

article

Digital media and domestic violence in Australia: essential contexts

Molly Dragiewicz, m.dragiewicz@griffith.edu.au
Griffith University, Australia

Bridget Harris, bridget.harris@qut.edu.au
Queensland University of Technology, Australia

Delanie Woodlock, dwoodloc@une.edu.au
University of New England, Australia

Michael Salter, michael.salter@unsw.edu.au
University of New South Wales, Australia

Domestic violence is a pervasive social problem in Australia. Digital media are increasingly integral to its dynamics. Technology-facilitated coercive control (TFCC) is a form of gender-based violence. This article examines domestic violence survivors' experiences with TFCC, drawing on interviews with 20 Australian women. Study results enhance understanding of how abusers use digital media. We highlight four key contexts for understanding the role of technology in domestic violence: the coercive and controlling relationship, separation abuse, co-parenting and survivors' safety work. These contexts provide insight into the dynamics of TFCC and illuminate key differences between this and other forms of online abuse.

Key words domestic violence • gender-based violence • technology • coercive control • online

Key messages

- Technology is integral to coercive control.
- Separation and co-parenting are key sites of technology-facilitated coercive control.
- Survivors manage technology-facilitated abuse in the absence of adequate responses and support.

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Introduction

Domestic violence is one of Australia's most pressing social problems. It is a form of gender-based violence, meaning that it disproportionately affects women and is 'both a cause and consequence of gender inequality' (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2014). Gender-based violence is recognised as a form of discrimination that 'seriously inhibits women's ability to enjoy rights and freedoms on a basis of equality with men' (CEDAW, 1993). One in six Australian women has experienced physical or sexual violence from a current or former partner since the age of 15 (AIHW, 2019). The economic and social costs are considerable. Nationally, the cost of domestic violence against women and their children has been estimated at \$26 billion annually (KPMG, 2016). Domestic violence also comprises one of the largest categories of police activity in Australia. Although the overwhelming majority of people who experience violence by a partner do not call the police (AIHW, 2019: 18), an estimated 40 to 60 per cent of frontline policing activities are related to family violence (Royal Commission into Family Violence, 2016: 56). Approximately one in three civil cases finalised in Magistrates' courts involve a family or domestic violence protection order (AIHW, 2019: 24). In addition, around 20 per cent of hospitalisations for assault injury in Australia are due to partner violence (AIHW, 2019: 28).

Gendered patterns of domestic violence are starkly illustrated by Australian deaths due to domestic homicide. More than a quarter of homicides in Australia are committed by current or former intimate partners. Seventy-nine per cent of victims in these incidents are female (Bryant and Bricknell, 2017: 37).¹ Such sex differences are the reason our study focused on female survivors of domestic violence. As our data show, domestic violence has highly gendered dynamics.

Digital media are increasingly integral to the dynamics of domestic violence, allowing abusers to establish and enforce coercion and control over partners before and after separation (Belknap et al, 2011; DeKeseredy et al, 2017; Dragiewicz et al, 2018). The UN Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women emphasised that '[o]nline and ICT-facilitated forms of violence against women have become increasingly common, particularly with the use, every day and everywhere, of social media and other technical platforms' (Šimonović, 2018: 4). The Council of Australian Governments Summit on Reducing Violence against Women and their Children (COAG, 2016) and Australia's Third Action Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and Their Children (Australian Government and Department of Social Services, 2016) identified technology-facilitated abuse as a growing concern in need of evidence to guide practice. Men's abusive and obsessive contact and stalking of female intimate partners via technology is an emerging trend in intimate partner homicide and filicide cases in Australia (Domestic and Family Violence Death Review and Advisory Board, 2017). This article adds the voices of domestic violence survivors to the emerging Australian research on this topic.

This article shows how male abusers use digital media, drawing on interviews with 20 domestic violence survivors in Queensland and New South Wales, Australia. The article highlights four key contexts for understanding the role of technology in domestic violence: coercive and controlling relationships, separation abuse, co-parenting with abusers and survivors' safety work. First, we outline the theory of technology-facilitated coercive control (TFCC) informing the study. Second, we review the research on technology and domestic violence. Next, we present our research methodology. We

then examine the four key contexts for understanding the dynamics of technology-facilitated abuse. Finally, we present practice implications and future directions for research. Throughout the article, domestic violence survivors' voices illustrate the nature of TFCC and the ways technology creates new opportunities for control and manipulation, amplifying the impact of coercive control.

