall within this framework.

Additionally, the participants' interpretations of the relationship between digital content and stalking are significant in terms of behavioral assessments. In this context, the fact that both generations evaluate content shared in the digital environment as "content presented to be seen" reveals that the concept of privacy has been redefined and that the notion of consent takes on a different meaning in the digital context. The sharp distinction between offline stalking and digital surveillance lays the groundwork for justifying digital surveillance as long as it does not cause harm. In this context, the understanding that posts on digital platforms have a public nature and that the act of stalking essentially consists of consuming this content is shared by both generations. However, the key difference lies in the fact that for digital immigrants, stalking behavior is more superficial and involves a passive observer role, whereas for digital natives, this behavior serves as an active, in-depth, and strategic tool for gathering information about the target individual, based on the assumption that if the target is sharing content, they have given explicit consent. While nearly all participants define physical stalking within the context of perversion, harassment, or crime, they legitimize stalking behavior in the digital environment as a routine, innocent, and harmless social practice. Particularly in the context of digital natives, any content an individual voluntarily shares in the digital environment is described as content available for consumption. On the other hand, it is important to note that digital immigrants typically engage in stalking only when they happen to come across someone in the flood of content, whereas digital natives perform this action as a daily routine and view it as part of their social media usage.

Conclusion

This study aimed to comparatively examine how digital immigrants and natives define stalking behavior, in which situations they evaluate this behavior as normal or problematic, and how they position the act of stalking within digital platform practices. The findings indicate that the act of stalking has differentiated from traditional covert surveillance; it has transformed into a new social surveillance mechanism intertwined with practices of visibility, curiosity, social comparison, and acquiring information about others on digital platforms. In the context of generational differences, the findings show that while digital immigrants experience this behavior with a superficial and passive curiosity, digital natives use it as an active and strategic tool to reduce uncertainty and manage social relationships. Consequently, this reveals that socialization and acquiring information about others in the digital world are no longer independent from surveillance/stalking actions; on the contrary, they are intertwined and feed into each other. With the increasing integration of daily life with digital platforms, the normalization of stalking practices necessitates a critical re-examination of the concepts of explicit consent, privacy, and the violation of personal boundaries. It is anticipated that future studies examining the long-term effects and dynamics of transformation of these practices across different cultural contexts, platform types, and quantitative datasets will make significant contributions to literature.

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