Theoretical framework

Despite the long history of calls for attention to coercive, controlling and non-physical forms of abuse and the factors that shape them (Martin, 1976; Dobash and Dobash, 1979), physical aspects of domestic violence continue to be foregrounded (Kelly et al, 2014). Accordingly, coercive control theory recalls attention to foundational feminist analyses of the role of gendered structural inequality in engendering patterns of controlling behaviour in relationships, encompassing non-physical forms of abuse, manipulation, liberty constraints and physical and sexual violence (Stark, 2007). This article adopts Stark's articulation of coercive control, which explicitly theorises it as a form of gender-based violence in which men leverage patriarchal cultural norms and structural inequality to manipulate, isolate, coerce and control women in the context of abusive intimate relationships.² Structural inequality creates gendered vulnerabilities to coercive control in interpersonal relationships, shapes the forms that abuse takes, and influences institutional responses to abuse. Coercive control is a useful frame for research on technology-facilitated abuse due to its emphasis on the non-physical, repetitive aspects of abuse, the gendered structural inequality that shapes technology-facilitated abuse, the structural contexts in which it emerges, and system responses to it.

This study investigated women's experiences of TFCC (Dragiewicz et al, 2018). TFCC is the abuse of technology in the context of coercive and controlling intimate relationships.³ TFCC is shaped by the affordances of digital media. TFCC may be enacted by current or former partners. It may incorporate monitoring, stalking, threatening, abusive and intrusive behaviours conducted via social media, GPS enabled devices, digital recorders, email, smartphones or other digital media. It includes unauthorised access to accounts, impersonation and sharing private information or images (Southworth et al, 2007; Dragiewicz et al, 2018; Harris and Woodlock, 2019). These behaviours may be overt or hidden, and the unauthorised access may be achieved using coercion, force or deception.

Literature review

Technology and domestic violence

Digital media are increasingly important in domestic violence perpetrators' abuse and control tactics (Belknap et al, 2011; Dragiewicz et al, 2018). Most of the extant research on technology and abuse of intimate partners is from the US and the UK. It largely comprises surveys of convenience samples of school and university students (see for example, Barter et al, 2017, Reed et al, 2016). This research reveals how the challenges associated with studying complex phenomena like domestic violence are exacerbated when the focus is online abuse (see Brown and Hegarty, 2018). Findings mirror the general research on domestic violence and coercive control, with different

definitions, methods, samples and theoretical frameworks producing divergent results. For example, [Brown and Hegarty's \(2018\)](#) review of studies on digital dating abuse found victimisation prevalence rates ranging from less than 1 to 91 per cent and perpetration prevalence rates ranging from 3 to 94 per cent, leading them to call for improvements to definitional and conceptual clarity and measurement. As with other research on domestic violence, decontextualised prevalence measures that count online behaviours without investigating their context, meaning, motives or outcomes, can produce results that are contradictory, inconsistent with other sources of data on violence and abuse, and difficult to interpret. Research on online abuse frequently uses ambiguous question items, rendering it difficult to understand whether the behaviours reported are experienced as harmful by those involved.

Studies on technology-facilitated abuse that include the impact of behaviours such as injury, fear or protective action as proxies for contextual information provide information that can be helpful to interpreting crude prevalence data. These studies suggest that girls and young women experience abuse differently and experience more harm from technology-facilitated abuse ([Barter et al, 2009](#); [Aghaie et al, 2018](#); [Reed et al, 2016](#); [Ybarra et al, 2017](#)). For example, 12 per cent of participants in the Data & Society/CiPHR Cyberabuse Survey ([Ybarra et al, 2017](#)) of US internet users aged 15 years and older reported intimate partner digital abuse. Ybarra and colleagues detected no statistically significant sex differences in the prevalence of different dating abuse behaviours (p 18). However, they found that almost three times more women than men reported had got a restraining or protective order. More than twice as many women than men asked a friend or family member for help (p 24).

Similarly, [Barter and colleagues \(2009\)](#) conducted an early UK study of partner exploitation and violence in teenage intimate relationships that asked about technology as part of a survey of 1,353 young people aged 13–16. They found that girls and boys reported using new technologies to humiliate or threaten at similar rates (p 78). They found that 12 per cent of girls and 4 per cent of boys who had ever been in a relationship reported their partners had used mobile phones or the internet to humiliate or threaten them (p 56). Girls were more likely to report negative impacts than boys. Girls most commonly reported feeling scared and upset. Boys most often reported feeling annoyed or thinking it was funny. Barter and colleagues' interviews with 91 young people from the same study provide contextual information to help understand these reported behaviours. Girls discussed how digital media were used to isolate, control, threaten and monitor them, even after the relationship ended. Boys did not ([Barter et al, 2009](#)).

In Australia, knowledge about technology and domestic violence is mostly derived from research with practitioners and anecdotal findings from studies on other issues ([Woodlock, 2013](#); [2015](#); [2017](#); [Douglas et al, 2019](#); [Harris and Woodlock, 2019](#); [WESNET, 2019](#)). Preliminary studies indicate that digital media technologies have serious implications for survivor safety ([Woodlock, 2017](#); [Harris, 2018](#)). Two studies conducted by community organisations found that domestic violence perpetrators use of technology is a growing problem for practitioners and survivors in Australia ([Woodlock, 2017](#); [Woodlock et al, 2020](#)). A survey by Domestic Violence Resource Centre Victoria of 152 practitioners and 52 adult female survivors in Victoria found that practitioners perceived technology as ubiquitous in domestic violence ([Woodlock, 2017](#)). The study documented survivors' feelings that technology made abuse omnipresent regardless of abusers' physical proximity. Practitioners and survivors

reported that technology-facilitated domestic violence was not taken seriously by police or legal systems (Woodlock, 2013).

Brown and colleagues' (2020) Australian study documented 38 young (18–24) women and men's perceptions of sex and gender differences in digital dating abuse. In this study, 97 per cent of participants reported sex differences in digital dating abuse. Differences included: men's greater involvement in sexual abuse, women and men reporting different controlling and monitoring behaviours, men's greater concern with embarrassment and women's greater fear, and some men's failure to comprehend the impact of digital abuse on women (Brown et al, 2020).

To date, there has been little qualitative research with adult survivors on the ways domestic violence perpetrators use technology to interfere in their lives via intrusion, surveillance and identity crime in Australia (Harris and Woodlock, 2019). George and Harris (2014) documented abusers logging into survivor accounts and changing information such as usernames and passwords. Survivors in their sample reported numerous challenges when seeking assistance from telecommunications companies, courts and police. Women in their study reported experiencing additional trauma and spending considerable time and effort to regain control of their information and communication technology, reporting generally unsatisfactory resolution to attempts at help-seeking. The lack of methodological diversity and over-reliance on student and practitioner samples in this body of research means that qualitative research with survivors is needed to more fully understand technology-facilitated abuse. This article builds on these foundational efforts to extend the body of empirical evidence on women's experiences of TFCC.

Method

Study design

This article reports key findings from the survivor portion of an exploratory study using qualitative methods to gather contextualised data directly from female survivors of TFCC and domestic violence practitioners. Data was collected using a convenience sample in 2018 and 2019. The study was funded by the Australian Communications Consumer Action Network. Pseudonyms are used to identify the survivor participants. Ethical approval was provided by Queensland University of Technology's Office of Research Ethics and Integrity and Western Sydney University.

Limitations

Since this was an exploratory study involving a small number of participants, the findings are not intended to be representative of TFCC in general.

Procedures

Ten interviews were conducted with survivors of TFCC in Queensland and ten in New South Wales. Questions focused on:

- demographics;
- experiences of technology-facilitated abuse;

- help-seeking strategies;
- recommendations for improving responses to TFCC; and
- perspectives on participating in research.

Local women's legal support programmes and health services with well-established relationships with domestic violence survivors assisted in recruitment. This reduced risks to survivors associated with online and telephone communication. Services provided valuable assistance identifying potential participants, sharing recruitment documents, explaining the study, and scheduling interviews. Practitioners had extensive experience in domestic violence work and utilised established survivor-centred organisational practices to establish safe voluntary contact.

Interviews were conducted on-site at service offices or via phone if women preferred. Interviews were recorded for transcription and coding. Survivors received a \$50 gift card as a token of appreciation. When coding data, we realised that one woman, Jade, was abused by a sibling rather than an intimate partner.⁴ Since that abuse had different dynamics to the coercive and controlling partner abuse we set out to study but involved some of the same technological issues, we included examples from her experience where pertinent.

Participants

Twenty participants ranged from 21 to 65 years old, with an average age of 39. Half of the women identified as Australian (9) or Aboriginal (1) and half were born overseas in Canada (1), China (2), India (2), Italy (1), Japan (1), New Zealand (1), Northern Ireland (1) and South Africa (1). Although we did not specifically recruit heterosexual women, all survivors had male abusers. Given our recruitment strategy involving specialised domestic violence and legal services, our findings reflect serious domestic violence necessitating help-seeking.

Analysis

Professional transcription was used and the research team coded transcripts using NVivo. A coding summary of key themes and exemplars was produced. Our study reinforced findings from earlier research and uncovered new information, including identifying key contexts for understanding TFCC, discussed later in the article.

Results

The coercive and controlling relationship

A challenge in studying TFCC is that identical behaviours and technologies can be innocuous in the context of a non-abusive relationship or used by abusers to terrorise intimate partners. The meaning of behaviours such as frequently texting your partner or checking their location depends on the overall relationship dynamic. Studies that do not account for the context and patterns of technology-related behaviours can inadvertently trivialise the seriousness of TFCC, mischaracterise the primary aggressor in an abusive relationship, or distort TFCC prevalence.

Echoing survivors consulted in other research (George and Harris, 2014; Woodlock, 2017; Harris and Woodlock, 2019), participants emphasised that TFCC was part of their overall experience of domestic violence. Anaya's partner monitored her phone and internet access among an overwhelming pattern of physical abuse and control over her activities, finances, immigration status and even access to food. Anaya said:

'I had noticed in his personality he was abusive towards me, like he was physical as well over the years when he is beating me or he is like harsh and rude to me. At that time, he is like taking all the phones and everything from me.'

When Anaya reacted to this abuse by shouting, her partner used his phone to record her, apparently gathering evidence:

'But the time when I am retaliating that okay you are doing this to me or that to me. Then he try to make those videos when I am yelling that okay, you are not nice to me.'

The act of taking Anaya's phone and using his to record her reaction exemplifies the dynamics of TFCC. Without her phone, Anaya is isolated and cut off from assistance, while technology is used to generate evidence that she, not he, is the aggressor.

In contrast, Michelle retained ownership of her devices during her relationship, but the devices were compromised as her partner insisted that she share all her passwords:

'He'd continually go through my phone, my iPad. If I changed my password, he had to know what my password was for my iPad or my iPhone... So he would do things like access my [online phone account app] and look at my phone records, who I'd been calling. He was looking at my emails. So anything on my phone he was looking through, and on my iPad as well.'

Sarah's partner also monitored her communication via networked Apple devices. He installed cameras in her house and car so that he could constantly monitor and record her activities. Sarah recounted:

'We had a video camera in our car, so he would always have any recordings if he wasn't in – so I couldn't talk in the car because there would be recordings... he put in an affidavit after I left that he put video cameras in our house... in case I accused him of doing anything to our daughter. So, I don't know if there were video cameras before, but there was certainly – you know you knew that he knew everything, so whether that was through the iPhone or other means, I don't know. But yeah, so always stalked, always controlled, had all of our communication.'

Technology could also be used in efforts to manipulate women after they sought help and assistance. After Michelle went to police, her ex sent texts and images containing suicide threats:

‘Saying that he’s going to kill himself. Through the text messaging, sending all these pictures of the stuff that he’s going to use to kill himself and it just got all gory. He says, “Oh look, the police are here now – help me, have mercy on me.” I just switched my phone off. After it – now I don’t even want to claim for insurance because all the pictures that are on there, I just don’t want to go through all that. He’s going to court as we speak but I just don’t want to look at my phone.’

These examples illustrate how abusers integrate digital media into an overall pattern of coercion and control to extend abuse across time and space. Devices could be taken from women, used to present the woman as the aggressor in the relationship, constantly surveil her, or compromise help-seeking. Without understanding the overall patterns in the relationship, the significance of such technology-related behaviours could easily be misinterpreted or minimised.

Separation abuse

Our study confirms that domestic violence commonly continues or escalates at separation (DeKeseredy et al, 2017). While some abuse was clandestine, 12 of 20 participants became aware of TFCC before separation from their partner. Seven participants became aware of TFCC at separation. All of the survivors reported that abuse increased at separation. None of our participants reported that TFCC decreased or ended at separation. Technology was a key mechanism for abusive ex-partners to extend and continue control and coercion beyond the relationship.

In line with other studies, we found that abusers often established control during the relationship in ways that could appear ambiguous, with significant implications for women as they sought to end the relationship. As communication practices change due to increased use of digital media, abusers can exploit privacy and intimacy norms in relationships to gain access to devices and accounts. Sarah said:

‘So especially the biggest one was the surveillance. My ex-husband is a big Apple user and so right from the beginning, now I look back, literally from our first date when we were at his house, he had the big Apple screen and computer and it was like let me log you in and I wasn’t a guest, he set up a profile for me on his computer and was right there, and I remember feeling awkward about it, but I wasn’t very IT savvy, but he watched me put the password in and I just kind of felt – because I had always protected my password and I thought but he’s put me on his computer, so I guess we’re sharing these things, but that was right from the beginning.’

Nicole observed that her abuser would

‘access my Facebook and Instagram and I suppose at that stage I didn’t really find it to be inappropriate because I thought, oh well, we’re married and that’s what, what you do.’

Abusers were able to gather information about women’s activities, communication and movements when they shared accounts and devices pre-separation. Mobile family

plans and shared accounts and devices provided ample opportunities for surveillance. In a number of cases, abusers gifted or shared phones, tablets or computers or profiles. Perpetrators' privacy violations and demands to access women's devices and accounts escalated over time until it was overwhelming. Many of the women described multiple forms of monitoring, abuse and control. Michelle said:

'I've been – had my location tracked, logging into my iCloud – yeah, logging into my Facebook. Had my Facebook linked to his phone so he could monitor all my messages, went through my phone, my text messages, my location, everything.'

As Dimond and colleagues observed, technology can 'pose not only a greater danger, but also provides a deterrent for some women who are leaving' (2011: 413–14). Survivors in our sample reported that TFCC made leaving even more frightening and difficult. Some abusers targeted survivors' social networks following separation. Isabella reported that her ex shifted from private to public harassment post-separation:

'He had my name and my profile up with a blurred-out message and said: "my crazy ex is trying to add everyone on my Facebook" blah, blah, blah. I think he's also making fake profiles of me and trying to add different people to make it look like I'm this crazy person even though I'm not doing anything... he's still putting posts up publicly on his Facebook about me... saying "I wish the weather wasn't as bipolar as my ex" and things like that or putting it public so you can see. Every couple of days he's posting something new about me.'

In sum, the intimate relationship context allowed some abusers to establish surveillance and control using digital media during and after the relationship. Access to devices and accounts was often achieved before the survivor realised her partner was abusive. Abusers were able to exploit intimate knowledge and physical access to devices to enact harm post-separation. In some cases, this behaviour was overt. In other cases, abusers concealed their identities, obfuscating the source of ongoing abuse.

Co-parenting with abusers

Fourteen of the 20 survivors in our study had children. Thirteen of the mothers reported TFCC during post-separation co-parenting. Contact between abusers and children provided opportunities for ongoing abuse whether it was voluntary or court-ordered. Abusers used children to gather information about their ex-partners' phone numbers and passwords post-separation. Julia described these dynamics:

'He gets [my phone number] through my son – yeah he gets it through our son. So when my son will go stay with him, he will get my phone number out of his phone... Even like with Netflix, just a couple of months ago he was saying to our son, "Oh just give me the password to your mum's Netflix account" and he's like "No"... I said to my son "Don't ever give the passwords. That's my account. I don't know why he needs it for." Then he would say to my son stuff like, "Well I'm not buying you anything any more. That's it."

In this example, not only is a child being manipulated into compromising his mother's information security, but the noncompliance of the child results in punishment by the abuser.

Nicole noted additional challenges mediating ongoing communication between her ex-partner and their children. The same technology that can facilitate contact between father and child can be misused to gather information about survivors. Nicole said:

My tactic is generally to block [my ex on social media] but it's made it very difficult because we have two children together and they want to contact their father and speak to him, so at some stage I have to unblock him and then the kids will want to talk to him.

Jessica's ex used different kinds of technology to contact her once a protection order prohibited some forms of communication but not others. Jessica explained:

'He stopped texting at that stage, or if he did it was a voice recording now attached to texts and emails. So, then he was trying to side-step these things by saying, "Well, I didn't write" – you know? "It doesn't say anywhere that I can't send voice recordings."

Jessica described police advising her against communication with her abuser post-separation. However, legal services warned her that stopping contact could have negative implications for her family law case. Jessica said:

'The police officer that did the reporting was saying, you know, "You need to make it no contact." I'm trying to say, "Well, I've been legally told, because of the situation with trying to arrange stuff with the son, trying to get him to go to mediation or do supervised visitations or something along those lines, I need to – if it would ever get to family court then I would look like – what he's saying is, I'm just taking his son away and being not communicative, and not being reasonable. So, I needed to keep that channel open", and the cop said to me, "Well, we can't help you if you're not going to help yourself."

This example illustrates the Catch-22 that many abused mothers face post-separation as family law processes impose obligations on women that can undermine their safety and contradict police advice (Laing, 2017).

Survivors described the stress and labour involved in exchanging children with their abusers due to digital media with GPS capabilities. Amahle said:

'Like, every time he gives the children gifts now, the first thing I do is sit and feel them and take them apart to see if there's something in them. So, it just creates this whole level of fear that you constantly have about being watched without your consent, and that there's so little you can do. My kids have this [toy set], and every time I see the kids playing with it I can't help thinking that somehow those dolls are watching me. Even though I've taken them to the police to get them checked. So, it just creates that level of like distrust around everything.'

Survivors emphasised that abusers used post-separation contact with children to continue patterns of abuse established pre-separation. Technology allowed them to

intensify abuse in the context of post-separation parenting. Accordingly, future work on cybersecurity and domestic violence should take this key context into account.

Survivor safety work

Previous research has highlighted the ‘safety work’ survivors are forced to undertake due to inadequate social, legal and structural responses to violence against women (Kelly et al, 2014). Safety work refers to the labour that women do to predict, survive and manage men’s violence. This includes extensive efforts to protect themselves and their children when there is no offender accountability; collecting evidence when police fail to investigate; and moving house in efforts to avoid physical violence post-separation. Technology plays a key role in safety work. Survivors emphasised the energy required to manage online security at a time of acute crisis. They described constant effort to check and re-check devices, accounts and settings for indications of compromise. In the absence of effective service or systems responses to domestic violence, survivors may disengage from technology. Josie said:

‘I’m not even going on Facebook or anywhere because I know I can put another name but I can’t. I can’t even get the photos from my grandkids because my son always puts all the photos of my grandkids and I can’t really just get them over my thing. But I don’t even want to go through Messenger. I can’t use those things any more on Facebook because of that.’

Given the extensive role digital media play in everyday life, however, abstaining from technology use can limit opportunities for building supportive networks, accessing education, and professional engagement, exacerbating isolation. Jade said:

‘I don’t know what profile he’s working behind so I’ve shut down my Facebook to really basic settings. I don’t announce anything about when I’m doing [a work event] any more. I closed my [work] page... I don’t want him to know when I’m going to the office or when I’m going to be there, particularly at night time.’

Significantly, several participants reported that disengagement made the abuse worse. Rebecca explained:

‘If I didn’t answer the phone or I didn’t reply to his text messages within 30 seconds or anything like that, the abuse would double. Yeah, sometimes he would even come home from work early just to – if I didn’t answer the phone quick enough, or for the morning when he would ring, he would just come home early just to make sure that I was at home, which eventually led to me not being able to leave the house, not even to do grocery shopping. I would have to do everything online, and the only time I left the house was to do the school pickup or school drop-off. Yeah, I was like a prisoner in my house for six months.’

As a result, some survivors strategically used technology as part of ongoing safety work. Several participants reported being forced to endure ongoing electronic surveillance and communication to manage threats posed by their abusers. Sarah said:

‘I have always kept the same Apple phone that I had, and I know that – I just accept that it’s a device that he watches and he stalks, because my concern is that if I go offline that he will just turn up in person. So, I still text from that; like for example, our daughter’s school, I can’t give them – so I have a whole new phone, I own a Samsung... he doesn’t have that number, but I have to have a number that he knows about because otherwise he will go looking for me elsewhere.’

This echoes earlier findings that perpetrators use tactics such as physical assaults or in-person stalking when unable to contact survivors using technology (George and Harris, 2014). Significantly, survivors were advised by police to disengage from technology despite the possibility of increased risk.

Our findings on women’s safety work reflect Mirza’s (2018) theorisation of ‘compliant agency’. Compliant agency recognises the constrained choices that women make in the context of abuse, including rational decisions to comply with perpetrator demands in order to prevent or de-escalate violence. Our participants actively assessed the risks and benefits of their choices and sometimes resigned themselves to TFCC in the context of limited personal resources, ineffective legal responses, and lack of government support to meet basic needs, including alternative access to telecommunications services. Expressions of compliant agency were particularly evident for mothers forced to co-parent with abusers. These mothers were in an impossible position within intersecting systems that impose gendered, mutually exclusive expectations to keep their children safe while facilitating contact with abusive fathers.

Discussion

The key contexts described earlier provide essential background for understanding TFCC: the coercive and controlling relationship, post-separation abuse, co-parenting with abusers, and survivors’ safety work. The meaning, types and outcomes of TFCC are shaped by survivors’ particular locations across intersecting and highly gendered social, cultural and material contexts. These findings have practical implications and point to opportunities for future research.

Implications

First, the dynamics and risks of TFCC were poorly recognised by legal systems. TFCC was infrequently addressed in domestic violence or parenting orders. In particular, mothers with voluntary or court-ordered contact with abusers reported having no meaningful way to stop TFCC. There is a clear need for police and legal training for those involved in responding to domestic violence and family separation.

Second, the threat of ongoing TFCC constituted a significant burden of safety work for survivors. Survivors described how mainstream digital products services, including social media, were easily appropriated by perpetrators. TFCC emerged

where men exhibited greater confidence with digital technologies than women. This is an additional reason to address the gendered digital divide and promote women's technological capacities.

Third, while it is necessary to address perpetrator behaviours, TFCC is situated within the spectrum of gendered and racialised harms engendered by unsafe technologies and lagging government regulation. Efforts to prevent and respond to TFCC should consider the social ecology of digital media, and the ways in which the architecture of online services and platforms facilitate the surveillance and exploitation of users by other users and technology companies (Zuboff, 2019). UK efforts to legislate a statutory duty of care by internet service providers to users is a promising development (HM Government, 2019), underscoring the role of government in shifting the burden of safety work from consumers to technology companies.

Finally, our findings have implications for cybersecurity. Survivors in this study described an intimate threat model wherein abusers have physical access to devices and personal knowledge of details that can thwart traditional cybersecurity measures (Dragiewicz et al, 2019). Intimate threats such as those posed by domestic violence perpetrators should be considered in device and platform design as this is a significant cybersecurity issue.

Future research

Future publications from this study will address the impact of TFCC, systems and service responses, and particular issues for immigrant women. We note that more research is needed on TFCC in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Research on cybersecurity in remote Aboriginal communities in Australia indicates that factors such as living with extended family networks, limited mobile service, sharing devices and accounts, and unique cultural dynamics shape privacy and abuse risks (Rennie et al, 2018), with potential implications for domestic and family violence. More research is also required to understand technology-facilitated abuse against LGBT people. While scholars have posited that coercive control theory can be adapted to accurately reflect the experiences of LGBT people, readers should not assume that dynamics described here would be reflected in relationships with male victims, female abusers or LGBT relationships.

Our findings can inform future research in other locations, with larger samples, and with additional targeted cohorts of diverse survivors, including children. As Anderson (2009) argues, research empirically investigating the gendered causes of coercive control can help explain how Stark's articulation of coercive control needs to be adapted for use in research on couples with diverse genders and sexualities as well as those experiencing different types of abuse. Intersectional research on TFCC in diverse couples can also contribute to the theorisation of domestic violence, moving beyond crude claims about whether intergroup differences matter to investigate dynamics of abuse on- and offline.

Notes

¹ The sex differences in domestic violence homicides are even greater than they appear at first glance, however, as deaths counted in these incidents include male and female children, deaths of domestic violence victims' new partners (usually male), and other collateral killings.

² While other scholars argue that coercive control theory can be applied to LGBT relationships, a discussion of the applicability of coercive control to other contexts is beyond the purview of this article on heterosexual women's experiences of TFCC by male abusers.

³ Commonly referred to as domestic violence or domestic and family violence in Australia.

⁴ This interview was with the one participant in the study who identified as Aboriginal. The family and domestic violence described in her interview highlights the need for additional research led by Indigenous scholars and advocates and family violence scholars on the complex dynamics of abuse across sibling and other family relationships.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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